

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INFLUENCER ENDORSEMENTS: HOW BRAND AWARENESS AFFECTS FOLLOWERS' PURCHASE INTENTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT - Social media influencers are first explored in the advertising field, particularly to create buzz in the markets and further expand social media coverage in businesses. This study is designed to investigate whether influencers' endorsement can mediate the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention among social media followers in Selangor, Malaysia. This study was hinged on the Source Credibility Theory. Using a survey research method, a structured questionnaire was administered among 389 social media (such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok) followers in Selangor with experience in purchasing products/services after watching or browsing social medias endorsed by an influencer. The findings revealed that majority of followers' purchase intention was moderately affected by the social media influencers. Furthermore, influencers' endorsement has a stronger influence on purchase intention, and brand awareness does not have an influence on purchase intention. In addition, influencers' endorsement has a mediation role on the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention. It was concluded that influencers' endorsement might be a more important construct than brand awareness and perhaps, followers develop a purchase intention when the social media post stated an '#sponsored' '#ad'. It was recommended that companies should ascertain the endorsement of social media influencers whose services would be employed in order to enhance positive perception about product promotion among the social media followers.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 28th Jul. 2025
 Revised : 01st Dec. 2025
 Accepted : 29th Dec. 2025
 Published : 30th Dec. 2025

KEYWORDS

Brand awareness
Influencer endorsement
Purchase intention
Digital marketing

INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers have attracted much attention from marketers and brands, not only as potential marketing channels but also as social relationship assets with whom they can collaborate (Ooi et al., 2023). This collaboration is believed can lead to sustainable relationships based on marketing and sales (Alboqami, 2023). With high competition among business owners, influencer marketing can be considered as one of the main tools used by many businesses to advertise their products/services through social media. Thus, it is clear that influencer in social media has great role as marketing medium for the development of the product/services (Marjerison et al., 2020). In these modern days, influencers are winning over the social media with their exceptional work and presence. Their opinions and judgments have the utmost impact on people, especially on young generations (Dou et al., 2023).

The social media enables the spread of information as well as influence that allows a large quantity of opinion leaders to become brand ambassadors (Susilo & Utomo, 2021). Through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, marketers team up with content creators/creatives who overtime, have earned the attention and trust of the audience well enough to directly and/or indirectly influence their opinion, choices and behaviours (Abraham et al 2022; Lee & Lee, 2022). Influencers have the powers to affect consumer behaviour because of their real or perceived authority, expertise, knowledge, engagement or relationship with the audience (Chen & Dermawan, 2020). Followers believe that celebrities are more trustworthy than salespeople hired by producers (Abraham et al 2022). Moreover, most celebrities are considered providers of expert-like opinions because the media constructs their characters (Dutta, 2020).

According to Hubspot, 71 percent of consumers were more likely to make a purchase when the product was mentioned in social media, and 92 percent would trust an influencer's marketing review of a brand when making a purchasing decision (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017). Influencers can label their post with a statement 'paid partnership with (business name)' to disclose their product endorsement. As most of the brands in the industry nowadays are connecting with the influencer in part of their marketing strategy as ambassador, there are number of issues concerning public's eye from engaging with such brands through influencers in the social media platforms. According to Prema (2020), the role of influencers in digital marketing communication is widespread, but they are not backed by empirical evidence. This study mainly aims to investigate whether social media influencers' endorsement can mediate the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention among social media followers in Selangor, Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purchase intention can be referred to willingness to purchase a specific brand as cognitive behavior (Doan, 2020). Purchase intention also refers to a motive to buy certain products or services in the future (Nursyirwan & Ardaninggar, 2020). Previous studies recommended that purchase intention is frequently linked to perceptions of influencers and influencer marketing as a whole (Abraham et al., 2022; Lee & Lee, 2022; Masuda et al., 2022). Weismueller et al. (2020) argued that the perceived trustworthiness of the influencer increased the rate of the purchase intention towards brands among customers. According to Le et al. (2021), the influence of social media influencers on the intention to purchase cosmetic products among consumers in Vietnam can be linked to the perception of the credibility of the information disseminated by the influencers. Masuda et al. (2022) pointed to perception of influencers' attitude, physical attractiveness, and parasocial relationship as factors that heighten the purchase intention for brands among the audience.

