The Influence of Social Media Influencers on Online Purchase Intention of Beauty Products in Malaysia: Moderating Role of Consumer Skepticism

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Abstract. This study explores the influence of social media influencers on online purchase intentions for beauty products among Malaysian millennials, integrating consumer skepticism as a moderating variable. Grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model and Source Credibility Theory, the research investigates four key influencer attributes—trustworthiness, expertise, likeability, and similarity—and their impact on purchase behavior. Utilizing a quantitative methodology, data were collected from 200 respondents via a structured online questionnaire. Partial least squares structural equation modeling was employed to test the proposed relationships and moderation effects. The findings reveal that trustworthiness, likeability, and similarity significantly enhance online purchase intentions, while expertise shows no notable effect. Consumer skepticism moderates the relationships involving trustworthiness and likeability but not expertise or similarity, underscoring the nuanced role of skepticism in shaping consumer behavior. This research advances theoretical understanding by highlighting the interplay of influencer attributes and skepticism and provides actionable insights for marketers to design transparent, effective influencer campaigns in the beauty industry. Future studies are recommended to expand the scope by incorporating additional variables and diverse contexts.

Keywords: Beauty Products, Consumer Skepticism, Online Purchase Intention, Social Media Influencers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the emergence of the online shopping industry has attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners in the world to obtain a better understanding of its applications with respect to buying online by region (Statista, 2019). The use of social networking sites by both consumers and businesses has expanded rapidly over the past several years. Thus, according to Statista, approximately 3.6 billion people use social media worldwide. In 2017, 2.86 billion people used social media; by 2025, that number will approximately increase to 4.41 billion. (Statista, 2021). Additionally, a growing figure is that internet users spend an average of 144 minutes on social networking sites and other messaging applications (Statista, 2021). According to Kemp (2021), the number of social media users has climbed by 13 per cent annually, reaching over 50 per cent of the world's population.

The global average time spent on social media is 2.25 hours per day, while Malaysians spend 3.01 hours per day. The report says that 44.8% of internet users utilize social media to discover a brand's products and services. 59.5% of Malaysian internet users use social media to find out about brands (Statista, 2021). The emergence of social media and its average length of time users have altered marketing (Chaffey, 2021). It has increased the prevalence and influence of social media influencers. Approximately 75% of Malaysian customers, according to Statista (2021), are aware of or have followed at least one social media influencer.

Businesses are shifting their marketing strategies to use social media marketing better and are willing to allocate a more significant budget to engage with these influencers (The Star Online, 2020). Social media influencers gather a sizable following of dedicated fans eager to share their message with others due to their popularity. In recent times, businesses have recognized the effectiveness of influencer marketing, resulting in a meteoric increase in the amount of money invested in this industry. Influencers enable brands to communicate with many individuals who will see and hear their messages. These create an ideal setting for promoting businesses' goods and services. According to Global Data, a leading data and analytics company, Malaysia's cosmetics, beauty, and personal care products will reach 520.4 million units by 2024, expanding at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 2.8% between 2019 and 2024. The key driver of this substantial increase is the influx of young consumers. This transformation is facilitated concurrently by digitalization, social media, and e-commerce, all lasting impacts on consumers' beauty product purchasing habits. Furthermore, global trends also influence and alter our everyday beauty and care routines.

Previous studies have shown a connection between influential people endorsements and consumers' purchasing decisions (Wiedmann, and Metternheim, 2019). Findings of research conducted by Jin et al. (2019) found that consumers viewed celebrity endorsements of items on Instagram as more credible and favourable attitudes toward the brands supported by celebrities. Pick (2020) concluded that social media influencers positively impacted consumers' purchasing decisions. Additional research by Wiedmann and Mettenheim (2019) explored the significance of influencers' beauty, knowledge, and trustworthiness in online campaigns. In the meantime, findings from recent research carried out by AlFarraj et al. (2021) suggested that the knowledge and attractiveness of influencers significantly impacted the level of customer involvement. It shows that trust, followed by attractiveness, were the best indicators of brand trust and loyalty that led to the intention to

purchase. However, the significance of competence was negligible.

