Enhancing Brand Trust through Influencer Marketing Credibility, Honesty and Trustworthiness - A SOR Theory Application

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Abstract

In the evolving social media landscape, influencer marketing is crucial for brands aiming to connect with consumers. However, issues such as increasing similarities among influencers and perceived dishonesty have diminished audience trust. This study uses the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory to explore how influencer honesty and trustworthiness impact their credibility and, in turn, brand trust among Malaysian social media users. Influencer actions are seen as stimuli, credibility as the internal response, and brand trust as the outcome. The findings show that honesty and trustworthiness strongly influence how credible an influencer is perceived to be, and this credibility plays a key role in building brand trust. Theoretically, the study enhances the SOR framework in the context of digital marketing by showing how influencer traits influence consumer perceptions. It also contributes to influencer marketing research by identifying credibility as the link between personal traits and brand trust. Utilizing a purposive sampling technique, 279 respondents completed an electronically distributed survey, with 250 valid responses analyzed through SPSS 25 and SmartPLS 3.0. The findings reveal that both influencer honesty and trustworthiness significantly enhance perceived credibility, which positively influences brand trust. Additionally, influencer credibility mediates the relationship between honesty/trustworthiness and brand trust, underscoring the importance of authentic and transparent endorsements. The study proposes a "trustworthiness seal" as a potential solution to restore and enhance trust, benefiting consumers, influencers, and brands. This study provides actionable insights for marketers, highlighting the importance of ethical conduct and authentic influencer partnerships in cultivating strong, trust-centered brand relationships in the digital era.

Keywords

INTRODUCTION

The study highlights growing concerns about influencer credibility, driven by the increasing similarity among influencers and a lack of transparency in sponsored content. Stanislaus argues that de-influencing, which involves being honest and transparent, is not just a strategy but a key to building credibility and trust. Honest influencers foster loyal communities, promote follower well-being, and ultimately benefit brands through enhanced credibility. Supporting this, the 2023 Influencer Benchmark Report reveals that 20 percent of consumers would

unfollow influencers who give dishonest reviews. These concerns are particularly significant due to the extensive use of social media, which has evolved into a global phenomenon with 4.65 billion users, accounting for 58.7 percent of the world's population, as reported in Digital 2022. In Malaysia, social media usage is even higher, with 91.7 percent of the population active on these platforms (Nurdayana et al., 2023), further emphasizing the importance of authenticity in influencer marketing.

The similarities among the influencers have been increasingly reported recently. The statistics show that influencers lack transparency and honesty in appraising a sponsored product. With an approximate ratio of 1,500 Malaysians to every influencer in the country, a pertinent question arises, which is how effective Malaysian influencers will continue to be amidst these increasing similarities (Influencer Benchmark Report, 2023). Adopting de-influencing is a catalyst for credibility and trust, and it is more than just a strategic move. In addition, influencers who are open and honest about the ideals of their products promote the well-being of their followers and build a strong, devoted group that respects their opinions (Tackling Similarities of Influencer Marketing, 2023). The market is eager for honest opinions, with 20 percent of customers saying they would unfollow influencers who give a sponsored product a dishonest review (Influencer Benchmark Report, 2023). The report also stated that brands stand to benefit greatly from this open strategy as well.

Indeed, brands gain credibility and reliability by aligning with influencers who are known for their authenticity and honesty (Deshi, 2023). As the influencer marketing landscape faces a critical battle, one fueled by dishonesty and waning trust, this highlights a growing disharmony between online personalities and their audiences, driven by a lack of authenticity and integrity in sponsored content (Influencer Benchmark Report, 2023). To rebuild trust and ensure mutual benefit, a solution is needed. Implementing a "trustworthiness seal" could be the key, safeguarding consumer trust, fortifying influencer credibility, and bolstering brand reputations (Tackling Similarities of Influencer Marketing, 2023). Such a seal would symbolize a commitment to honest and transparent endorsements, fostering a healthier influencer ecosystem where everyone wins. The failure of industry to create trust element, customer commitment, and privacy also the usefulness of the services will end up with their customer intention to leave their company (Wahab et al. ,2009).

