

# INFLUENCER MARKETING AND ENGAGEMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER

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## Abstract

Influencer marketing has been substantially adopted in the digital marketing strategy due to the rise of internet especially social media. This conceptual paper is aimed to study the relationship of social media influencers (SMIs) engagement and its influence on customers perceptions and behaviours from endorsed online brands. The study examines the attributes of the SMIs including attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness, which are adopted from Source Credibility Theory. The data and methodology were gathered from previous articles in Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases. Content analysis from the articles was done to come out with the adopted theory and research framework. The results from the analysis found that strong relationship of the SMIs contribute to the increase of sale of products and services, as well as to motivate their audience to own the products and services by changing these customers' perceptions. Attributes of the SMIs gives the strong perceptions to the customers, while acting as endorsement that everyone has to believe. Overall, positive attributes of the SMIs have positive influence on the customers perceptions and behaviours. Thus, this paper provide insights on how the credibility of the SMIs can be the major influence to customers behaviours while offering the businesses to consider this value when searching endorser for their products and services.

**Keyword:** influencer marketing; social media influencers engagement; Source Credibility Theory; perceptions; behaviours

## 1. Introduction

The popularity of social media has been risen tremendously, thanks to the emergence of internet which acts as the medium of transformation in every aspect of life. This global network has successfully revolutionised the way of communication and information dissemination by allowing more SMIs to be born. Hence, there is a mutual relationship between social media and influencers that impacts the dimension of digital and accessibility (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). Due to this reason, SMIs have successfully attracted many brands and business owners to be the endorsers and ambassadors of their products and services. Influencer marketing technique is strategically implemented by businesses to form a strong collaboration with the SMIs to influence the potential customers to own the products or services (Masuda, Han & Lee, 2022). Therefore, current trend shows that many businesses have adopted online marketing strategies through SMIs to increase the awareness towards brands and to attract customers (Ye et al., 2021). This statement is further supported with the findings from Statista, the spending in the market of influencer is expected to hit US\$67.9 million in 2024 with annual growth rate of 10.79%. It is vital to understand the roles of SMIs in the engagement with their audiences and followers in the marketing techniques applied by businesses, and perceptions of the customers. The mechanism that can manage the relationship of SMIs engagement can help to leverage the products of particular businesses (Bhardwaj et al., 2024) and trigger the purchasing decision made by the customers (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019).

The relationship that involves SMIs must start with the engagement with the businesses at the first stage of influencer marketing. Engagement is also one of the criteria that every business will look into before appointing SMIs to be the ambassadors and endorsers of the products and services that they carry along. In the area of marketing, SMIs have the responsibility to ensure the marketing campaigns carried out with the collaboration of businesses are able to achieve the target. The most prominent target for every business is indeed to obtain the customers who will buy the products and services. This in turn requires the communicative action made by the SMIs to engage with their followers through social media platform (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022). Additionally, persuasion in communication to influence the customers' perceptions can only be effective if the engagement of SMIs is strong and credible (De Sousa Pereira et al., 2023). Potential customers who come from the followers and audience of the SMIs are easier to be influenced, if the SMIs are able to delve into the minds of these potential customers. For instance, the SMIs who are active in posting and portray good personality are most likely to be accepted and trusted by their followers.

Nowadays, customers tend to buy the products based on the recommendations from the people that they trust. The effectiveness of word of mouth (WOM) strategy is fully utilised in every type of businesses. Stepping into digital era, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) gains the attention of the marketers to implement to. In today's case, SMIs are the persona that every business expected to hire to promote their brands and products. Thus, the concept of opinion leaders can be associated with SMIs as they share similar roles to influence the decision made by the customers (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). Godey et al. (2016) further explained that customers tend to be positively influenced by the opinion leaders due to their attributes such as expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Heavy reliance of the potential customers to the SMIs is the indicator that the credibility of the SMIs can influence the purchasing decision. There is the tendency of the potential customers to show positive attitude

towards the credibility of SMIs who can fulfil the needs of the customers to know about the brands that SMIs endorse.