Consumers increasingly criticize influencers for misinformation, deceptive promotions, counterfeit products, and excessive sponsorships, eroding trust and harming brands dependent on such partnerships. For beauty product buyers, this skepticism fosters feelings of betrayal and distrust toward influencer reviews. Some influencers exaggerate product effectiveness, misleading consumers and causing marketing efforts to fail when trust is lost (Pophal, 2019). Deceived customers often raise complaints about unfair trade practices (Saxena, 2021). Despite prior studies, little empirical research explores how influencer endorsements impact local beauty products in Malaysia. Challenges include mistrust over follower authenticity and difficulties in selecting suitable influencers. Research also indicates that influencers' attractiveness, credibility, and expertise may not significantly drive purchase intent, underscoring inconsistent findings. This study aims to clarify these issues, aiding brands in better understanding factors influencing purchase intent and optimizing influencer collaborations.

2. LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES
2.1. Underpinning Theory: The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) serves as the primary theoretical framework for this study due to its capacity to elucidate the mechanisms through which persuasive communication from social media influencers (SMIs) impacts consumer purchase intentions. As a dual-process model, ELM posits that individuals process persuasive messages via two routes: the central route, which involves careful scrutiny of message content, and the peripheral route, which relies on superficial cues such as the attractiveness or credibility of the message source (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In the context of this study, consumer skepticism—a moderating variable—plays a pivotal role in determining which route consumers engage with when processing influencer content.

Highly skeptical consumers are more likely to adopt the central route, critically analyzing the substance of an influencer's message, such as product details or reviews (Jamil, & Qayyum, 2022). Conversely, less skeptical consumers may gravitate toward the peripheral route, where non-verbal cues like the influencer's popularity, appearance, or relatability hold greater sway. ELM, therefore, provides a robust framework for examining how the interplay of skepticism and influencer marketing strategies shapes purchase intentions. This alignment underscores the importance of tailored influencer marketing strategies that cater to consumers across varying levels of skepticism.

To complement ELM, the Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) offers a nuanced perspective on how the characteristics of social media influencers—namely their trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness—interact with consumer skepticism to influence purchase decisions. Source Credibility Theory emphasizes that a credible source is more likely to persuade an audience effectively. For instance, skeptical consumers might prioritize trustworthiness and expertise as prerequisites for engaging with an influencer's recommendations. In contrast, less skeptical consumers may be more susceptible to the influencer's attractiveness or relatability.

The integration of these two theories provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the impact of SMIs on online purchase intention. While ELM explains the cognitive pathways of persuasion, Source Credibility Theory delves deeper into the attributes of the influencer that modulate the efficacy of these pathways. Together, these theories address both the content of the message and the credibility of its messenger, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the dynamics at play in influencer marketing. This dual-theoretical approach not only enriches the conceptual underpinnings of the study but also offers practical implications for marketers. It highlights the need to align influencer selection and message design with the varying levels of skepticism among target audiences, ensuring that campaigns resonate effectively and drive purchase intentions.

2.3. Social Media Influencers and Online Purchase Intention

The emergence of SMI has revolutionized marketing strategies, highlighting a significant shift in how brands engage with their target audiences (Cheung et al., 2022). This change highlights influencers' crucial role in shaping and influencing consumers' decision-making processes. Haenlein (2020) asserts that individuals outside of their followers consistently overlook social media influencers with large and active audiences across various platforms. In the same study, Haenlein explained that the influencers produce content to involve their followers and partner with the brands for commercial purposes, receiving payment or products in return. The rise of influencers is largely due to their skill in building loyal fan groups through great content, which boosts their online presence.

Furthermore, Sanders (2020) stated that influencers classify themselves into different tiers according to their follower count namely mega, macro, mid-tier, micro, and nano influencers. Influencers significantly impact consumer behaviour, pique interest, and assist advertisers in effectively reaching their intended audience. Several studies have reached the conclusion that influencers, including brand communities, celebrities, bloggers, and members, clearly have a considerable influence on consumers' brand perceptions and their purchasing decisions (Rushworth & Djafarova, 2017; Anisa et al., 2024) Alcántara-Pilar et al.'s (2024) research reveals a clear correlation between consumer loyalty, purchase intentions, and an influencer's credibility and attractiveness.