Hence, consumers tend to gain confidence in recommendations, influencers solidify their genuine connections with their followers, and brands benefit from authentic partnerships that resonate with their target audience. This shift toward ethical practices is not just an option but a necessity for the future of influencer marketing. Only by prioritizing honesty and building trust can all stakeholders thrive in this dynamic and influential space. With this in mind, this article is directed to answer the following research questions.

i. To identify the relationship between honesty, trustworthiness with influencer credibility
ii. To identify out how an influencer's credibility has an impact on brand trust
iii. To examine how influencer credibility acts as a mediator for honesty and trustworthiness with brand trust.

THEORETICAL PREMISE AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory

According to the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model, consumer behavior is influenced by their immediate environment (S), their current emotional state (O), and their shopping

response (R) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The theory posits that external stimuli influence the internal state of the organism, leading to behavioral responses from the individual (Zhai et al., 2020). According to the SOR mechanism, external stimuli influence the internal psychology of the organism, which then triggers corresponding behavioral responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

Within this context, the stimulus consists of an influencer making a statement that endorses a product or service. The statement causes a reaction from the organism (the consumer) when it suits both their material and non-material needs. A stimulus that demonstrates credibility and honesty tends to elicit positive reactions from consumers. The consumer serves as the organism, which receives the influencer's statement as a stimulus and subsequently experiences a response. Customer response is dependent on the honesty and trustworthiness of the influencer. If consumers perceive an influencer as honest and trustworthy, they are more likely to trust the brand and consider making a purchase based on the influencer's recommendations. Consumer receptiveness to marketing messages increases when influencers create emotional connections and engage their audiences, which leads to heightened influence and purchase decisions (Chen et al., 2024). The response represents how consumers react after processing both the influencer's statement and their own evaluation of this stimulus (Ilmalhaq et al., 2024). When consumers trust the influencer's statement to be honest and establish trust with the influencer, their reaction towards the brand becomes positive, which elevates brand trust and may result in a purchase (Huang, 2023; Kumar et al., 2020).

Influencer Credibility

The term "social media influencer" refers to someone who has become a prominent figure online. These individuals have amassed a large following on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok. They leverage their audience by creating content focused on specific niches, such as food, travel, or beauty, with the aim of influencing their followers' choices and behaviors (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencer credibility is the measure of an online content creator's reliability and trustworthiness for a particular audience, which makes them opinion leaders and allows their posts to have an impact on products, businesses, and potential customers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

The phenomenon of social media influencers has become a major aspect of contemporary digital culture, with individuals assembling substantial followings on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. These digital platforms, often focused on areas such as food, travel, or beauty, exert significant influence on their extensive audience through the creation and spreading of content (Belanche et al., 2021). The concept of influencer credibility is crucial in understanding the dynamics of this online influence. As opinion-makers, influencers hold the power to shape perceptions and preferences, making their posts capable of affecting brands, products, and prospects (Martínez-López et al., 2020).

Honesty

Social media influencers typically state that they are giving their "honest opinions," even in sponsored posts. This study looks at how these honesty claims affect people's perception of the message and the influencer themselves. A study by Hwang and Jeong (2016) examined how "honest opinion" sponsorship disclosures compare to no disclosure or simple disclosure. Their findings showed that people found the influencer more credible and the message more trustworthy when they claimed it was their honest opinion, compared to the other disclosure

options (Lee et al., 2021). Social media influencers increasingly use "honesty claims" to assure viewers that their content reflects genuine opinions, regardless of sponsorship. As the digital influencer marketing landscape continues to evolve, a deeper exploration of the nuanced interplay between honesty claims, credibility, and audience responses is imperative. Such insights will not only contribute to the refinement of influencer marketing strategies but also provide a comprehensive understanding of how authenticity in sponsored content shapes consumer perceptions in the dynamic realm of social media influence. In addition, a previous study by Shanahan and Hopkins (2007) found that simply stating "the content is based on one's honest opinions" could restore source credibility and foster positive message attitudes. However, a more recent study by Vassey et al. (2024) reported that this effect was not statistically significant. Therefore, we propose:

H1: There is a positive relationship between honesty and influencer credibility.

