

**Antecedents and Influence of Social Media Influencers' Credibility on
Brand Attitude: Findings from PLS-SEM and NCA**
(Anteseden dan Pengaruh Kredibiliti Pempengaruh Media Sosial terhadap Sikap Terhadap
Jenama: Penemuan daripada PLS-SEM dan NCA)

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, it is common to engage social media influencers (SMIs) in social marketing to promote brands and products. Nevertheless, the effect of influencer marketing in Malaysia, especially the credibility of SMIs and its impact on brand attitude, has not been subject to much discussion. Therefore, the goal of this study is to examine the antecedent credibility of SMIs in social media marketing campaigns, which leads to brand attitude, particularly among Malaysian Generation Y and Z. This study targeted Generation Y and Z in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. An online survey was conducted using convenience and purposive sampling techniques. The collected data were analysed using Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) technique, followed by Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA) to determine the critical factors that contribute to the outcome. The PLS-SEM estimation results show that similarity, expertise, likeability, argument quality and trustworthiness significantly influence SMIs' credibility, which in turn affects the positive brand attitude. The NCA results also suggest that these factors are significant contributors to credibility. Notably, both argument quality and likeability are two factors that have a large effect on credibility. This study adds to the body of knowledge to assist a better understanding of the antecedent influence of credibility and to confirm the significant factors which contribute to credibility, leading to brand attitude. Methodologically, PLS-SEM and NCA approaches were used in this study to confirm the hypotheses. From a managerial perspective, this study offers several strategies to build the credibility of influencers and promote business sustainability through brand attitude.

Keywords: Brand attitude; credibility; expertise; trustworthiness; argument quality

ABSTRAK

Pada era globalisasi ini, pempengaruh media sosial (PMS) merupakan perkara biasa di pemasaran sosial untuk mempromosi pelbagai jenama dan produks. Kendatipun, kesan pempengaruh pemasaran di Malaysia, terutamanya kredibiliti PMS dan kesannya mengenai sikap terhadap jenama, masih tidak banyak dibincangkan oleh para penyelidik. Oleh itu, tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji kredibiliti anteseden PMS di kempen pemasaran media sosial, di mana kajian ini telah menyusuli sikap terhadap jenama, terutamanya untuk generasi Y dan Z di Malaysia. Kajian ini disasarkan kepada generasi Y dan Z di Lembah Klang, Malaysia. Tinjauan dalam talian dilakukan dengan menggunakan teknik persampelan yang mudah dan bertujuan. Data yang dikumpulkan telah dianalisis dengan menggunakan teknik Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) diikuti dengan Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA) untuk menentukan faktor-faktor kritikal yang menyumbangkan kepada hasil tersebut. Keputusan anggaran PLS-SEM menunjukkan bahawa persamaan, kesukaan, hujah berkualiti dan kebolehpercayaan telah memberi pengaruh yang ketara dengan kredibiliti di mana PMS memberi kesan sikap positif terhadap jenama. Keputusan NCA telah mencadangkan bahawa faktor-faktor tersebut merupakan penyumbang utama terhadap kredibiliti. Perdebatan antara kualiti dan kesukaan adalah dua faktor yang mempunyai kesan yang besar terhadap kredibiliti. Kajian ini telah menyumbang kepada ilmu badan secara lebih mendalam dari segi pengaruh anteseden yang berkredibiliti dan untuk mengesahkan faktor-faktor yang ketara di mana ini akan menyumbangkan kredibiliti terhadap sikap jenama. Perkaedahan PLS-SEM dan NCA dalam kajian ini adalah untuk memastikan hipotesis-hipotesis yang akan dikaji. Dari sudut pandangan pengurusan, kajian ini telah memberi beberapa strategi untuk membina kredibiliti pempengaruh dan mempromosikan kelestarian dalam perniagaan melalui sikap terhadap jenama.

Kata kunci: Sikap jenama; kredibiliti; kepakaran; kebolehpercayaan; hujah berkualiti

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, social media is indispensable in our daily life, and it has turned into an essential platform for marketing campaigns and activities. Unsurprisingly, global social media users are approaching 60% of the world population, and the number is expected to expand further (Global Digital Insights 2023). As a result, influencer marketing technique has been viewed as a prominent way to influence consumer behaviour (Foroughi et al. 2023; Jin & Ryu 2018; Qian & Mao 2023). Correspondingly, influencer marketing is a form of social media marketing strategy which entails collaboration with social media influencers (SMIs) in product placements and endorsements via creative content postings on their social media accounts (Statista 2023a). The growth of influencer marketing is due to the opportunities offered by social media platforms to anyone, including influencers, to promote brands and products to their followers (Statista 2023b). Hence, many brands have increased their influencer marketing budget and collaborated with SMIs to create brand awareness and deliver messages to their targeted audience. It is supported by a recent study by Statista (2023a), which shows that there is an upsurge in the global social media influencer marketing market share. The study also reports that the global influencer marketing size has more than doubled since 2019. Particularly, in 2023, the market was estimated to reach USD 21.1 billion.

Social media platforms can assist in bridging the gaps between brands and consumers. Social commerce adoption is a business strategy which involves establishing a social presence on social media platforms to engage with customers and facilitate buying and selling activities. It is a prudent decision to use social media as an online channel to reach customers and generate sales. Thus, influencer marketing has been viewed as the most effective method to create brand or product awareness, reach a targeted audience, boost traffic, improve engagement, and influence consumer perception and purchasing behaviour (Statista 2023b). Many SMIs are experts in their own specific areas (Qian & Mao 2023). They understand the latest trends and are always able to leverage social media platforms to maximise brand exposure. In addition, it is proven that influencer marketing can improve organic engagement and profitability; through SMIs, brands can convert their online visitors into followers and buyers (Ooi et al. 2023). Owing to this, influencer marketing spending was projected to be USD59.4 million in 2023 in Malaysia (Statista 2023b). Statista (2023b) also estimates an annual growth rate (CAGR 2023-2027) of 12.09% for such spending. This highlights the importance of influencer marketing; thus, brands are urged to consider influencer marketing as part of their marketing strategies as well as the importance of SMIs' involvement in influencing consumers' attitudes towards their brands.

Businesses often engage SMIs to be advocates for their brands. SMIs are seen as trendsetters for new products, opinion leaders in shaping consumer perceptions (Wang & Lee 2021), and a medium to communicate the brands' values (Cheung et al. 2022). Since SMIs have a large group of followers, their recommendations and opinions can have an impact on their followers' perceptions and consumer decisions (Purwanto 2021; Qian & Mao 2023). In this context, the credibility of SMIs is very vital as it can increase their persuasiveness in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, their credibility has a great impact on brand equity, which necessitates SMIs to build and maintain their followers' perception of their credibility (Belanche et al. 2021). The existence of SMIs' credibility would improve the value of information provided by SMIs, and they would be treated as a reliable source of information. As such, the greater the SMIs' credibility, the greater the likelihood that a positive attitude towards a brand is fostered.