Similarly, Utami and Elizabeth (2023) revealed that an influencer's level of expertise, reliability, likeability and physical appearance affect the consumers' purchasing tendencies.

2.4. The Relationship between Trustworthiness and Online Purchase Intention

Trust is a fluid trait that develops throughout current interactions, enabling individuals to expect and assess the value of future exchanges (Christov-Moore et al., 2022). When an individual or entity exhibits trustworthiness (e.g., honesty, competence, and reliability), it enhances the probability of others conferring trust onto them. Because trustworthiness may bridge the gap between digital interaction and customer confidence, it has a particularly significant impact on social media marketing. Consumers are always looking for interactions with influencers and showing interest in purchasing products they endorse. Different studies consistently demonstrate that an influencer's credibility has an obvious impact on consumer purchase decisions (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Macheka et al., 2024; Yaacob et al., 2021). According to Hess et al. (2022), it is obvious that trustworthiness is a key component of reputational capital, which facilitates the success of endorsements. Weismueller et al. (2020), in their study, stated that trustworthiness of influencers greatly affected the intentions of purchasing from 306 Instagramers in Germany.

This explains the crucial role of influencer credibility in modelling consumer behaviour and underscores the necessity for businesses to select and manage their influencer relationships carefully. Furthermore, Chetioui et al. (2020) affirm that trustworthiness and reliability significantly influence followers' perceptions and their purchase intentions. Online purchasing intention is significantly increased by social media influencers' trust (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Influencers serve as intermediaries between brands and customers in influencer marketing, which makes this relationship clearer. Being trustworthy guarantees that followers view influencers' recommendations as genuine, relevant, and credible, all of which have a big influence on their propensity to buy. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: Trustworthiness positively influences the consumer's online purchase intention.

2.5. The Relationship between Expertise of Influencer and Online Purchase Intention

Expertise refers to the ability to effectively and accurately convey knowledge, which significantly impacts the trustworthiness of the shared data (Ismagilova et al., 2020). A study by Al-Muani et al. (2023) indicated that an influencer's perceived expertise—encompassing their experience, knowledge, and competence in a specific field—enhances consumer trust and confidence in their recommendations, subsequently increasing the intention to purchase. This expertise encompasses a combination of skills, knowledge, and proficiency among those who promote a product or service. Earlier studies had indicated a connection between the expertise and skills of the service provider and the likelihood of customers completing a transaction (Schouten et al., 2021; Martensen et al., 2018). Findings from Balabanis et al. (2019) suggest that the impact of an influencer's expertise on purchase intention can be context-dependent. Specifically, their study found that while expertise enhances credibility, it may sometimes create a perceived distance between influencers and their followers, reducing relatability and emotional connection, which are critical for influencing purchase decisions in non-technical industries like beauty products. Similarly, Schouten et al. (2021) highlighted that while expertise positively influences trust, its effect on purchase intention is often mediated by other factors, such as the perceived alignment between the influencer's expertise and the promoted product. The above-mentioned past studies have generally indicated that the expertise of social media influencers significantly influences purchasing intention. Expertise augments credibility, delivers important insights, and cultivates trust, hence increasing the likelihood of consumer action on product endorsements. Consequently, it is hypothesis that:

H₂: Expertise of the influencer positively influences the consumer's online purchase intention.

2.6. The Relationship between Likeability and Online Purchase Intention

Likeability denotes the degree to which an individual is favourably perceived by others, which can profoundly affect consumer attitudes and decision-making processes (Chetioui et al., 2020). According to a study by Yeo and colleagues (2021), the trait of likeability significantly influences consumer attitudes towards brands, products, or services. Its components, such as physical attractiveness, receiving compliments, and the perceived rapport between individuals, all have a great influence on enhancing likability. Furthermore, social media influencers endorse or use products that resonate with their personality traits, thereby drawing customers towards them. Prominent social media influencers have a significant effect on consumers' product choices.