To understand more about how cognitive behavior affect purchase intention among consumers, this study focuses on the mediating influence of social media influencers' endorsement on the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention. Figure 1 shows the research framework for this study. This study is anchored on the Source Credibility Theory. Hovland and Weiss (1951) proposed the Source Credibility Theory in 1951 to explain that a communicator's message is convincing to the degree to which receivers consider the source to possess some credibility traits such as expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness (Le et al 2021). The theory proposes that people are more likely to be persuaded when the source presents itself as credible. The perceived credibility of the source determines how the audience will react to the message. The view of the audience of a medium and how they receive the message of that medium to a large extent, is dependent on how they see the source (Balaban & Mustătea, 2019). It can be considered that the more a social influencer has embodied the characteristics of source credibility, the more customers would accept the promotional messages from such influencer. In regards to social media influencer marketing of products, Figure 1 shows that this study assumes the effectiveness of the brand awareness is reliant on the positive perception of the audience towards influencer endorsement for their purchase intention.

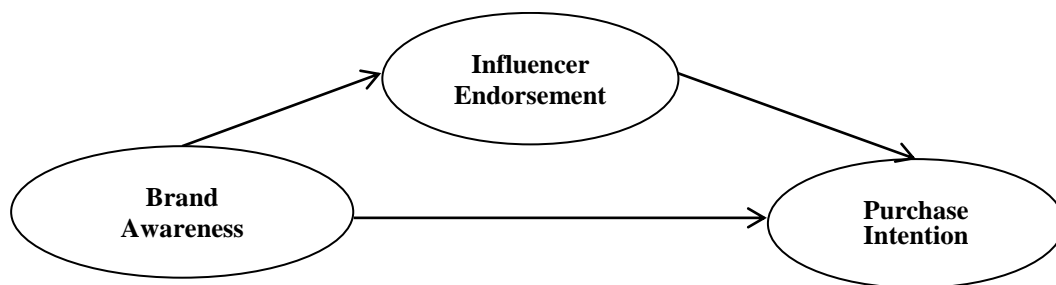


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Brand Awareness

Brand denotes a combination of identification and differentiation in which it draws great attention to the product/service. Hermanda et al. (2019) defined brand awareness as the probability that consumers are familiar about the availability and accessibility of a company's product/service. Brand could bring value to consumers and companies whereby consumers perceived that companies would make their attempt to satisfy their consumers by providing consumers' desire list of values, where value means benefit (Khan, 2020). When consumers are satisfied with the value they receive from brands, they may provide value to companies and demonstrate brand loyalty. According to Mudassar et al. (2013), the awareness of the brand plays a substantial role while purchasing a product/service and may have control on perceived risk evaluation of consumers and their level of assurance about the buying decision due to awareness with the brand and its uniqueness. In fact, social media is crucial as brand awareness basically build in there for the engagement of social media influencers with their followers. These influencers may use their platform, particularly the online profile to connect with other social media users and to raise awareness about the brands' products (Adreani et al., 2021). Whenever a customer is willing to buy a product/service, the first brand name that clicks in his mind reveals that this product has higher brand awareness (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021). Nurhandayani et al. (2019) also indicated that it seems that influencers have a massive reach, and they have the ability to increase brand exposure and boost brand awareness. As conclusion, countless businesses are partnering with respected digital influencers, including celebrities and/or influencers to raise awareness about their products/services, and increase their sales (Hsu et al., 2013).

Influencer Endorsement

Influencer endorser is defined as any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer product/service by appearing with it in an advertisement (Seno & Lukas, 2007). The goal of influencers' endorsement is to encourage positive attitudes and create favourable behavioural responses towards the endorsed brand as a result, just like human influencers (Torres et al., 2019). The phenomenon of using social media influencers for endorsement purposes is currently on the rise since the influencers exert a huge influence on their followers and can affect their buying decisions. Wiesmueller et al. (2020) revealed that there is high substantial effect of influencers endorsement in the decision of buying a product/service, given that this result justify the increase in company's sales. Some of the companies even promote their social media platform for customer relationship management (CRM) in an influencer-

brand setting and claim this is the root of the superior results (Venciute et al., 2023). On top of that, there are plenty of studies showed that customer purchasing intention is initiated when the influencer’s endorsement conditions were satisfied (Kurdi et al., 2022; Venciute et al., 2023). These conditions which mentioned by Müller et al. (2018) entailed that customer must perceive the product as useful, the influencer as credible, must have a positive attitude towards the ad, must perceive the persuasion attempt of the ad, and assess the ad rationally or emotionally. This indicates that customer reviews on influencer endorsements before making purchase as they are considered trusted and credible sources of information. Besides, it is highly significant that influencers are endorsing the products professional as it affects the buying decision.