The Source Credibility Theory has been widely used to examine the antecedents of credibility (Aych 2015). Assaker (2020) and Aych (2015) exert that trustworthiness and expertise are the key antecedents of credibility, while Alam et al. (2024) and Kapoor et al. (2020) claim the level of credibility depends on the source's attractiveness/likeability, familiarity, and expertise. A recent study also discovers that trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and similarity affect SMIs' credibility (Bogoevska-gavrilova & Ciunova-shuleska 2022). Furthermore, Weismueller et al. (2020) contend that expertise, which is measured by the extent of knowledge, experience and qualification of SMIs, is the key factor in influencing credibility. Since there are different criteria for assessing credibility, it is necessary to conduct further research on the factors highlighted earlier to validate the determinants of SMIs' credibility and identify the crucial factors which contribute to credibility and lead to brand attitude.

According to Sprout Social (2021), Generation Y uses social media to interact with brands, obtain customer support and learn about new trends. They are the second largest generation (44%) as compared to Generation Z (50%) when it comes to daily engagement with social media (Choudhury 2023). They also shop mostly online, follow brands and purchase products promoted by SMIs (Kefallonitis 2015). Thus, the credibility of SMIs and brand value are important influences in their decision-making and the shaping of brand attitudes (Kefallonitis 2015). Similarly, SMIs is the resonance for Generation Z to establish a positive brand attitude. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the key factors which influence the brand attitude of Malaysian Generation Y and Z in the presence of SMIs' credibility from perspectives which have not been investigated in previous studies.

One of the risks faced in ensuring business sustainability is the development of scepticism by consumers. This happens as consumers might develop personal knowledge about marketing tactics which leads them to doubt the claims made by brands in relation to their marketing and promotional activities. Scepticism about authenticity may lead to brand rejection (Kefallonitis 2015; Morel & Pruyn 2003). Since the primary drivers of business sustainability are customers, brands have to take measures to prevent or reduce such scepticism. The key to solving this difficulty lies with credibility which can eliminate scepticism and communicate positive values of a brand or product. Attitude towards a brand is built on credibility and will impact consumer buying patterns and behaviours. Moreover, attitude towards a brand can be used as an indicator of advertising effectiveness (Taillon et al. 2020). Therefore, influencer marketing is an effective strategy used by marketers to promote brand attitude and maintain business sustainability. In this context, the impact of SMIs' credibility on brand attitude, particularly among Malaysian Generation Y and Z consumers, needs to be further verified since there is not much research in this area.

Previous studies have focused on examining the antecedents and outcomes of credibility. Their findings confirm the causal relationship between these two components (i.e., there is a sufficient condition to determine the outcome). However, these studies have omitted the critical factor that contributes to credibility and brand attitude. Due to this omission, in this study, the PLS-SEM approach is first used to analyse and confirm the relationships, followed by the NCA. The combination of PLS-SEM and NCA bridges the current research gaps and provides a better understanding of the sufficient cause and necessary condition (must-have) for the outcomes. In summary, the purpose of this study is twofold. We first examine the antecedents of brand attitude caused by SMIs' credibility. Second, an attempt is made to identify the key factors which influence SMIs' credibility and brand attitude.

The structure of this paper is as follows: It begins by outlining the literature review, the underlying theory, and how hypotheses were developed. The following sections include the research method, data analysis, results, and a discussion of the findings. The paper ends with a conclusion, detailing practical and theoretical implications, shortcomings, and recommendations for further study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOURCE CREDIBILITY THEORY

The source credibility theory has been widely used in marketing communications to explain how the persuasiveness of communication affects the perceived credibility of an endorser. According to the model, the factors leading to credibility include the expertise of the communicator and the perceived level of trustworthiness (Ismagilova et al. 2020; Ling et al. 2022). Expertise is defined as a person's knowledge and experience and the degree of ability to provide substantial and useful information (Ismagilova et al. 2020). Trustworthiness, on the other hand, can be described as providing information or recommendations that is perceived as valid, doubtless, and honest (Ismagilova et al. 2020). It is posited that if the sender of a message has a positive trait (e.g., likeability and homophily), good argument quality, perceived fit based on expertise, and trustworthiness, he will be able to influence the reception of the message (Amos et al. 2008; Ooi et al. 2023). The theory of source credibility is suitable for evaluating factors which affect the credibility of a communicator. Previous studies have extensively applied this theory to examine the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements, user-generated content (Assaker 2020; Ayeh 2015), and the influence of eWoM (Kapoor et al. 2020). In the setting of this study, the source credibility theory was applied to investigate the antecedents of SMIs' credibility.

ATTITUDE-TOWARDS-THE-AD MODEL

This study further integrates the attitude-towards-the-ad model and the source credibility theory to serve as the underpinning theory to examine the influence of antecedents of SMIs' credibility on brand attitude. The existence of a belief influences one's attitude towards an action or object, while attitude is an overall evaluation. The strength of a person's belief would affect the strength of his overall evaluation and attitude. According to the attitude-towards-the-ad model, people respond favourably or unfavourably to an advertisement depending on their perception of its credibility (Xiao et al. 2018). Therefore, in this study, SMIs' credibility is posited to have a significant impact on consumers' attitude towards a brand.

BRAND ATTITUDE

Attitude is the psychologically favourable assessment or rejection of a specific object (Wang et al. 2019). The brand attitude is defined as the audience's salient beliefs and responses to a product or service (McClure & Seock 2020). It refers to how customers perceive a brand and how they feel about it, leading to a particular behaviour (McClure & Seock 2020). According to Wang et al. (2019), attitude is the symbolic and functional attributes that

customers form based on their experiences with products and services, or marketing communication. McClure and Seock (2020) add that brand attitude can be built through social media communication. It is important to highlight that brand attitude is pertinent for business sustainability, as it influences customer choice and drives purchases (Wang et al. 2019).

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

CREDIBILITY

In marketing research, credibility refers to the facts and their reliability, which lead consumers to believe in a brand, business, or product. For this study, SMIs' credibility refers to information sources from SMIs that are authentic, highly legitimate and persuasive and can induce consumers to accept and follow their opinion (Abraham et al. 2022; Schouten et al. 2020). Breves et al. (2019) and Abraham et al. (2022) point out that SMIs are often regarded as opinion leaders and trusted voices of the public. This establishes a connection between SMIs and their followers, and SMIs' endorsements are always regarded as credible. Likewise, past literature has asserted that the credibility of SMIs hugely influences consumer attitude towards a brand (AlFarraj et al. 2021; Ooi et al. 2023; Schouten et al. 2020; Xiao et al. 2018). Following this, it is posited that high credibility develops a favourable brand attitude.

H₁ Credibility is related to brand attitude.

SIMILARITY

The term "similarity" describes the perceived commonalities between the sender and the recipient of a message. The similar traits shared include background, demography, attitudes, lifestyle, beliefs, opinions, interests, and societal status (Abdullah et al. 2020; Herjanto & Amin 2020). Similarity and homophily are interchangeable, which refer to the fact that people who share common attributes with a reference group are emotionally attached to it (Ao et al. 2023; Ladhari et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2019). People tend to trust individuals who bear similar traits to themselves. In this setting, SMIs have followers in the same reference group on social media who are enticed by their messages. The messages propagated within a homogeneous network will generate an emotional connection (Ladhari et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2019). Since the views, attitudes and values of the source and the recipients are comparable, credibility is established when their views coincide.