Nevertheless, the number of research on the SMIs engagement with customers is still considered low, despite more customers seek the information about particular products and services from them (Pradhan, Kishore & Gokhale, 2023). Most research focuses only on the engagement of the customers as the study of engagement of SMIs and customers does not conduct simultaneously. Through this study, it tends to narrow the gap by examining the attributes of the SMIs that may influence the perceptions and behaviours of the customers. AlFarraj et al. (2021) found attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness as dimensions in influencers credibility that are not well studied by scholars and further investigation should be considered on this topic. This statement is further supported by Weismueller et al. (2020) who have found the influence of attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness as the main topic of discussion among social media users. These three dimensions of influencers credibility are part of Source Credibility Theory that is suitable to study the engagement of SMIs as they have the impacts on customers purchase decision, and attitude towards brands and advertisement (Phua et al., 2018; Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018). Therefore, this study will examine how attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness of SMIs impact customers' perception, as well as the intention to purchase.

This conceptual paper is structured into following sections. The first section is about the introduction. Second section discusses the literature review on the issues of influencer marketing, social media engagement and Source Credibility Theory. In the third section, the methodology to conduct the study will be addressed. While in the next section, the findings obtained from the content analysis of previous articles will be provided. This paper will be closed with the conclusion.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Influencer Marketing**

Over the years, social media has expanded into a medium of communication and information dissemination that is needed by the people. Businesses are not exempted to gain benefits from the rise of social media as more people rely on internet and social media to fulfil their needs and wants. The transition of marketing strategy from traditional to influencer marketing has been rapidly adopted by the businesses due to effectiveness of the social media. According to Lee and Eastin (2021), competition in current marketplace needs the businesses to implement effective influencer marketing while it is no longer an option to be adopted. Businesses that are late to shift into influencer marketing strategy are already jeopardizing the opportunities of their brands to grow and to be the selection among the customers. Influencer marketing has been proven as a medium of interaction that change how the people react towards particular brands (De Sousa Pereira et al., 2023). Here, SMIs shape the engagement with followers or audience through their posts related to the brands they endorse and the reaction from followers is in the form of likes, shares and comments.

In another study, Scott (2015) identifies that influencer marketing is associated with the opinion leaders who have the capacity to influence customers by participating in the activities of marketing. Additionally, opinion leaders have been considered as the connector of information between media and people (Feik & Price, 1987), and the source of information that

has influence to the audience (Hoonsopon & Puriwat, 2016). Overall, more businesses are spending their money on influencer marketing by hiring the SMIs to increase the visibility of their brands to the potential customers.

## **2.2 Social Media Engagement**

Social media engagement has been defined in different perspectives by scholars. As noted by Brodie et al. (2013) in the text of Wismiarsi et al. (2024), social media engagement is a type of engagement that involves customers happens in a particular form while acts as communication medium involving both people and brands with the help of social media. In order to measure the engagement of SMIs in social media is successful, it can be seen from the number of reactions from their followers by liking, sharing or leaving comments in the posts (Wismiarsi et al., 2024). Another indicator to show the SMIs engagement is by looking at their number of followers as higher number of followers proves that the SMIs are credible. Nevertheless, some scholars such as Thorpe (2022) and Jaakonmäki, Müller and Brocke (2017) argue that higher number of followers does not indicate that the SMIs have high engagement rate with the data showed that nano and micro-influencers are typically constitute to high engagement rate.

Improving SMIs credibility may improve the social media engagement with the followers, then foster the brands to stay relevant in the marketplace. When hiring SMIs as the endorser of their brands, businesses may consider the SMIs that have high engagement rate, as at the end of the day, it aims to increase the sales of the products and services while making profits from the activities. Enormous benefits are able to be gained by all parties that involve in this triangular relationship of social media engagement.

## **2.3 Source Credibility Theory**

Customers already have a belief that a credible source is more persuasive and can influence their purchasing intention towards endorsed brands. In the case of influencer marketing, SMIs are the first source that customers have to believe as they have the knowledge on the endorsed brands that they promote. By having a credible source, it may avoid any bias that jeopardize the sustainability of the marketing and purchasing activities. Hence, the Source Credibility Theory has been identified as the most suitable model to be adopted in this study as the model tries to discuss the roles of source of information in influencing the acceptance of users and how the message is interpreted (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Previous studies believe that trustworthiness and expertise are the key features in determining the source credibility (Ayeh, 2015; Tseng & Fogg, 1999). Attractiveness has been considered as one of the features in source credibility model after it has been identified as the indicator to relay the message effectively due to its ability to link similarity to the endorser (Seiler & Kucza, 2017). In addition, this model has been effectively proven after is widely applied in different areas of research in media technology that involves smartphones, websites and robots. Thus, by applying this source credibility model in this study, it may define the impacts of those key dimensions in the model to the purchase intention of the customers towards endorsed brands.