Trustworthiness

The integrity and apparent plausibility of the source are referred to as its trustworthiness. Furthermore, how consumers view influencers' motivations is a key factor in determining their credibility (Shimp, 2000; Silvera & Austad, 2004). The second essential component of credibility, expertise, describes an influencer's familiarity with, proficiency in, and experience related to a particular product or subject (Umeogu, 2012), as well as the veracity of his or her assertions regarding the goods or subjects (Silvera & Austad, 2004). Furthermore, persuasiveness and purchase intention are seen to be most significantly impacted by knowledge (Aaker & Myers, 1987; Silvera & Austad, 2004; Ohanian, 1991). Two essential components are crucial when analyzing the causes and effects of social media influencers' credibility: reliability and competence. The first essential element, trustworthiness, includes the influencer's credibility and perceived plausibility as a source. According to Shimp (2000) and Silvera and Austad (2004), consumers' perceptions of an influencer's motivations are closely linked to the level of trust they place in them. Additionally, Ding (2024) demonstrated that the perceived high trustworthiness of Gen Z social media influencers positively influences brand value perception and enhances consumers' purchase intentions. This suggests that the influencer's general trustworthiness is greatly influenced by their genuineness and authenticity. Therefore, we suggest:

H2: There is a positive relationship between trustworthiness and influencer credibility.

Brand Trust As The Outcome

Delgado-Ballester et al. operationalize brand trust as a feeling of security throughout brand interaction, based on the belief that the brand will continue to be dependable and accountable for meeting customer needs (Munuera-Alemán et al., 2003). Drawing on the work of Naggar and Bendary, brand trust is defined as expectations and perceptions that stem from convictions that a given brand possesses attributes that make it reliable, competent, and consistent (Abdel et al., 2017). Garbarino and Johnson propose that brand trust is a product of prior encounters and interactions and that it reflects the process of learning over time (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999).

Influencer credibility, determined by their expertise, trustworthiness, and likability, serves as a fundamental element in this process. As highlighted by previous studies, influencer credibility reflects how customers view a brand's credibility and influences their confidence in the brand's products and loyalty to it (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Additionally, brands can develop

effective strategies to build strong relationships with their customers and drive long-term success by understanding the interplay between brand trust and influencer credibility. Furthermore, brands can foster a sense of security and trust among their customers, ultimately leading to increased brand loyalty and purchase intentions, by carefully selecting influencers who possess the right attributes and consistently demonstrate dependable and accountable performance (Kemec & Tuksel, 2021). Several studies have also reported that perceived influencer credibility positively affects trust, as shown by Abdul Aziz et al. (2023), while Talesara (2024) further confirmed a strong positive relationship, indicating that higher perceptions of influencer credibility are associated with greater brand trust. Therefore, we propose the following:

H3: There is a positive relationship between influencer credibility and brand trust

Mediating Role of Influencer Credibility

In the present study, we extend the examination of honesty and trustworthiness on brand trust. We expected that when an influencer is perceived as honest, their credibility increases, which in turn enhances brand trust because consumers believe in the credibility of the influencer endorsing the brand. Similarly, an influencer perceived as trustworthy is seen as more credible, and this increased credibility leads to higher brand trust. Thus, both honesty and trustworthiness contribute to influencer credibility, which mediates their effect on brand trust, ultimately benefiting the brand by leveraging the trust consumers place in a credible influencer (Saima & Khan, 2020). This understanding is rooted in the idea that customers develop trust when they perceive a brand as reliable, competent, honest, and responsible (Shoukat, Selem & Shah, 2023). A few studies, including those by Saini and Bansal (2024) and Belanche et al. (2021), found that dimensions of influencer credibility as a mediating variable positively influence brand image. Moreover, these attributes indirectly have a positive and significant effect on brand attitude. Ultimately, both perceived credibility and brand attitude foster positive behavioral responses toward the influencer, highlighting the need for influencers to continually enhance these factors to maintain their influencing power.

The above discussion gives rise to the following hypotheses:

H4a: To examine the mediating effect of influencer credibility between honesty with brand trust.

