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The Impact of Micro-Influencer Attributes on Consumer Choices in Social Media: An Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) Perspective

***Qiao En Chan*[1]**
qiaoenn06@1utar.my[1]

***Thiam Yong Kuek*[2]**
qiaoenn06@1utar.my[1]

***Fitriya Binti Abdul Rahim*[3]**
qiaoenn06@1utar.my[1]

***Lit Cheng Tai*[1]**
qiaoenn06@1utar.my[1]

[1]Faculty of Accountancy and Management (FAM), Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Selangor, Malaysia
[2]Teh Hong Piow Faculty of Business and Finance, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Perak, Malaysia
[3]School of International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Kedah, Malaysia

Abstract

Social media has transformed marketing communication, making consumer decision-making more interactive, immediate, and socially embedded. Within this landscape, micro-influencers gained prominence due to their perceived authenticity and relatability. Grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this study examined how four micro-influencer attributes namely credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, and entertainment value influenced consumer choice on social media. These attributes were conceptualised as persuasive cues that operated through both central and peripheral processing routes. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed, targeting Malaysian social media users who followed micro-influencers. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire using purposive sampling and analysed using partial least

squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). Measurement items were adapted from established literature, and a pilot test was conducted to ensure validity. The study proposed that credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise enhanced consumer choice

through cognitive evaluation, while entertainment value influenced decisions through affective and heuristic processing. By integrating these attributes within an ELM framework, this research provided a comprehensive model for understanding consumer choice in influencer-driven digital environments.

Keywords: Micro-influencers, Consumer choice, Credibility, Trustworthiness and Expertise.

Introduction

Social media has reshaped marketing communication by making consumer decision-making more interactive, immediate and socially embedded. According to Ao et al. (2023) and Spörl-Wang et al. (2025), influencer marketing has become an important mechanism through which brands shape awareness, evaluations and purchase-related behaviour. Within this broader development, micro-influencers have attracted substantial attention because they are often perceived as more relatable, authentic and engaging than celebrities or macro-influencers (Belanche et al., 2021; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This paper examines four micro- influencer attributes; credibility, trustworthiness, expertise and entertainment value and their influence on consumer choice in social media. These attributes, as the independent constructs of the study, are theoretically coherent because each represents a persuasive cue that may influence how consumers process and act upon influencer recommendations. Accordingly, consumer choice is positioned as the dependent construct in this paper.

Literature Review

The underlying theory for this paper is Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). ELM explains persuasion through two routes; the central route, where individuals carefully evaluate message content and the peripheral route, where they rely on simpler cues such as source attractiveness, trust, emotions or style. This theory is particularly appropriate for social media because users do not process influencer content uniformly. Some engage in thoughtful evaluation, especially when product relevance is high while others respond more quickly to heuristic or affective cues embedded in the influencer's presentation (Gao et al., 2021; Li et al., 2025; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Recent literature also indicates that influencer marketing effectiveness is driven by multiple predictors operating together rather than by one isolated factor, which further supports the suitability of ELM as an integrating framework (Spörl-Wang et al., 2025).

The dependent construct, consumer choice refers to the process by which individuals evaluate available alternatives and make preference or purchase- related decisions after exposure to influencer content on social media (Masuda et al., 2022). In digital environments, consumer choice is shaped not only by product features or price, but also by social cues, perceived trust, emotional engagement and online recommendation dynamics. Recent studies show that social media influencers can significantly affect consumer decision-making by shaping purchase intention, shopping

behaviour, product evaluation and imitation-related responses (Afzal et al., 2024; Ampornklinkaew, 2025; Hanaysha, 2022). Research also indicates that consumer choices in social media settings are influenced by both cognitive evaluations, such as credibility and expertise and affective or social mechanisms, such as entertainment, parasocial connection and social identity (Ao et al., 2023; Farivar & Wang, 2022; Migkos et al., 2025). Accordingly, consumer choice in this paper should be understood as a broad outcome encompassing consumers' tendency to prefer, intend to purchase or act upon products and services recommended by micro-influencers.

The first independent construct is credibility. Credibility broadly refers to the extent to which an influencer is perceived as believable and convincing (Belanche et al., 2021). In source-based persuasion research, credibility has long been recognised as a major determinant of whether audiences accept or reject a message (Ohanian, 1990). In social media settings, credibility is particularly important because consumers are constantly exposed to sponsored content, endorsements and hybrid commercial-personal messages. Research has shown that influencer credibility significantly shapes followers' attitudes, purchase intentions and behavioural responses (Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Mabkhot et al., 2022). Meta-analytic evidence also suggests that credibility is among the strongest predictors of purchase intention in influencer marketing contexts (Ao et al., 2023).

From ELM perspective, credibility can influence persuasion through both processing routes. Under central processing, consumers may view a credible micro-influencer as a dependable source whose recommendations are worth considering carefully. Under peripheral processing, credibility can function as a shortcut, leading users to accept a message simply because the source appears believable. This dual role is useful because social media users often shift between careful evaluation and low-effort judgment depending on time, interest and cognitive load (Gao et al., 2021; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Therefore, higher perceived credibility will positively influence consumer choice.