RESEARCH METHODS

Quantitative analysis with cross-sectional design was employed in this study. The population of this study represented all social media (such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok) followers in Selangor with experience in purchasing products/services after watching or browsing social media endorsed by an influencer. A web-based survey was designed and administered in collecting the data. Screening questions were placed at the beginning of the survey to check whether the respondents regularly used social media as an influencer channel, had experience in purchasing products/services after watching their social media. Participants who answered “yes” to all of these screening questions were asked to fill in the remainder of the survey. Unqualified participants denied further access. The final sample size was 389.

Measurement of the Constructs

Demographic profile constituted the first section of the questionnaire, followed by the proposed abstract variables in this study. All latent variables were measured based on previously validated measurements. The measures employed in the study along with their sources are listed in Table 1. The measures were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’.

Table 1. Measurement of the constructs and its sources

Constructs	Items	Source(s)
Purchase Intention	10	Nagori (2020)
Brand Awareness	6	Hermanda et al. (2019)
Influencers’ Endorsement	7	Dwidienawati et al. (2020)

Data Analysis Method: Mediation Testing

A mediation testing is used to investigate whether influencers’ endorsement can mediate the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention among social media followers in Selangor, Malaysia. The SPSS Process Macro Model 4 add-on function in SPSS is used in the present study to test the direct and indirect effects among all the constructs in a model whether it is a single or multiple mediators or a moderator model (Hayes & Rockwood, 2016). Mediation in statistics is a hypothesised model in which the first variable influences a second variable then the second variable influences a third variable. M is a mediating variable (also called mediator) that mediates the relationship between a predictor variable, X, and an outcome variable, Y as shown in simple mediation model below (Figure 2). Based on Figure 2, X leads to M through path a, and M leads to Y through path b. Therefore, both path a and b have a direct effect. In the mediational effect, X leads to Y through M demonstrating indirect effect.

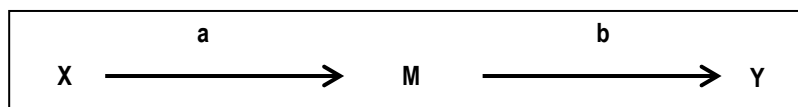


Figure 2. Simple mediation model

Model 4: Statistical Diagram

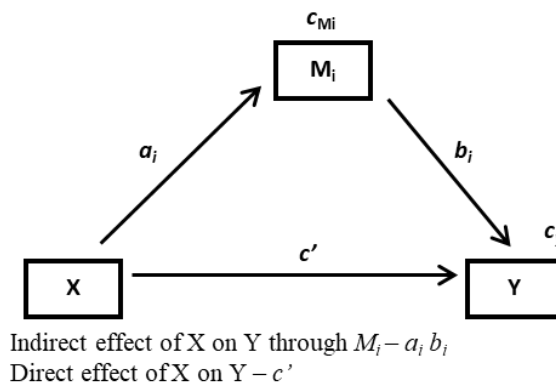


Figure 3. Model template for SPSS and SAS process (Model 4)

The current study proposes a research framework where the mediating variable, influencers’ endorsement (M) mediates the relationship of predictor variables, which are brand awareness (X1) on the outcome variable, purchase intention (Y). The ‘Model 4’ in the model templates for SPSS and SAS Process is chosen for the current study to get the results shown in Figure 3.

Preliminary Assessment

A preliminary analysis of the data was conducted and a reliability assessment of the constructs were carried out by calculating the values of the Cronbach’s alpha for each construct separately. According to Bougie and Sekaran (2019), reliability coefficient test indicates how well the items in a set positively correlated from one another. Variables can be considered as reliable if the Cronbach’s alpha value is set to be 0.7 and above (Pallant, 2020). Table 3 depicts that all constructs measuring purchase intention (brand awareness and influencers’ endorsement) are ranging from values 0.800 to 0.882. Hence, the internal consistencies of all constructs are considered acceptable since each reliability testing exceeds the suggested threshold.