H₂ Similarity is related to SMIs' credibility.

EXPERTISE

Expertise is present if communicators are knowledgeable, experienced, authoritative, and competent (Abdullah et al. 2020; Ooi et al. 2023). Similarly, expertise also arises when an influencer possesses competency, qualification, and professionalism in the subject matter promoted (Ao et al. 2023). In other words, an influencer's expertise is described as the communicator's ability to make reliable and accurate comments or judgments based on their knowledge or experience (Belanche et al. 2021; Weismueller et al. 2020). Past studies have shown that SMIs' knowledge and competence make them more credible (Abdullah et al. 2020). AlFarraj et al. (2021), Abdullah et al. (2020) and Xiao et al. (2018) assert that expertise can shape the credibility level of SMIs because consumers perceive the contents provided by SMIs are reliable. They also believe that SMIs are more credible compared to advertisements and paid sponsorships (Abdullah et al. 2020). As a result, they will be more likely to accept SMIs' endorsements (Ao et al. 2023).

H₃ Expertise is related to SMIs' credibility.

LIKEABILITY

The concepts of likeability and physical attractiveness are interchangeable (Taillon et al. 2020). According to Martensen et al. (2018) and Taillon et al. (2020), likeability refers to a receiver's affection as a result of the physical attractiveness, traits, behaviour, and social status of the source. Likeability indicates that a person's appearance and cues can lead to a positive judgment or perception of him, which is always reinforced by a pleasant first impression (Martensen et al. 2018). Similarly, Taillon et al. (2020) contend that SMIs are more persuasive when they have an affinity with the goods or services that they promote. Previous studies have shown that the more likeable the influencers are perceived to be, the stronger the assumption that they are a credible source of information (Myers 2021; Taillon et al. 2020). Similarly, Myers (2021) asserts that followers are more interested

in their SMIs' views and opinions compared to advertisements; thus, it is posited that the credibility of an endorser will be influenced by his likeability.

H₄ Likeability is related to SMIs' credibility.

ARGUMENT QUALITY

Argument quality is the assessment of the informativeness and persuasiveness of any information, message or cues which can persuade a behaviour (Liu et al. 2021; Xiao et al. 2018). Meanwhile, Xiao et al. (2018) argue that argument quality is the persuasive strength of a statement/s made. Therefore, information, messages, claims, or opinions are said to have a high argument quality when it is useful, accurate, comprehensive, valid and convincing (Liu et al. 2021). In the context of this study, argument quality reflects the ability of SMIs to provide convincing, persuasive and logical support to their claims or suggestions for a brand. In other words, it is the quality of the statements in relation to a brand or product made by SMIs which are highly informative and persuasive. It is argued that high argument quality increases the persuasiveness and perceived value of an endorsement, thus leading to credibility.

H₅ Argument quality is related to SMIs' credibility.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness is referred to as the dependability, honesty and reliability of an endorser (Abdullah et al. 2020; Ooi et al. 2023; Weismueller et al. 2020). AlFarraj et al. (2021) point out that trustworthiness involves the integrity and believability of the endorser. Trustworthiness has a positive effect on credibility and can lead one to change their opinions (Seiler & Kucza 2017). Furthermore, Abdullah et al. (2020) argue that trustworthiness is a key factor affecting followers. Chekima et al. (2020) assert that in the absence of trust, no matter how good the attitude of the endorser is, it cannot change consumers' perceptions. Therefore, trustworthiness is a vital factor in credibility evaluations (Saima & Khan 2020; Vrontis et al. 2021). Similar studies by AlFarraj et al. (2021), Schouten et al. (2020), and Saima and Khan (2020) demonstrate that influencers' trustworthiness determines their credibility. A dependable, honest and reliable influencer is more persuasive, and consumers are more likely to perceive him as credible and accept the brand and product endorsed by him.

H₆ Trustworthiness is related to SMIs' credibility.

PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL

This study integrates source credibility theory and attitude-towards-the-ad model to examine the antecedents of SMIs' credibility and the consequences which lead to brand attitude. Particularly in an online environment, source credibility can decrease uncertainty and establish trust. SMIs' credibility would lead consumers to perceive that SMIs is an authentic and legitimate source of information, thus playing a role in changing one's attitude towards a brand. Figure 1 shows the proposed research model of the study. In this study, we identify similarity, expertise, likeability, argument quality, and trustworthiness as the antecedents to SMIs' credibility, which in turn leads to attitude towards a brand.

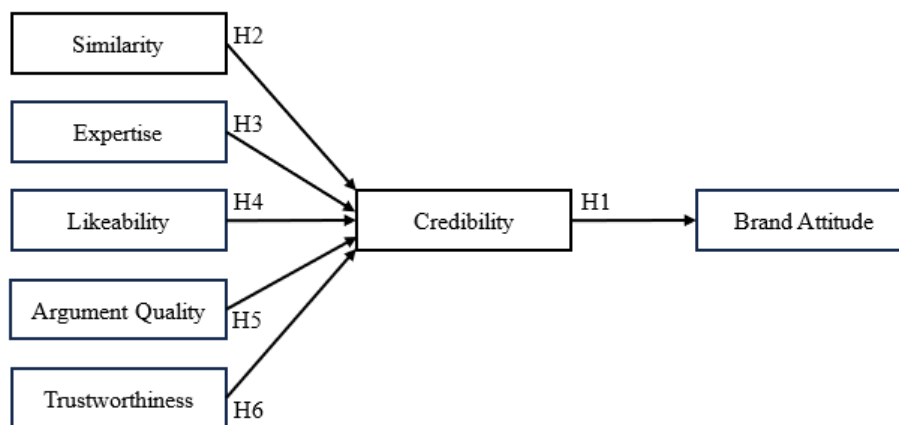


FIGURE 1. Proposed conceptual model of the study.

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

An online questionnaire was designed and used in the data collection procedure. Prior to questionnaire distribution, two academics and three targeted respondents were invited to give feedback on the questionnaire in our pre-testing. The questions were revised in response to the suggestions given in the pre-testing. A pilot test involving 30 respondents was conducted right after the pre-testing to evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire. The Cronbach alpha values obtained were between 0.879 and 0.966 which shows that a high internal reliability was achieved. This study was confined to Klang Valley, Malaysia, and the targeted respondents were from Generation Y and Z, aged between 16 and 41 years old (Nwobodo & Weissmann 2024; Ruixia & Chein 2019). Therefore, the sampling frame was unavailable. A non-probability convenience sampling and a purposive sampling technique were used in this study. Convenience sampling allows researchers to select participants based on their accessibility and willingness to respond. The questionnaires were distributed at various social media platforms and community groups to reach a wider audience. The Internet and social media penetration rate in Malaysia is high, especially among Generation Y and Z. The convenient sampling also enables researchers to distribute surveys easily and collect responses quickly (Tang et al. 2022). Meanwhile, purposive sampling allows researchers to select respondents based on specific characteristics that conformed to the research objectives, namely Generation Y and Z. The Klang Valley was chosen as the sampling location because it is a significant metropolitan agglomeration, making it easier to access relevant respondents on the subject of this study and gather more information (Tang & Huam 2023). It is also the most densely populated city in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2023). This enables the researchers to draw a broad and comprehensive conclusion of the antecedents of SMIs credibility and its impact on brand attitude in Malaysia (Mang et al. 2020).