The second independent construct, trustworthiness refers more specifically to the perceived honesty, sincerity, and integrity of the influencer (Ampornklinkaew, 2025). Although closely related to credibility, trustworthiness is different in that a source can come off as polished or visible without necessarily coming off as honest. In influencer marketing, trustworthiness takes on particular

importance since followers are often aware of the arrangements made for sponsorship, and may be sceptical if it appears that the recommendation is too commercial. Recent studies continue to show that trust is a core mechanism between influencer communication and purchase intention, recommendation behaviour and consumer loyalty (Adaba et al., 2025; Alcántara-Pilar et al., 2024; Shamim et al., 2024). In addition, research conducted in the context of live commerce and social commerce also indicates that trustworthiness decreases uncertainty and enhances persuasive effectiveness (Gao et al., 2021; Khudaykulova et al., 2026).

From ELM perspective, when consumers have an incentive to process influencer content carefully, trustworthiness will facilitate message acceptance by boosting

confidence in the honesty of the information source. As Petty and Cacioppo (1986) stated when elaboration is low, trustworthiness is a heuristic cue. If the influencer appears to be sincere, the recommendation is more readily accepted. In cluttered and fast-moving social media environments this shortcut can have substantial practical influence on consumer choices (Gao et al., 2021). Thus, trustworthiness will have a positive influence on consumer choice.

The third independent construct is expertise, which refers to the degree to which the influencer is perceived as knowledgeable, competent or experienced in a relevant domain (Duffett & Mxunyelwa, 2025). Expertise is one of the classic dimensions of source credibility and remains central in digital recommendation settings (Ohanian, 1990). Consumers are more likely to rely on influencer recommendations when they believe the influencer understands the product category and can offer meaningful advice. This becomes especially important for product categories involving greater uncertainty, risk or comparison, such as skincare, technology, health products or finance-related services. Empirical and review-based research continues to support the positive role of expertise in shaping attitudes, engagement and purchase intention (Ampornklinkaew, 2025; Ao et al., 2023; Ilieva et al., 2024).

Under ELM, expertise fits strongly with the central route because it enhances the perceived informational value of the message. A knowledgeable micro- influencer makes recommendations appear more diagnostic and useful, which encourages deeper consideration. At the same time, expertise can also function as a peripheral cue when followers make rapid judgments such as perceiving the person knows exactly what he or she is presenting. This ability to operate through both routes makes expertise especially consistent with the proposed framework (Gao et al., 2021; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Therefore, expertise will positively influence consumer choice.

As mentioned by Barta et al. (2023), the fourth independent construct entertainment value, refers to the extent to which influencer content is enjoyable, humorous, interesting or emotionally engaging. Ao et al. (2023) and Feng et al. (2015) argued that while entertainment may seem less substantive than expertise or trustworthiness, it is very influential in social media environments where attention is scarce and content is in a constant competition for visibility. Entertaining posts are more likely to give attention, longer viewing time, interaction and memorability. A recent meta-analysis showed that entertainment value was the best association with customer engagement of the influencer characteristics analysed (Ao et al., 2023). Studies on TikTok and social commerce also indicate that humour, hedonic experience and entertaining content can boost influencer effectiveness and purchase-related outcomes (Cao et al., 2025; Migkos et al., 2025).

Within ELM, entertainment value is most naturally interpreted as a peripheral cue (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) since many users consume social media content casually and rapidly rather than through sustained scrutiny. In such conditions, entertainment can create positive affect, reduce resistance and make consumers more receptive to recommendations. It may also increase the likelihood that the message is processed at all, since enjoyable content captures attention before any deeper evaluation occurs. For

this reason, entertainment value will also exert a positive influence on consumer choice (Ao et al., 2023; Barta et al., 2023).

Based on our arguments, we proposed the following propositions;
P1: Micro-influencer credibility positively influences consumer choices in social media.
P2: Micro-influencer trustworthiness positively influences consumer choices in social media.
P3: Micro-influencer expertise positively influences consumer choices in social media.
P4: Micro-influence entertainment value positively influences consumer choices in social media.

Methodology

The proposed research framework will be tested empirically through a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. This approach is appropriate because influencer marketing research commonly examines relationships among latent constructs such as credibility, trust, expertise and behavioural intention using structured questionnaires and structural equation modelling (Adaba et al., 2025; Belanche et al., 2021; Mabkhot et al., 2022). The target population consist of social media users in Malaysia who follow at least one micro-influencer and have been exposed to influencer-generated recommendations. As there is no readily available sampling frame, non-probability sampling will be used. Purposive sampling approach would be suitable because respondents should satisfy specific screening criteria that match the research purpose (Battaglia, 2008). Data collection will be conducted through an online self-administered questionnaire, which is consistent with prior influencer studies and practical for digitally active populations (Shamim et al., 2024).

Measurement items for credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, entertainment value and consumer choice will be adapted scales derived from source credibility and influencer marketing research (Ao et al., 2023; Belanche et al., 2021; Ohanian, 1990). Before the main survey, pilot test will be carried out to assess face validity of the instrument used, as pilot testing is widely recommended as a dress rehearsal for the full survey process (Presser et al., 2004). For data analysis, partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4.0 will be used as the study is prediction-oriented and this choice is consistent with several recent influencer marketing studies (Adaba et al., 2025; Cheah et al., 2024; Mabkhot et al., 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, ELS provides a strong theoretical basis for explaining how micro-influencer attributes shape consumer choices in social media. Credibility, trustworthiness and expertise are expected to explain why consumers accept recommendations as reliable and worthwhile while entertainment value explains why content can still persuade under lower-effort processing conditions. By integrating these four attributes into one research framework, this paper offers a clearer theoretical

foundation for future empirical research in the Malaysian context and a more robust basis for a theoretical paper.

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