H4b: To examine the mediating effect of influencer credibility between trustworthiness with brand trust.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

This study aims to identify the relationship between the effect of influencer credibility on brand trust across all the variables. The summary of this figure is provided below based on the preceding review of relevant literature.
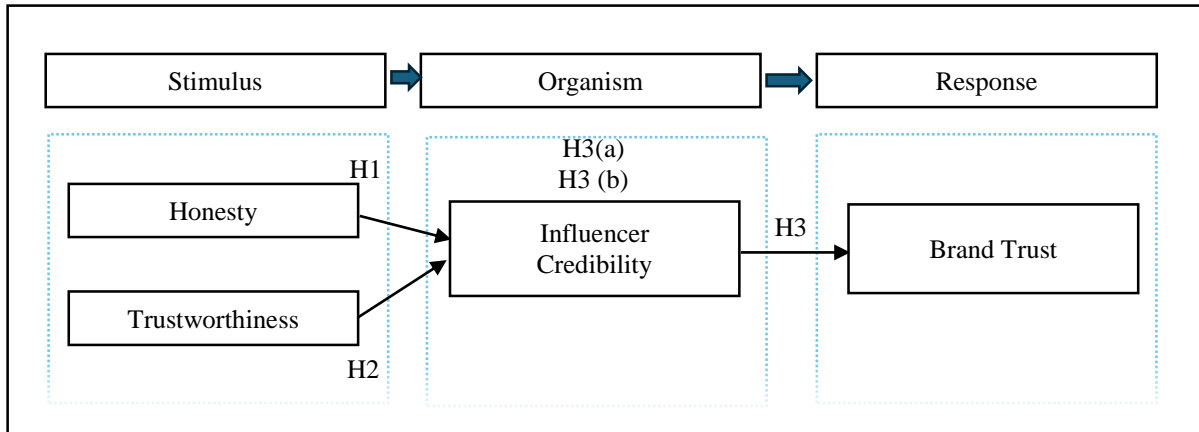

Figure.1: Conceptual framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

This study focuses on social media users in Malaysia to explore what makes influencers appear credible and the effects their credibility has. Malaysia was chosen because of its high social media usage and diverse cultural background, which provide a rich context for understanding how influencer credibility develops and influences consumer behavior. The study is interested in social media users who turn to influencers on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to learn about products. In addition, according to Adapon et al. (2024), brands and companies are marketing their products using these platforms. We chose this target group because social media use is widespread across all ages. Hence, the population for this study primarily consists of social media users, and this platform has affected brands both positively and negatively, as online customer reviews have been widely used (Adapon et al., 2024). This study followed the recommendations of previous research suggesting that a sample size of 150 can be sufficient to represent the wider population for studies of this nature (Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Deshi, 2023). Since it is challenging to pinpoint the exact number of social media users or influencer followers, we opted for a non-probability sampling technique, specifically purposive (judgment) sampling. It is generally assumed that social media users who follow any influencer on social media and have experience interacting with those influencers are suitable for this study. Additionally, minimizing response biases in respondents' selection for this sampling technique was perceived as workable due to the inclusion of the screening question, "Do you follow any social media influencers?". Hence, we were able to reach the right category of people with the information that is sought while minimizing response biases by employing this technique.

Interviewing, questionnaire administration, and observation are the three main data collection methods in survey research (Sekaran & Wiley, 2002). This study involved electronically distributing a structured questionnaire to gather responses. Non-probability sampling comes in two varieties: convenience sampling and purposive sampling (Sekaran et al., 2010). Specifically, a snowball technique was used to collect the primary data. An electronic

link was created and shared accordingly. Additionally, we received some assistance from personal contacts to share the questionnaire link with the targeted respondents. The questionnaire consists of seven sections, and the respondents' information will remain strictly confidential in this survey. Attitudes are commonly measured using a Likert scale, which is an ordinal scale with 5 or 7 points, allowing respondents to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with a given statement (Likert, 1932). In Section A, two questions were developed to obtain demographic background data on all respondents, including gender and age. Section B is about social media. Furthermore, the next section, Section C, measures influencer credibility (dependent variable), while Sections D and E focus on honesty and trustworthiness (independent variables) using the Likert scale. Section F is about brand trust based on influencer social media.