MEASUREMENT DEVELOPMENT

A self-administered questionnaire comprising thirty scale questions was designed to obtain respondents' opinions regarding the antecedents of SMIs' credibility and its impact on attitude towards a brand. Measurement items were adapted from previous literature developed by Xiao et al. (2018). These measurement items were measured using a five-point Likert scale (See Appendix 1).

DATA ANALYSIS: PLS-SEM AND NCA

In this study, the Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyse the relationship between the proposed hypotheses. The PLS-SEM is commonly used to investigate causal relationships and is often credited to have sufficient logic to determine the outcome (Richter et al. 2020). However, Richter et al. (2020) contend that though a particular determinant may be sufficient to produce an outcome, it may not be necessary. Therefore, Richter et al. (2020) suggest the Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA) technique, i.e., a necessity logic to compensate for the limitation of the sufficient logic technique. The NCA employs a bottleneck to assess the degree of a necessary condition needed to satisfy a certain level of desired outcome (Richter et al. 2020). In this situation, the hypotheses were first examined via PLS-SEM, followed by NCA to determine the critical factors contributing to an influencer's credibility. The NCA test is a technique to determine factors that are necessary (must-have factor) to achieve the desired outcome. The NCA test was conducted with the NCA package in R environment. The CE-FDH (Ceiling Envelopment with Free Disposal Hull) and CR-FDH (Ceiling Regression with Free Disposal Hull) are the statistical approaches in relation to the NCA test to approximate the ceiling accuracy of the data. According to Dul (2016), the accuracy of CE-FDH is 100%, whereas CR-FDH can be less than 100%. CE-FDH is chosen if the data is dichotomous and discrete, and CR-FDH is the default approach to be used for continuous data (Dul 2016). The CE-FDH approach is a more flexible technique which does not require many assumptions (nonparametric technique) and can be applied to continuous necessary conditions. Nonetheless, Chaurasia et al. (2020) argue that both the CE-FDH and CR-FDH approaches may produce similar results, but there are others who believe that the CE-FDH approach is the most robust way (Sukhov et al. 2022) to produce more stable results (Bakır et al. 2022). Therefore, in this study, the CE-FDH line was chosen to conduct the NCA test.

RESULTS

COMMON METHOD BIAS

The data was collected using a single method, i.e., an online questionnaire. Thus, possible common method bias may exist. Therefore, in this study, the statistical approach, including Harman's single factor and full collinearity test, was used to assess common method bias. According to the statistical results of the Harman single factor, the

variance explained by a single factor using an unrotated factor is 48.97% which is below the threshold value of 50%. Meanwhile, the full collinearity test shows the VIF to be between 2.00 and 3.28. Kock (2015) suggests a VIF value of 3.3, 5.0 or 10 as the threshold to determine the model's common method bias. Thus, it is confirmed that the model in this research is free of common method bias issues.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

There were 237 samples used for data analysis (See Table 1). However, the gender distribution of the respondents is not balanced. Most of the respondents in the sample are female, accounting for 73% of the total respondents. Male respondents make up the remaining 27% of the sample. The largest age group in the sample consists of individuals below 24 years old, representing 71.31% of the respondents. They also represent the Generation Z group. The 25-33 years old age group comprises 19.41% of the sample. Individuals aged between 34-42 years old account for the smallest proportion, which is 9.28%. These two groups represent Generation Y. Most of the respondents are students, constituting 78.48% of the sample. Employed individuals make up 13.50% of the respondents, followed by self-employed and unemployed, 7.17% and 0.84%, respectively. The majority of the respondents (44.30%) spend 2-4 hours every day on social media. The next significant group (19.83%) spends 5-6 hours on social media daily. Around 21.10% of the respondents spend 1-2 hours on social media and a smaller proportion spend less than 1 hour (3.80%) or more than 7 hours (10.97%) on social media daily. In addition, 80.59% of the respondents follow at least one Malaysian SMI, while a smaller proportion (19.41%) does not follow any Malaysian SMI.

TABLE 1. Demographic profile (n=237)

| Attribute | Value | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 64 | 27.00 |
| | Female | 173 | 73.00 |
| Age | Below 24 years old | 169 | 71.31 |
| | 25 – 33 years old | 46 | 19.41 |
| | 34 – 42 years old | 22 | 9.28 |
| Occupation | Students | 186 | 78.48 |
| | Employed | 32 | 13.50 |
| | Unemployed | 2 | 0.84 |
| | Self-employed | 17 | 7.17 |
| Time spent on SM | Less than 1 hour | 9 | 3.80 |
| | 1 – 2 hours | 50 | 21.10 |
| | 2 – 4 hours | 105 | 44.30 |
| | 5 – 6 hours | 47 | 19.83 |
| | More than 7 hours | 26 | 10.97 |
| Follow any Malaysian SMI? | Yes | 191 | 80.59 |
| | No | 46 | 19.41 |

MEASUREMENT MODEL ASSESSMENT

According to Table 2, all the construct indicators' loadings are above the threshold value of 0.7. Meanwhile, Cronbach alpha (CA), rhoA and composite reliability (CA) are above the 0.7 threshold values, suggesting that these constructs are highly reliable. Convergent validity was determined by average variance extracted (AVE). The results show that the constructs' AVE is greater than 0.6, higher than the required 0.5 threshold value. Lastly, discrimination validity was conducted based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT.90 criterion. The results of both methods confirm that the data collected is free of discriminant validity issues (see Tables 3 and 4). Lastly, the collinearity test shows that the variance inflation factor (VIF) value of the model ranges from 1.948 to 2.865 (less than 3.0), indicating that collinearity is not an issue.