Table 3. Reliability and normality assessment results

Constructs	Items	Cronbach’s Alpha	Skewness	Kurtosis
Purchase Intention	10	.800	-0.313	1.317
Brand Awareness	6	.806	-0.502	0.168
Influencers’ Endorsement	7	.882	-0.582	0.474

Further, the assessment of normality of the metric variables in this study involves empirical measures of a distribution’s shape characteristics (skewness and kurtosis). Table 3 shows that the normality assessment values for purchase intention, brand awareness, and influencers’ endorsement are between ±3.00 as suggested by Pallant (2020). Therefore, this assessment confirms that the data of this study is normally distributed.

RESEARCH FINDING

Respondents’ Profile

Figure 4a depicts unsurprisingly that female is more than the male as 66.4% of the study’s participants were female as compared to 33.6% males. Further, Figure 4b shows that majority of the respondents are between 18 and 30 years old. They make up more than half (73.6%) of the total responses to the survey given. The race status of the respondents as depicted in Figure 4c shows that 85.7% of respondents are Malay, while Indian make up the second largest respondents in this study with 9.3% of participation. Chinese respondents are the least participate in this study (5.0%).

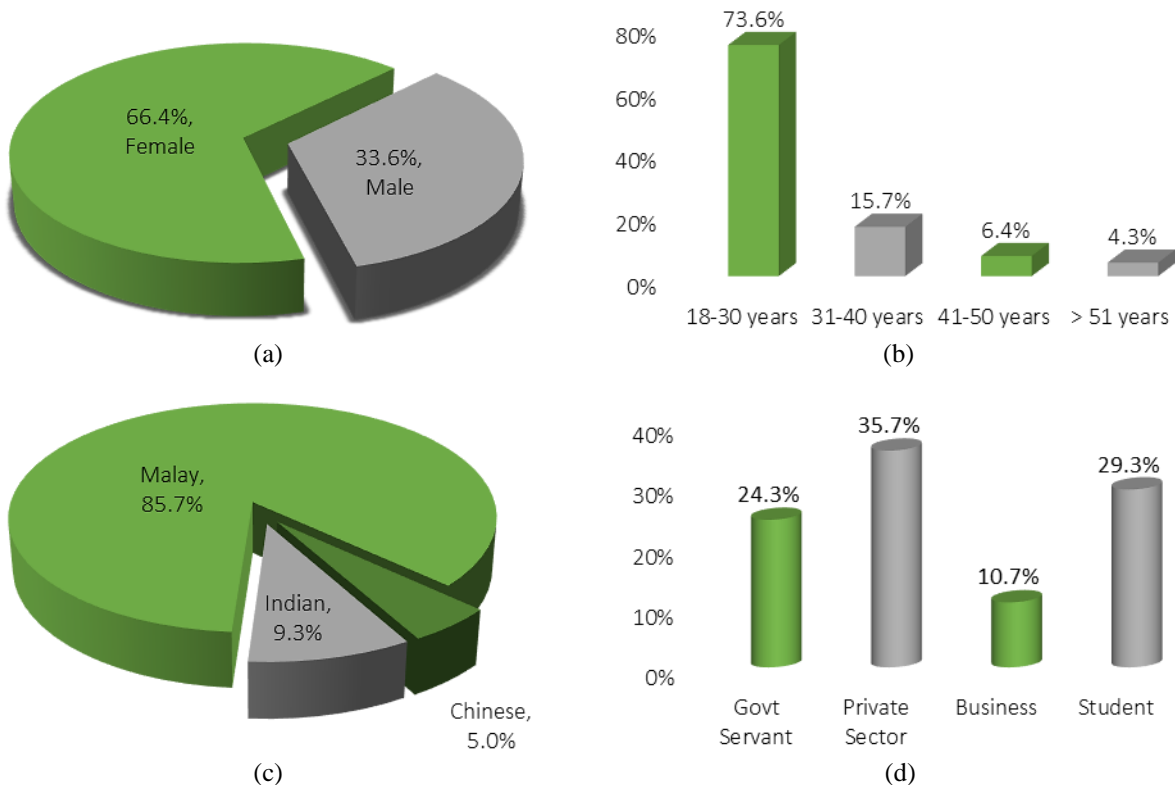


Figure 4. Respondents profile; (a) gender, (b) age group, (c) race, (d) occupation

In terms of occupation (Figure 4d), majority of the respondents (35.7%) currently worked in private sector, followed by students (29.3%). Finally, the rest of the respondents are worked as government servant (24.3%) and doing business (10.7%).