Out of the 279 sets of questionnaires received, 29 were found to contain faults, outliers, or were left blank or missing by the respondents. The demographic data reveals a balanced gender distribution among the respondents (53.2% male, 46.8% female) and a predominant age range of 21-25 years (41.2%), with notable groups in the 15-20 and 26-30 age categories (both 18.4%). Social media usage varies, with 42.8% using it for less than an hour daily, 23.6% for 1-2 hours, 13.6% for 3-4 hours, and 20% for more than 4 hours. Importantly, all respondents (100%) follow social media influencers, indicating high engagement with influencer content. These insights suggest that marketing strategies should focus on young adults, leveraging influencer partnerships, and employing diverse content strategies to cater to both light and heavy social media users. A balanced gender distribution supports broadly appealing campaigns without a strong need for gender-specific targeting.

Table 1: Respondent's demographic profile

Demographic	Categories	Respondents = (n=250)	
		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	133	53.2
	Female	117	46.8
Age	15-20	46	18.4
	21-25	103	41.2
	26-30	46	18.4
	31-35	32	12.8
	35 and above	23	9.2
Frequency of Social Media Usage per Day	1-2 hours	59	23.6
	3-4 hours	34	13.6
	Less than 1 hour	107	42.8
	More than 4 hours	50	20
Following Social Media Influencer	Yes	250	100
	No	-	-

FINDINGS PRESENTATION

Partial Least Squares (PLS) Path Modelling

In this research, PLS path modeling was carried out using SmartPLS 4.1 software (Ringle et al., 2015) to evaluate both the measurement and structural models. This method was chosen because it does not assume data normality, an assumption frequently violated in survey-based studies (Chin et al., 2003). Consistent with the guidelines proposed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), a two-step approach was utilized. This approach necessitates establishing a valid measurement model before testing the structural model.

Assessment of The Measurement Model

According to Hair et al. (2011, 2019), evaluating the measurement model involves verifying item reliability, internal consistency, content validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Table 1 presents a summary of the reliability and convergent validity for the overall PLS path model. All indicators achieved the suggested loading value of 0.70 or higher, with the exception of H2 (0.678), T1 (0.607), IC4 (0.623), and BT5 (0.564), which fall below the 0.70 benchmark and were consequently excluded from the analysis.

Fornell and Larcker (1981) highlight the significance of evaluating convergent validity using the average variance extracted (AVE). As stated by Chin (2010), a construct must have an AVE greater than 0.50 to confirm convergent validity. In this study, Table 1 presents AVE values ranging from 0.667 to 0.696, demonstrating adequate convergent validity according to Chin's (2010) benchmark.

Cronbach's alpha, a widely used method for evaluating reliability, involves computing the average intercorrelations among items measuring a specific construct (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Reliability scores below 0.60 are considered weak, scores between 0.70 and 0.80 are acceptable, and scores above 0.80 are strong. Hair et al. (2018) recommend a reliability threshold of 0.70 or higher. Table 2 presents Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.763 to 0.883, all of which exceed the satisfactory benchmark (Berthony Manalu et al., 2022). Additionally, composite reliability values also surpass the acceptable threshold of 0.80. Therefore, this study demonstrates strong internal reliability and convergent validity.

Table 2: Measurement model

Constructs	Items	Loadings >0.70	AVE >0.50	Composite Reliability >0.80	Cronbach's Alpha >0.7
Honesty			0.696	0.872	0.798
	H1	0.769			
	H3	0.884			
	H4	0.846			
Trustworthiness			0.678	0.863	0.763
	T2	0.874			
	T3	0.751			
	T4	0.841			
Influencer Credibility			0.691	0.870	0.774
	IC1	0.891			
	IC2	0.772			
	ICC3	0.826			
Brand Trust			0.667	0.888	0.883
	BT1	0.891			

BT2	0.865
BT3	0.742
BT4	0.758

The following step involved evaluating the model's discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT) approach, as recommended by Hair et al. (2017). As shown in Table 3, all construct pairs recorded HTMT values below 0.90, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity.