TABLE 2. Constructs, reliability and average variance extracted (AVE)

| Construct | Items | Loading | CA | rhoA | rhoC | AVE |
|-----------------|--------------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Trustworthiness | Trust1 | 0.843 | 0.860 | 0.873 | 0.905 | 0.704 |
| | Trust2 | 0.758 | | | | |
| | Trust3 | 0.874 | | | | |
| | Trust4 | 0.875 | | | | |
| Similarity | Similarity1 | 0.779 | 0.798 | 0.799 | 0.868 | 0.623 |
| | Similarity2 | 0.812 | | | | |
| | Similarity3 | 0.796 | | | | |
| | Similarity4 | 0.778 | | | | |
| Expertise | Expertise1 | 0.836 | 0.892 | 0.893 | 0.920 | 0.697 |
| | Expertise2 | 0.823 | | | | |
| | Expertise3 | 0.819 | | | | |
| | Expertise4 | 0.839 | | | | |
| | Expertise5 | 0.858 | | | | |
| Likeability | Likeability1 | 0.788 | 0.813 | 0.822 | 0.877 | 0.642 |

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Argument Quality (AQ) | Likeability2 | 0.853 | | | | |
| | Likeability3 | 0.832 | | | | |
| | Likeability4 | 0.726 | | | | |
| | AQ1 | 0.816 | | | | |
| | AQ2 | 0.793 | 0.836 | 0.842 | 0.890 | 0.670 |
| Credibility | AQ3 | 0.849 | | | | |
| | AQ4 | 0.815 | | | | |
| | Credibility1 | 0.856 | | | | |
| | Credibility2 | 0.871 | 0.887 | 0.888 | 0.922 | 0.747 |
| | Credibility3 | 0.898 | | | | |
| Brand Attitude | Credibility4 | 0.830 | | | | |
| | Attitude1 | 0.808 | | | | |
| | Attitude2 | 0.808 | | | | |
| | Attitude3 | 0.792 | 0.855 | 0.857 | 0.896 | 0.633 |
| | Attitude4 | 0.784 | | | | |
| | Attitude5 | 0.786 | | | | |

TABLE 3. Discriminant validity analysis via Fornell Larcker criterion

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Similarity | 0.789 | | | | | | |
| Expertise | 0.634 | 0.835 | | | | | |
| Likeability | 0.527 | 0.646 | 0.801 | | | | |
| Argument Quality | 0.590 | 0.730 | 0.660 | 0.819 | | | |
| Trustworthiness | 0.641 | 0.710 | 0.603 | 0.702 | 0.839 | | |
| Credibility | 0.648 | 0.732 | 0.661 | 0.752 | 0.703 | 0.864 | |
| Brand Attitude | 0.618 | 0.735 | 0.689 | 0.743 | 0.721 | 0.722 | 0.796 |

TABLE 4. Discriminant validity analysis via HTMT

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---|
| Similarity | | | | | | | |
| Expertise | 0.745 | | | | | | |
| Likeability | 0.649 | 0.757 | | | | | |
| Argument Quality | 0.719 | 0.841 | 0.800 | | | | |
| Trustworthiness | 0.766 | 0.801 | 0.718 | 0.822 | | | |
| Credibility | 0.769 | 0.822 | 0.774 | 0.867 | 0.797 | | |
| Brand Attitude | 0.747 | 0.839 | 0.828 | 0.875 | 0.838 | 0.828 | |

Note: HTMT.₉₀

STRUCTURAL MODEL ASSESSMENT

The PLS-SEM with 5000 sub-samples using the bootstrapping approach was used to evaluate all the hypotheses. The PLS-SEM estimate results show that similarity ($\beta=0.167$, $p\text{-value}<0.01$), expertise ($\beta=0.202$, $p\text{-value}<0.01$), likeability ($\beta=0.156$, $p\text{-value}<0.01$), argument quality ($\beta=0.299$, $p\text{-value}<0.001$), and trustworthiness ($\beta=0.148$, $p\text{-value}<0.01$) are found to have a significant positive relationship with credibility (see Table 5, Figure 2). Among the relationships, argument quality and expertise have greater standardised beta compared to the rest of the variables. The proposed model offers a highly convincing explanation of the significance of SMIs' credibility ($r^2=0.688$). These variables are found to have a small effect size (effect size < 0.15) on credibility (see Table 6). Meanwhile, credibility ($\beta=0.722$, $p\text{-value}<0.001$) is discovered to have a significant positive relationship with brand attitudes. The results also indicate that 52.1% of the explained variance is for brand attitude

TABLE 5. Result of PLS analysis

| Relationship | β | Std. Error | T-values | P-value | LLCI | ULCI |
|--|---------|------------|----------|---------|-------|-------|
| Similarity \rightarrow Credibility | 0.167 | 0.052 | 3.231 | 0.001 | 0.069 | 0.268 |
| Expertise \rightarrow Credibility | 0.202 | 0.071 | 2.868 | 0.002 | 0.064 | 0.339 |
| Likeability \rightarrow Credibility | 0.156 | 0.061 | 2.543 | 0.006 | 0.031 | 0.271 |
| Argument Quality \rightarrow Credibility | 0.299 | 0.073 | 4.098 | 0.000 | 0.159 | 0.446 |
| Trustworthiness \rightarrow Credibility | 0.148 | 0.061 | 2.451 | 0.007 | 0.036 | 0.269 |
| Credibility \rightarrow Brand Attitude | 0.722 | 0.039 | 18.631 | 0.000 | 0.642 | 0.793 |

TABLE 6. F-square value

| | Credibility | Brand Attitude |
|------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Similarity | 0.046 | |
| Expertise | 0.046 | |
| Likeability | 0.038 | |
| Argument Quality | 0.103 | |
| Trustworthiness | 0.027 | |
| Credibility | | 1.088 |

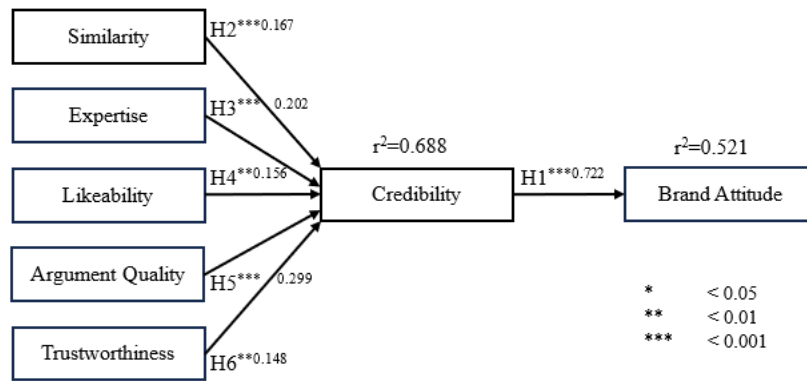


FIGURE 2. PLS path model and estimation results

NECESSARY CONDITION ANALYSIS (NCA)

Table 8 shows the NCA results of the outcome variable credibility and attitude towards a brand. Meanwhile, Table 9 shows the bottleneck analysis result at the level of necessary conditions to achieve a certain level of outcome. The results suggest that all variables are critical contributors to the outcome. Notably, argument quality ($d = 0.390$, $p < 0.001$) and likeability ($d = 0.349$, $p < 0.001$) have a large effect size on credibility. On the other hand, expertise ($d = 0.290$, $p < 0.001$), trustworthiness ($d = 0.194$, $p < 0.001$), and similarity ($d = 0.141$, $p < 0.001$) have a medium effect size on credibility. Similarly, credibility ($d = 0.221$, $p < 0.001$) has a medium effect size on brand attitude. According to the results obtained from the bottleneck analysis, to achieve a 50% level of credibility, the factors of trustworthiness, similarity, expertise, likeability and argument quality should be at no less than 19.6%, 19.9%, 20.5%, 26.5%, and 31.6%, respectively (see table 9). Likewise, to reach a 50% level of brand attitude, it needs at least 25.0% of credibility.