Studies such as Lou and Yuan (2019) and Chetioui et al. (2020) further support the notion that likability positively influences consumer behaviour. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that influencers perceived as likeable are more successful in fostering trust and engagement, which directly impacts purchase intentions. Their research highlights that likeability is closely tied to the perceived authenticity of influencers, as consumers tend to follow and purchase from influencers they find relatable and personable. Similarly, Chetioui et al. (2020) emphasized that the likeability of fashion influencers significantly impacts the purchase decisions of young consumers, especially when influencers exhibit characteristics that align with the preferences and values of their followers. This finding is consistent with a study by Adnan et al. (2017), which revealed that physical attractiveness, friendliness, and

perceived relatability are critical components of likability that drive consumer engagement and purchasing behaviour.

Additionally, Ki et al. (2020) noted that the emotional connection between influencers and their followers, often stemming from likability traits, strengthens brand loyalty and encourages consumers to act on purchase recommendations. Their study underlines the role of personality alignment and shared values in reinforcing this connection. Based on these findings, it is evident that likeability plays a pivotal role in shaping online purchase intentions, particularly in the beauty and fashion industries. Influencers who exude likeable traits can effectively bridge the gap between brands and consumers, fostering trust, engagement, and ultimately, purchase behaviour. Based on this explanation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₃: Likeability of the influencer positively influences the consumer's online purchase intention.

2.7. The Relationship between Similarity and Online Purchase Intention

When it comes to social media, followers become deeply involved when they notice shared experiences, values, interests, or personal experiences with influencers. As a result, this encourages vibrant discussions and emotional connections (Chen et al., 2021). Furthermore, Ohanian (1990) highlights the key elements, such as attractiveness, familiarity, similarity, and likeability that influence the connection between social media influencers and their followers. These elements clearly influence the effectiveness of beauty product or service endorsements. Influencers can create emotional connections with their followers by assuring shared characteristics, which also strengthens their relationship. Upon closely observing the influencers' similar lifestyles and personalities, their followers experience a sense of camaraderie that satisfies their desire for connection (Ki et al., 2020). A few studies further underscore the role of similarity in influencing purchase intention.

For example, Lou and Yuan (2019) found that perceived similarity between influencers and their follower's fosters trust and identification, which in turn positively affects purchase intention. Their research highlights that when consumers see influencers as relatable or as having shared values, they are more likely to act on product endorsements. Similarly, Prendergast et al. (2023) examined the impact of perceived similarity on consumer engagement and purchase decisions in the fashion industry. They concluded that shared demographics, values, and lifestyles between influencers and followers significantly increase the likelihood of purchase, as consumers are more inclined to trust endorsements from influencers they view as "one of their own." These findings align with prior research by Ki et al. (2020), which emphasizes that influencers with relatable traits and lifestyles are more successful in creating emotional connections with their followers, ultimately driving higher purchase intentions. By leveraging shared characteristics, influencers can establish a sense of authenticity and relatability, key factors in shaping consumer behaviour. Essentially, this argument suggests the following hypothesis:

H₄: Similarity with the influencer positively influences the consumer's online purchase intention.

2.8. The Moderating Role of Consumer Skepticism

Consumer scepticism is the propensity of customers to be sceptical about the truthfulness, motives, or sincerity of claims made by businesses, marketers, or endorsers (Cicciù and Carmona, 2024; Peng, 2023). It results from uncertainty, mistrust, or suspicion and has a big impact on buying decisions, particularly in the digital age when individuals are overwhelmed with advertisements. Consumer scepticism is considered a key element affecting the effectiveness of developing marketing processes (Leung et al., 2022). This kind of doubt can greatly influence how consumers view and respond to influencer endorsements as a result of their worries about misinformation and misleading promotions. As trust issues arise from perceived exaggerations and misleading information, consumers may develop a more cautious approach toward influencer recommendations (Pophal, 2019). Scepticism can stem from past experiences, media reports, and social discourse highlighting instances of misleading or exaggerated claims made by influencers. However, when consumer scepticism is high, even trustworthy influencers may face challenges in convincing their audience (Peng, 2023). Sceptical consumers might question the authenticity of the influencer's endorsements, reducing the overall impact of trustworthiness on online purchase intentions. Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H₅ₐ: Consumer skepticism moderates the relationship between social media influencers' trustworthiness and online purchase intention.