Table 3: Assessment of discriminant validity

Constructs	Brand Trust	Honesty	Influencer Credibility	Trustworthiness
Brand Trust	0.816			
Honesty	0.686	0.834		
Influencer Credibility	0.705	0.550	0.831	
Trustworthiness	0.719	0.600	0.762	0.824

Assessment of The Structural Model

The path coefficient estimates, which represent the expected relationships among the constructs, were obtained using the bootstrapping technique. This process involved generating a bootstrap sample of 5,000 from the original 250 observations, in line with the method suggested by Hair et al. (2017). Figure 1 presents a comprehensive view of the structural model estimates, while Table 3 outlines the results of the proposed structural model, including the standard errors of the path coefficients and their respective t-statistics.
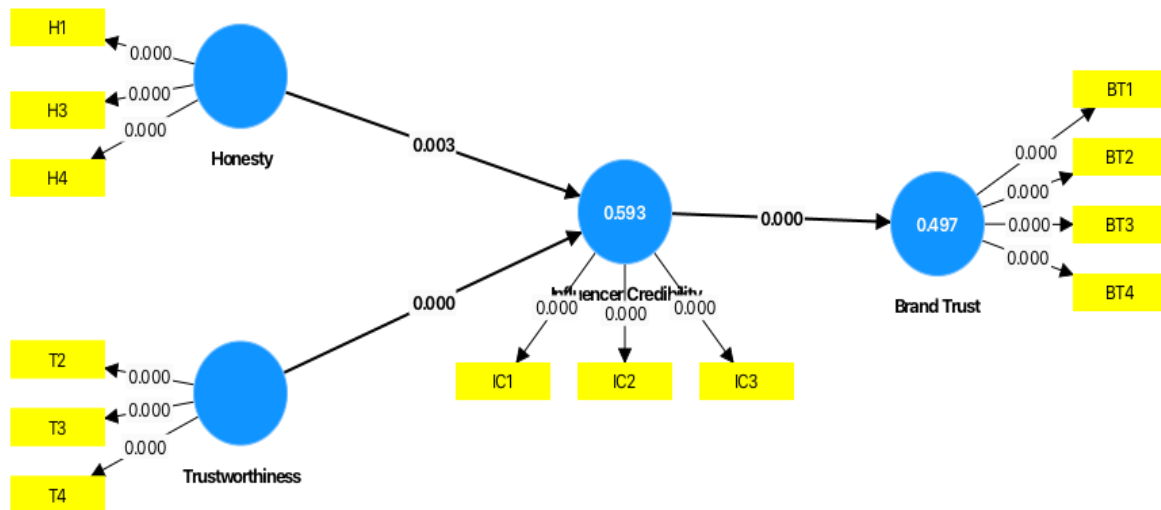

Figure 2: Results of structural model

Based on the findings presented in Table 4, three hypotheses were supported with t-values greater than 1.645 and p-values less than 0.05. The first hypothesis, H1, states that honesty is positively related to influencer credibility. The results in Table 3 and Figure 1 show a significant positive relationship between honesty and influencer credibility ($\beta = 0.144$, t = 2.970, p = 0.003), thus supporting H1. Additionally, the results demonstrate a positive

relationship between trustworthiness and influencer credibility (β = 0.675, t = 15.018, p = 0.000), confirming H2. Similarly, hypothesis 3 posits that influencer credibility is positively related to brand trust (β = 0.705, t = 16.812, p = 0.000).

Table 4: Direct relationship for hypothesis testing

Hypotheses		Std Beta	Std Error	t-values	p-values	5.0% (LLCI)	95.0% (ULCI)	Decision
H1	Honesty→ Influencer Credibility	0.144	0.147	2.970	0.003	0.046	0.164	Supported
H2	Trustworthiness → Influencer Credibility	0.675	0.674	15.018	0.000	0.402	0.553	Supported
H3	Influencer Credibility → Brand Trust	0.705	0.707	16.812	0.000	0.626	0.766	Supported

Testing Mediator Effects

Table 5 presents the results of the four mediation hypotheses (H3a, H3b) that were tested to investigate the mediating role of credibility in the influence between trustworthiness, honesty, and brand trust. Therefore, to examine these mediation hypotheses, this study used the PLS algorithm and conducted a bootstrap procedure with a data set of 250 cases and a sample size of 5,000, following the methodology outlined by Hair et al. (2014). According to Preacher and Hayes (2008), an indirect effect is considered significant when the confidence interval does not include zero.