The Extent of Purchase Intention

This section reports the finding which relate to the extent of purchase intention by the customers in Selangor, Malaysia. One sample t-test was conducted to test whether the mean of overall extent of purchase intention is significantly equal to or different from a specified constant. Table 4 shows the mean result of 3.6736 for purchase intention which indicates that respondents have moderate intention in their purchase of products/services, and it is statistically significant at 1% level. Overall, majority of the respondents reveals that they usually read customer reviews before decide to buy the products/services. Besides, they do their own research about the products/services before buying it online and often go through social network sites to do online shopping.

Table 4. The extent of purchase intention perceived by respondents

Panel A: One Sample T-Test				
	n	Mean	t-statistic	p value
Purchase Intention	389	3.6736	67.539	.000***

Panel B: Mean for Itemised Attributes			
Attributes	Mean*	Rank	
- I often go through social network sites to do online shopping.	3.81	3	
- I do my own research about the products before buying it online.	4.35	2	
- I usually read customer reviews before I decide to buy the product.	4.65	1	

Note: Result is significantly different at *** 1% level and ** 5% level, respectively, using two-tailed tests

Figure 5 reveals that majority of the respondents mostly preferred Instagram as their social media site as compared to other social media types. They counted more than half (57.1%) of the overall participants in this study. Facebook is the second preferable social media chosen by the respondents (22.9%). Contrary, the least preferred social network site when deciding for purchasing products/services by respondents is TikTok with only 5%.

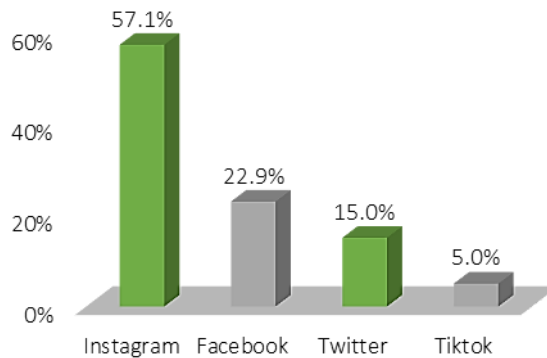


Figure 5. Social media preferences

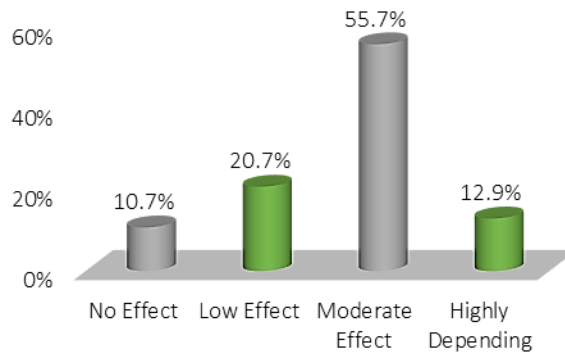


Figure 6. Social media effects on respondents

Respondents also are required to indicate how do social media influencers affect their purchase intention. Figure 6 illustrates that majority of the respondents indicate that their purchase intention was moderately affected by the social media influencers (55.7%). There are 12.9% of respondents stated that they are highly depends on social media influencers when thinking of making purchase, while 10.7% of respondents revealed that they are not affected by the social media influencers.

Mediating Role of Influencers' Endorsement

This section discusses the results of mediation testing in order to examine whether social media influencers' endorsement is a possible mediator to the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention among social media followers in Selangor, Malaysia. Figure 7 depicts the outcome of Model Testing 1 whereby the R^2 value of 0.2793 means that both brand awareness and influencers' endorsement explain about 27.93% of the variance in the purchase intention.