### 3. Material and Method

The most appropriate method to study the relationship of SMIs engagement and its influence on customers perceptions from online endorsed brands are through content analysis of articles that had been published in Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). The databases from both Scopus and WoS are selected due to their comprehensive data sources and they are expected to be the most reliable and trusted sources for this conceptual paper. As a result, a total of 46 articles have been identified for the analysis. After screening that included some criteria such as period of publication between 2015 and 2024, keywords searching and the subject of study, only 20 articles were eligible and met the criteria for evaluation.

Based on those 20 articles, more than half of the researchers implement quantitative design by escalating questionnaire to the respondents. This study method is considered suitable considering the aim of the study is to examine the relationship between variables. At the same time, it enables the researcher to obtain statistical data from the results of the analysis. Through the questionnaire, the researchers are able to get the overview and feedback from the respondents with the responses are measured on Likert scale.

#### 3.1 Research Framework

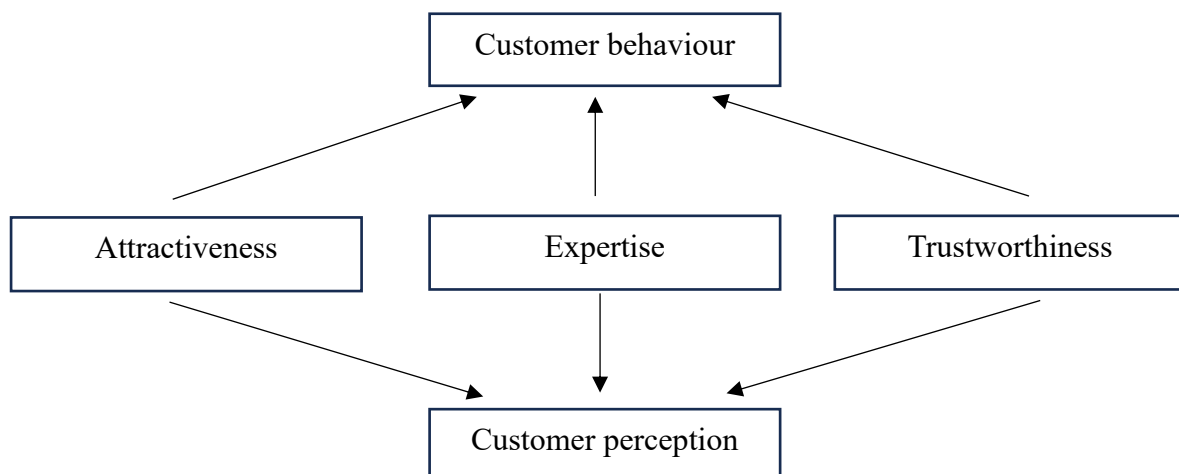


Figure 1: Research framework

### 4. Conclusion

Credibility of SMIs is important in the engagement with the customers in social media platform. The attributes belong to Source Credibility Model; attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness can influence the perception and behaviours of customers. Then, the intention to purchase will be higher among the customers if the endorsers of particular brands are credible. The perceptions and behaviours of the customers can change according to the SMIs attributes especially if they are able to prove that they deserve to be followed. Customers tend to follow the SMIs that have expertise in the niche areas that they have the knowledge and their feedbacks on the brand can be trusted.

At the same time, the credibility of the SMIs help the businesses to choose the most suitable speakers for their products. Businesses must follow closely to these attributes when selecting SMIs to alter the perceptions of the customers. At the end of the day, SMIs must be able to bring benefits to the businesses in term of profit and business sustainability by influencing the potential customers to buy the products. All in all, credibility of the SMIs have direct positive impact towards customers perceptions and the intention to purchase, besides increasing the sales of the business that implement influencer marketing.

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