TABLE 8. NCA effect size

| Determinant | Outcome | Ceiling lines | Effect size (d) | P-value |
|------------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------|
| Trustworthiness | Credibility | CE_FDH | 0.194 | 0.000 |
| Similarity | Credibility | CE_FDH | 0.141 | 0.000 |
| Expertise | Credibility | CE_FDH | 0.290 | 0.000 |
| Likeability | Credibility | CE_FDH | 0.349 | 0.000 |
| Argument Quality | Credibility | CE_FDH | 0.390 | 0.000 |
| Credibility | Brand Attitude | CE_FDH | 0.221 | 0.000 |

Note 1: $0 < d < 0.1$ = small effect; $0.1 \leq d < 0.3$ = medium effect; $0.3 \leq d < 0.5$ = large effect; $d \geq 0.5$ = very large effect

TABLE 9. Bottleneck table

| | Trustworthiness | Similarity | Expertise | Likeability | Argument Quality | Credibility |
|---------------------------|-----------------|------------|-----------|-------------|------------------|-------------|
| Bottleneck Credibility | | | | | | |
| 0 | NN | NN | NN | NN | NN | |
| 10 | NN | NN | 10.3 | 20.5 | 20.5 | |
| 20 | NN | NN | 15.9 | 20.5 | 20.5 | |
| 30 | NN | NN | 15.9 | 20.5 | 20.5 | |
| 40 | 19.6 | 19.9 | 15.9 | 26.5 | 31.6 | |
| 50 | 19.6 | 19.9 | 20.5 | 26.5 | 31.6 | |
| 60 | 19.6 | 19.9 | 22.3 | 28.1 | 31.6 | |
| 70 | 33.0 | 19.9 | 25.0 | 28.1 | 39.9 | |
| 80 | 33.0 | 19.9 | 52.7 | 28.1 | 50.0 | |
| 90 | 33.0 | 33.9 | 65.7 | 81.5 | 75.0 | |
| 100 | 61.1 | 33.9 | 75.0 | NA | 76.7 | |
| Bottleneck Brand Attitude | | | | | | |
| 0 | | | | | | NN |
| 10 | | | | | | NN |
| 20 | | | | | | NN |
| 30 | | | | | | NN |
| 40 | | | | | | NN |
| 50 | | | | | | 25.0 |
| 60 | | | | | | 30.9 |
| 70 | | | | | | 30.9 |
| 80 | | | | | | 30.9 |
| 90 | | | | | | 50.0 |
| 100 | | | | | | 93.7 |

DISCUSSION

The PLS-SEM path model estimation has confirmed that all six hypotheses are supported. The findings are consistent with the source credibility theory and attitude-towards-the-ad model. Consumers tend to rely on the recommendations made by credible public figures. Hypothesis 1 supports the claim that perceived credibility is the driving factor which influences consumers' overall evaluation and establishes favourable brand attitude. The relationship between SMIs' credibility and brand attitude is also supported by Seiler & Kucza (2017). In other words, when SMIs are highly credible, consumers will tend to have a more positive evaluation of the brand endorsed, which will result in favourable brand attitude.

Similarity is perceived as one of the significant factors influencing credibility (Balaban & Mustătea 2019). Our finding confirms hypothesis 2, which posits that similarity is positively correlated with SMIs' credibility. In addition, hypothesis 2 is also supported by Sokolova and Kefi (2020) and Schouten et al. (2020). Our findings denote that people who are similar to one another in terms of shared values, interests and beliefs are more likely to develop stronger levels of understanding and trust among themselves. This helps to foster a sense of identity, association, and social learning between SMIs and their followers. These followers cum consumers view SMIs as a more credible source of information and seek the latter's approval before making a purchasing decision. However, the NCA results show that similarity is the antecedent which contributes least towards credibility. This suggests that consumers take into account other aspects such as likeability, expertise and argument quality when evaluating and forming the credibility of SMIs. Another possible reason is that similarity will only be considered a more important criterion when the situation fits the context.

According to the credibility source theory, expertise is a key factor in determining credibility. Hypothesis 3 examines the impact of expertise on credibility and is found to be supported, and this is backed by Schouten et al. (2020) and AlFarraj et al. (2021). In this setting, SMIs with high levels of expertise can build strong perceptions of their credibility among audiences and followers in social media (Schouten et al. (2020). Furthermore, influencers are always characterised as experts who are knowledgeable about the products they endorse. Their expertise directly changes consumers' perception who believe their endorsements are more authentic and credible, thus shaping a higher level of credibility (Schouten et al. 2020). However, expertise only has a moderate effect size on both the PLS estimation and the NCA test. This indicates that Malaysian Generation Y and Z do seek quality and authenticity in the claims made by SMIs from other sources rather than relying solely on SMIs' expertise. They demand relatability and shared experience to establish credibility.

The findings support hypothesis 4, and this is in line with the study conducted by Lai and Liu (2020), which confirms that the perceived credibility of an endorser is associated with his likeability. The finding demonstrates that the more likeable the SMIs are perceived to be, the stronger the assumption that the SMIs are credible (Myers 2021; Taillon et al. 2020). One plausible reason is that likeability increases positive emotions towards SMIs, and consumers would then perceive them as friendly, which increases engagement with them. Consumers' confidence in influencers is thereby strengthened as a result of their frequent engagement and interaction. Surprisingly, according to the NCA results, likeability has a large effect size on credibility and is also the second most critical factor in contributing to credibility. The result also suggests that the likeability of SMIs affects consumers' perception of their credibility, more than trustworthiness and expertise.

The results for Hypothesis 5 are consistent with the findings by Saima and Khan (2020), thus confirming that argument quality is significantly associated with influencers' credibility. Hence, it can be concluded that argument quality has a significant impact on SMIs' credibility. Moreover, Liu et al. (2021) state that consumers are inclined to engage with SMIs with high argument quality and strong persuasiveness and would accept reviews and recommendations of these SMIs. The PLS estimates and NCA results suggest that argument quality is the most critical factor in affecting credibility. This is different from the results obtained in previous studies. This indicates that Malaysian Generation Y and Z do not simply accept any claim made by SMIs; rather, they would consider and evaluate the quality of SMIs' arguments carefully to support their decisions and shape their beliefs and attitudes. Therefore, the more relevant and high-quality arguments SMIs can provide, the more it will lead them to perceive SMIs' claims are credible, and they will rely on these claims as central cues.