Based on the bootstrapping analysis, the results indicated that the paths trustworthiness → influencer credibility → brand trust (β = 0.476, p = 0.000) and honesty → influencer credibility → brand trust (β = 0.102, p = 0.005) were statistically significant.

Table 5: Mediation testing results

Hypotheses		Std Beta	Std Error	t-values	p-values	5.0% (LLCI)	95.0% (ULCI)	Decision
H3a	Trustworthiness → Influencer Credibility → Brand Trust	0.476	0.477	10.368	0.000	0.402	0.553	Supported
H3b	Honesty → Influencer Credibility → Brand Trust	0.102	0.104	2.831	0.005	0.046	0.164	Supported

Coefficient of Determination

Determining the R² value for a model can be complex, as it depends on the research context and domain-specific factors. In this study, following Hair et al. (2017), a higher R^2 value reflects stronger predictive accuracy. Furthermore, according to Sarstedt and Mooi (2009), it is detailed that R^2 values of 0.67, 0.33, and 0.19 represent strong, moderate, and weak explanatory power, respectively.

The R² values for influencer credibility and brand trust, which are 0.593 and 0.497, respectively, indicate moderate explanatory power, as shown in Figure 3, according to Sarstedt and Mooi (2019). The results obtained show that honesty and trustworthiness explain 59.3% of the variance in influencer credibility, while honesty, trustworthiness, and influencer credibility together account for 49.7% of the variance in brand trust.
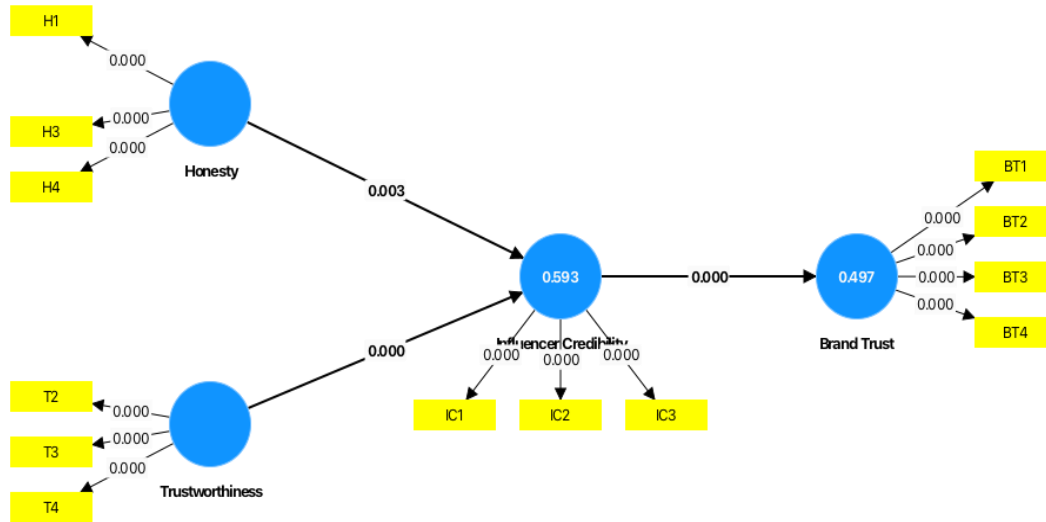

Figure 3: Coefficient of determination

Effect Size

The magnitude of the impact of predictor constructs can be evaluated using Cohen's f², a measure that quantifies the significance of changes in R² resulting from variations in an independent latent variable. This metric essentially assesses the extent to which an endogenous construct explains an exogenous construct (Ramayah et al., 2018).

According to Cohen (1988), effect size values are categorized as large (0.35), medium (0.15), and small (0.02). The f² values presented in Table 6 indicate that all relationships contribute to varying extents, both small and large, in examining honesty, trustworthiness, influencer credibility, and brand trust.