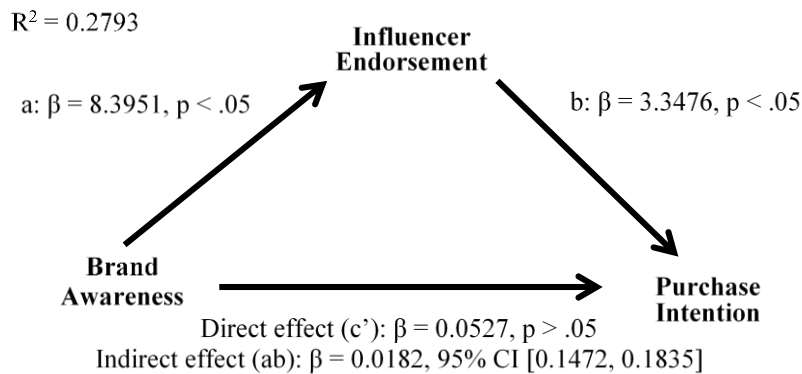


Figure 7. Model testing 1 (IV is Brand Awareness, MV is Influencers' Endorsement)

The mediation testing result reveals that brand awareness has a positive effect on influencers' endorsement ($\beta = 8.3951, p < .05$). Next, influencers' endorsement does significantly predict purchase intention ($\beta = 3.3476, p < .05$). Further, the result shows that the direct effect of brand awareness does not significantly influence purchase intention ($\beta = 0.0527, p > .05$). Finally, the β -value of indirect effect of brand awareness on purchase intention is 0.0182 ($p < .05$) and the 95% confidence interval (CI) falls between 0.1472 and 0.1835. Since the 95% CI does not include 0, the indirect effect is statistically significant (i.e. mediation is supported). This result indicates that there is a mediation role of the social media influencers' endorsement on the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention among social media followers in Selangor, Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken to clarify the role of social media influencers' endorsement, which is considered a critical construct in social media marketing. This study conducted an online survey of social media followers who had purchased a product/service after watching an influencer's video advertisement on their social media platform to examine the mediation effect of influencers' endorsement on the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention based on Source Credibility Theory. The results show that influencers' endorsement has a stronger influence on purchase intention, and brand awareness does not have an influence on purchase intention. Further, social media influencers' endorsement has a mediation role on the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention. This result indicates that influencers' endorsement might be a more important construct than brand awareness and perhaps, the followers develop a purchase intention when the social media post stated an '#sponsored' '#ad'. This is consistent with previous studies such as Kurdi et al. (2022), Müller et al. (2018), and Venciute et al. (2023) that consumers tend to gather information before making decisions about purchasing the products/services from others' experiences which could reduce the perceived risk and increase the confidence of shoppers. This includes influencers' endorsements as they are considered trusted and credible sources of information.

The study's practical contribution is that influencers' endorsement can be used to enhance marketing efforts. Focusing on a diverse types of social media advertising, this study shows that influencers' endorsement positively influences purchase intention in social media influencer marketing. By contrast, previous studies have shown that, influencers' endorsement has a greater impact on outcomes (Kurdi et al., 2022; Müller et al., 2018; Venciute et al., 2023). Therefore, companies trying to use influencer marketing can exploit the impact of the construct of endorsement on purchase intention to develop more optimal social media marketing strategies for their customers. This study had three main limitations. First, further dividing the influencers' social media types and consumer attributes information could allow a more detailed analysis of the structure of influencers' endorsement and its influence on marketing strategies. Using the research model examined here as a starting point, a more detailed explanation of the impact could be obtained by comparing the models by subdividing the influencers' social media types and consumer attributes. Second, the selection for the determinants of purchase intention is not exhaustive. There may be other predictors that may contribute or be a reason of purchase intention which might provide more insight. Thus, further research may consider to include other predictors such as

attitude, lifestyle, influencers' credibility, and others to enrich findings in various perspectives. Third, the study's analysis did not sufficiently incorporate the product/service categories to which the influencers belonged. Therefore, future studies should create subcategories based on the product/service of each advertising target and compare marketing effectiveness levels across the subcategories.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors acknowledge Universiti Selangor for their collaboration and technical support, which contributed significantly to the success of this research..

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This article was written jointly by all the authors, who were also involved in designing the study, conducting data collection and analysis, writing the manuscript, and final revision before submission for publication.

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