Our finding confirms Hypothesis 6, which posits that there is a significant positive relationship between trustworthiness and credibility. This is because trustworthiness reflects SMIs' honesty, integrity and reliability. SMIs' credibility would be enhanced if consumers believe their endorsements are trustworthy and dependable. Similarly, Nafees et al. (2021) and Schouten et al. (2020) suggest that the credibility of an influencer is contingent on trustworthiness; thus, the higher the trustworthiness perceived by consumers, the higher the credibility of SMIs would be. The PLS estimates and NCA results diverge slightly from the source theory of credibility as the effect size of trustworthiness on credibility is only moderate. The findings suggest that Malaysian Generation Y and Z do not consider trustworthiness as a dominant factor affecting the credibility of SMIs. This may be because both generations are Internet savvy and would conduct Internet research to reduce any doubt they have over SMIs' endorsements. They are sceptical of claims made by SMIs and will not directly trust their opinions or recommendations without further verification.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

First, this study attempts to integrate the source credibility theory and attitude-towards-the-ad model to examine the antecedents of credibility and how it affects influencer marketing. Secondly, this study also provides new insights into this area of research. Our findings show that the argument quality of SMIs' claims could not be ignored in influencer marketing. Young consumers behave differently; being Internet savvy, they are conducting extensive Internet research to verify claims or suggestions obtained from SMIs. In terms of research methodology, this study compensated for the inadequacies of PLS estimation by including the NCA approach to identify the necessity for antecedents which would contribute to SMIs' credibility, leading to a positive brand attitude. The source credibility theory stresses that expertise and trustworthiness are the two critical factors which influence a source's credibility. Our findings diverge from the theory as these two factors are not the dominant factors contributing to SMIs' credibility. This study finds that argument quality and likeability of SMIs have a larger effect size compared to expertise and trustworthiness. It adds to the body of knowledge and provides a better understanding of influencer marketing and theory development.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

In our study, most of the respondents follow Malaysian SMIs, highlighting their significant influence on Generation Y and Z. This indicates the potential effectiveness of influencer marketing in reaching out and influencing the target audience. Since consumers continue to avoid and disregard advertisements in this modern age (Breves et al. 2019), brands will most likely shift from working with SMIs as part of a campaign to working with them more as partners. SMIs can provide persuasive content based on personal experiences and expertise, which creates more credibility among their followers. Collaborating with relevant and credible SMIs can help build brand awareness and positive brand attitude among the audience.

Furthermore, the data of this research reveals that a substantial portion of respondents spend several hours on social media daily. This presents an opportunity for brands to leverage social media platforms as a key marketing channel. Collaborating with popular SMIs by including commercial messages and narratives related to the brands and products in their feeds can help to increase brand visibility and reach. Brands and SMIs can create a sense of similarity and likeability in their engagement with followers who are seeking social proof. To achieve this objective, the product or brand advertised must match SMIs' personalities and interests. This will enable followers to form the belief that the SMIs are credible, particularly if they share similarities with the latter. Accordingly, they will be keen to accept or imitate the lifestyle choices of SMIs. This would also lead to positive reviews or recommendations made about SMIs, resulting in a greater perception that their endorsement is credible.

The expertise, trustworthiness and argument quality of SMIs can compensate for the ambiguities present in the online environment. Adequate information may help consumers reduce any uncertainty and improve reviews and recommendations about the brands and products. Thus, it is crucial to develop and provide followers with reliable and shareable content and carry out frequent interactions with them. The advertiser needs to ensure the appointed SMIs respond to enquiries and doubts from their followers with solid and accurate information. In addition, SMIs are encouraged to share their personal stories about the products or brands in their feeds to build credibility and brand attitude.

According to the NCA results, likeability has a strong effect on credibility. Likeability can be enhanced by increasing SMIs' engagement and participation in social media marketing campaigns with their followers. The brands may motivate SMIs to provide creative, valuable and engaging content and relevant brand-related information on their feeds to create emotional attachments and attract more followers. SMIs are also advised to be genuine when sharing their personal stories related to brands and refrain from any unnecessary exaggeration or deception.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that SMIs' credibility could establish a positive brand attitude. The results of this study also show that argument quality, expertise, similarity, likeability and trustworthiness are the significant factors which influence SMIs' credibility. According to the NCA results obtained in this study, argument quality carries the highest standardised beta and is found to be the most important factor in building credibility. In addition, the findings on expertise are also consistent with the credibility source theory. As such, it is important to select SMIs who can provide convincing, persuasive and logical support, as well as be knowledgeable and competent in the subject matter of their endorsements. This can ensure their opinions and recommendations are aligned with the brand's values and enhance their ability to reach out to the target audience to maximise the impact of the SMIs. Surprisingly, trustworthiness is less important in contributing to SMIs' credibility. On the other hand, according to the NCA results, the effect of likeability is larger than most of the other factors tested in this research.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Generally, influencers fall into different categories such as celebrities, bloggers and content creators, industry experts, opinion leaders, and micro-influencers. The effectiveness of endorsements by these influencers will vary due to their different characteristics and experiences, such as the degree of fit between the type of endorsements and the type of influencers (Janssen et al. 2022). However, our study only focuses on the influence of SMIs in general. It is suggested that future research may use multi-group analysis to examine the impact of different types of influencers on their credibility and brand attitude. The extension of the research will enable marketers to select more suitable influencers based on their target audience to maximise the benefits of influencer marketing strategies, as well as to measure the effectiveness of such strategies. Since our findings are slightly different from previous studies and deviate from the underpinning theory, further investigation in this area is warranted.

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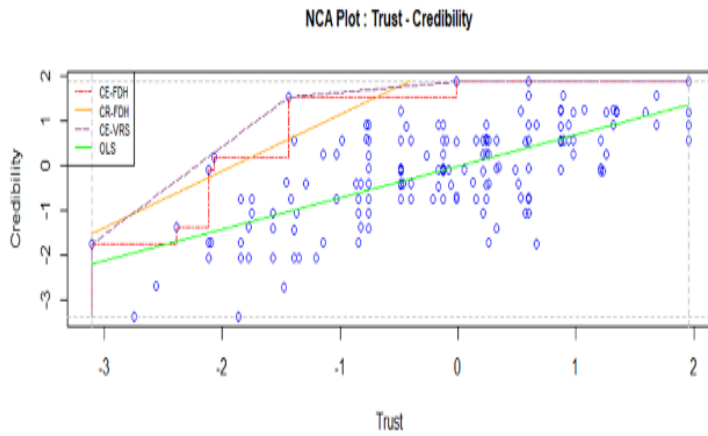
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APPENDIX 1