Table 6: Effect size

Constructs	F square	Effect size rating
Honesty -> Influencer Credibility	0.033	Small
Trustworthiness -> Influencer Credibility	0.990	Large
Influencer Credibility -> Brand Trust	0.717	Large

DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The first research question assessed the relationship between honesty and trustworthiness with influencer credibility. Specifically, three hypotheses were proposed to address this initial question. The current results indicate that H1, H2, and H3 are supported. When influencers are honest, they are perceived as more credible because their audience believes the information being shared is accurate and not misleading. The impact of honesty on credibility becomes significant when followers consistently experience truthful interactions. This builds a foundation of reliability, making followers more likely to trust the influencer's recommendations and opinions (Geyser, 2018). Trustworthiness and influencer credibility are significant in hypothesis testing because they ensure the reliability and accuracy of information, enhance audience perception and engagement, and increase the persuasive power of communicated messages. Trustworthy sources provide a solid foundation for valid and reliable data collection, while influencer credibility effectively reaches and influences a larger audience (IBM, 2022). Influencer credibility and brand trust are also important in hypothesis testing because credible influencers positively affect consumer attitudes and behaviors, leading to greater engagement, higher conversion rates, and stronger brand loyalty. Trust in a brand, often built through consistent quality and transparent communication, enhances consumer loyalty and purchase intentions (Qualtrics, 2023). Empirical evidence supports that influencer credibility significantly impacts brand trust and consumer behavior, making it a crucial factor in developing successful marketing strategies (Qualtrics, 2023).

The credibility of an influencer significantly influences consumer trust in a brand, which is essential for the success of influencer marketing strategies. When an influencer is perceived as credible (being honest, trustworthy, and knowledgeable), their endorsements carry more weight, leading to increased brand trust among their followers. This relationship becomes particularly significant when the influencer has a strong and loyal following that views their recommendations as reliable and authentic (Jun and Yi, 2020). When followers trust the influencer, they are more likely to transfer that trust to the brands the influencer promotes (Almahdi et al., 2022). Indeed, trust is further solidified if the influencer's values and image align with those of the brand, creating a seamless and authentic partnership.

In addition, there are positive mediating effects of influencer credibility between honesty and trustworthiness and brand trust. This is due to the influencer's credibility acting as a mediating factor that enhances the effect of honesty and trustworthiness on brand trust. In short, when an influencer is perceived as honest and trustworthy, it increases their level of credibility and makes their endorsements more convincing. Credibility then mediates the relationship between influencer honesty and trustworthiness and can subsequently increase their followers' level of trust in the brand they are promoting. The result is significant when followers rate the influencer as highly trustworthy, leading to a stronger link between positive influencer qualities and the brand (Lindmoser et al., 2022). This enhanced credibility translates into greater brand trust, as followers are more likely to trust the integrity and values of the promoted brand, driven by their confidence in the influencer's genuine and trustworthy character (Chen & Lu, 2024).

In conclusion, this research advances theoretical knowledge by merging concepts from source credibility, trust transfer, and media effects theory, providing a comprehensive understanding of how influencer characteristics can shape consumer trust within the Malaysian social media landscape. Practically, it highlights that by emphasizing honesty and trustworthiness, leveraging influencer credibility, enhancing communication strategies, monitoring influencer-consumer relationships, investing in influencer development, and

targeting specific consumer segments, brands can effectively use influencer marketing to build stronger and more trusting relationships with their audiences.

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD FOR FUTURE STUDY

In conclusion, specifically based on the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) theory, this study provides a valuable perspective on the dynamics of influencer credibility and its impact on brand trust within the Malaysian social media environment. This research contributes to both the theoretical and practical understanding of influencer marketing by examining how brand credibility and trust are influenced by perceptions of influencer honesty and trustworthiness. Additionally, the finding that influencers perceived as honest and trustworthy are more effective in increasing brand trust offers meaningful insight into the essential role of credibility in fostering stronger brand relationships and shaping consumer perceptions. This study also emphasizes the importance of genuine and transparent influencer support in maintaining and building brand trust in the digital era, as demonstrated through the framework applied in this research.

Despite these contributions, the study also acknowledges limitations, such as the lack of specific brand variables and a more diverse sample across different brands and consumer demographics. Future research should address these gaps to further refine the application of the SOR theory in influencer marketing strategies. By incorporating a wider range of brand contexts and consumer profiles, subsequent studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how various stimuli and internal states impact brand trust. Overall, this research enriches our understanding of influencer marketing dynamics in Malaysia and offers valuable guidance for leveraging influencer credibility to foster brand trust and engagement effectively.

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