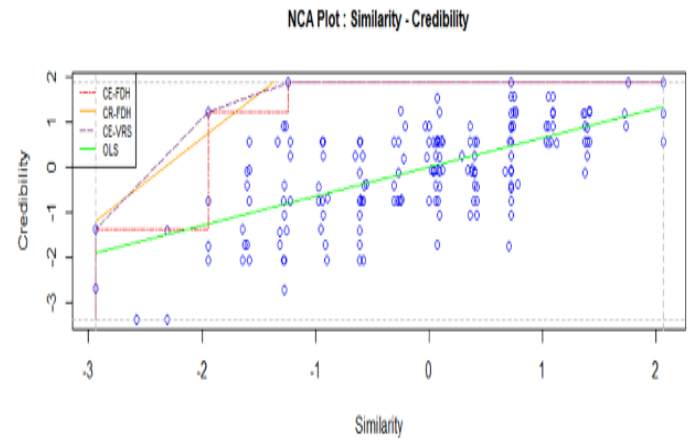
TABLE: Original source of constructs

| Construct | Measurement items |
|------------------|--|
| Similarity | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I think the social media influencer have the same thoughts and opinions as me in some ways. 2. I think the social media influencer behaves the same ways I do. 3. I think the social media influencer and I have the similar preferences in products. 4. I think the taste and style of social media influencer is just like me. |
| Expertise | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I think the social media influencer is an expert when he/she is endorsing a health and beauty product. 2. I think the social media influencer is experienced when he/she is endorsing a health and beauty product. 3. I think the social media influencer is very knowledgeable about endorsing health and beauty products. 4. I think the social media influencer is qualified when he/she is endorsing a health and beauty product. 5. I think the social media influencer is skilled when he/she is endorsing a health and beauty product. |
| Likeability | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I think the influencer on social media is friendly. 2. I think the influencer on social media is likeable. 3. I think the influencer on social media is warm. 4. I think the influencer on social media is approachable. |
| Argument Quality | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I think the information that social media influencer conveyed is convincing. 2. I think the information that social media influencer conveyed is supported by strong arguments. 3. I think the information that social media influencer conveyed is persuasive. 4. I think the information that social media influencer conveyed is good. |
| Trustworthiness | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I think social media influencer is reliable when he/she is endorsing a health and beauty product. 2. I would trust the social media influencer on endorsing a health and beauty product if he/she is being honest. 3. I think the social media influencer is sincere when he/she is endorsing a health and beauty product. 4. I think the social media influencer is trustworthy when he/she is endorsing a health and beauty product. |
| Credibility | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The social media influencers provide a believable information. 2. The social media influencers provide a reliable information. 3. The social media influencers provide a trustworthy information. 4. The social media influencers provide an accurate information. |
| Brand Attitude | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The brand that social media influencer endorsed/promoted is appealing. 2. The brand that social media influencer endorsed/promoted can be trusted. 3. The brand that social media influencer endorsed/promoted is pleasant. 4. The brand that social media influencer endorsed/promoted is favourable. 5. The brand that social media influencer endorsed/promoted is likable. |

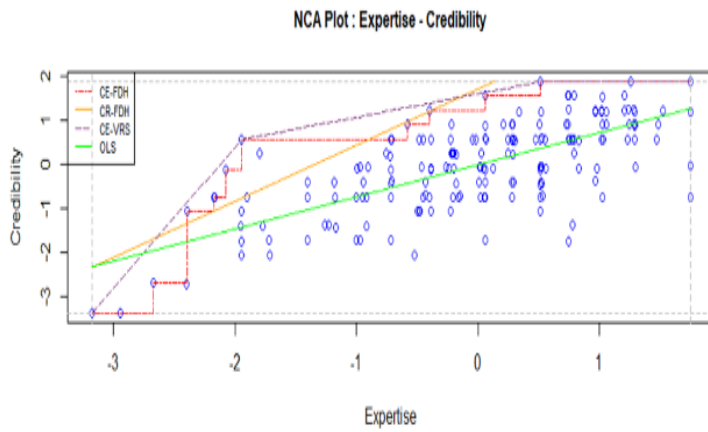
APPENDIX 2. NCA Plot



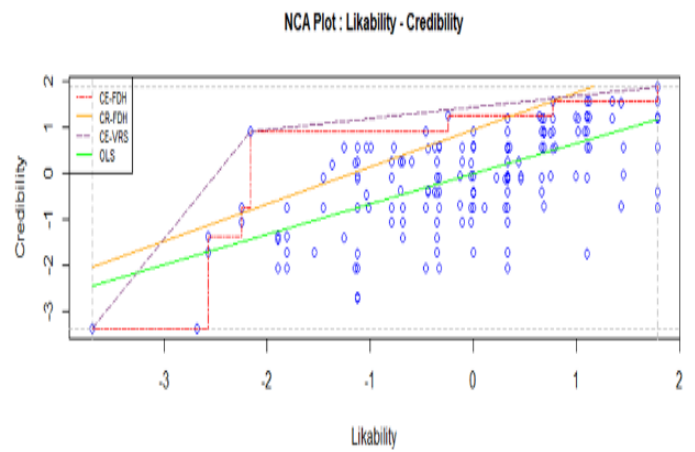
Predictor: Trustworthiness



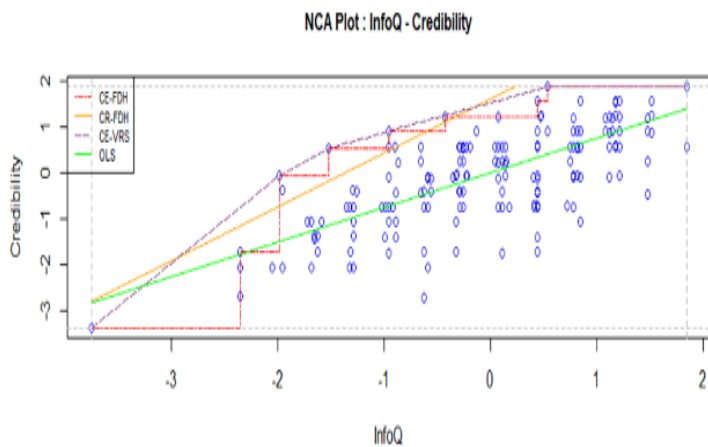
Predictor: Similarity



Predictor: Expertise

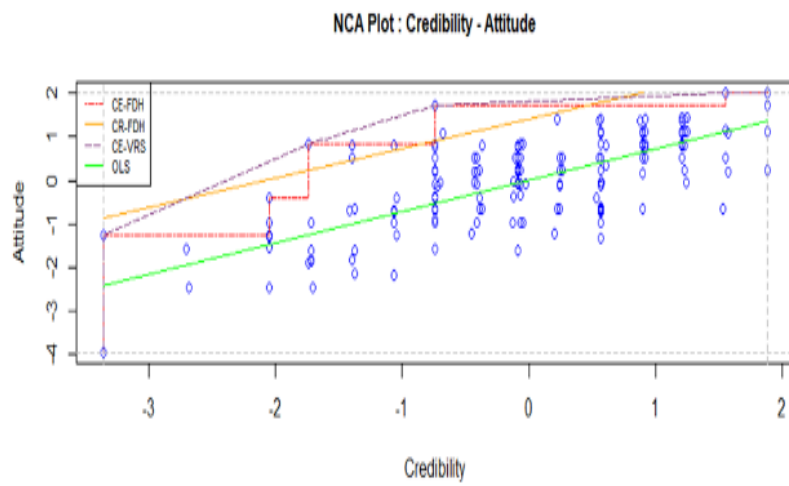


Predictor: Likeability



Predictor: Argument Quality

FIGURE 3. NCA plot: Outcome = Credibility



Predictor: Credibility

FIGURE 4. NCA plot: Outcome: Brand attitude