Influencers with high levels of expertise are generally more persuasive, as their recommendations are based on perceived knowledge and competence. A study by Ismagilova et al. (2020) supports the notion that expertise enhances the credibility of influencers, which in turn positively impacts consumer trust and purchase intentions. Similarly, Chetioui et al. (2020) found Athat expertise increases the likelihood of consumers perceiving influencers as reliable sources of product information, particularly in specialized or technical product categories. However, past studies revealed that consumer scepticism can weaken the influence of expertise on online purchase intention. Balabanis et al. (2019) argue that expertise alone does not always translate into higher purchase intentions, as consumers may question the authenticity of endorsements, particularly if they perceive influencers as primarily motivated by financial gain.

This scepticism is further highlighted by Pophal (2019), who notes that the rise of deceptive influencer practices has led consumers to critically evaluate the intentions behind endorsements, even when influencers

display high levels of expertise. Furthermore, Schouten et al. (2021) emphasize that scepticism reduces the persuasive power of expertise by shifting consumer focus from the influencer's knowledge to their perceived motives. Sceptical consumers are less likely to be influenced by expertise if they suspect that recommendations are biased or commercially driven. This aligns with findings by Lou and Yuan (2019), who revealed that consumer trust and purchase intentions are significantly weakened when scepticism is high, even for influencers deemed knowledgeable. These studies underscore the complex relationship between expertise and purchase intention, particularly when moderated by consumer scepticism. While expertise remains an important attribute for influencers, its effectiveness can be undermined by doubts about authenticity and transparency. Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H_{5b}: *Consumer scepticism moderates the relationship between social media influencers' expertise and online purchase intention.*

An influencer's likeability, including traits such as fascination, attractiveness, and rapport with followers, typically boosts their persuasive ability. Chetioui et al. (2020) highlight that likeability significantly enhances consumer trust and engagement, leading to higher purchase intentions. However, likeability may not always translate into effective persuasion in the presence of consumer scepticism. Sceptical consumers are more likely to perceive likeability as a superficial attribute, potentially questioning the authenticity and credibility of endorsements. A study by Lou and Yuan (2019) found that consumer scepticism moderates the effect of likeability on purchase intentions. They argue that while likeability initially fosters positive attitudes toward influencers, high levels of scepticism can diminish its impact, as consumers prioritize authenticity and expertise over charm or attractiveness. Similarly, Pophal (2019) notes that scepticism erodes the perceived value of likeability, as sceptical consumers tend to scrutinize the motives behind endorsements, especially when influencers are perceived as prioritizing commercial interests over genuine recommendations.

Additionally, Ki et al. (2020) emphasize that the moderating effect of scepticism varies depending on the product category and consumer demographics. For instance, in the beauty industry, likeability often plays a significant role, but sceptical consumers may still discount likeability if they suspect that influencers lack genuine interest or alignment with the promoted product. This underscores the need for influencers to complement likeability with perceived authenticity and transparency to mitigate the effects of scepticism. The above findings suggest that while likeability is a powerful driver of purchase intentions, its effectiveness is contingent on the level of consumer scepticism. The moderating role of scepticism highlights the importance of trust and authenticity in influencer marketing strategies. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H_{5c}: *Consumer scepticism moderates the relationship between likeability of influencer and online purchase intention.*

Influencers who align with their followers' values, lifestyles, or demographics typically enhance consumer relatability and trust. Ki et al. (2020) emphasize that perceived similarity between influencers and their audience strengthens emotional connections and fosters trust, which are critical for influencing purchase behaviour. This alignment helps consumers feel understood and validated, making them more receptive to product recommendations. However, consumer scepticism can moderate this relationship. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that in high-scepticism situations, followers are more likely to question the authenticity of influencers' perceived similarities. Sceptical consumers may view such alignment as a deliberate strategy to manipulate their emotions rather than a genuine reflection of shared values or experiences. Pophal (2019) supports this by noting that as consumers become more aware of influencer marketing tactics, they critically evaluate whether influencers are authentic or simply employing calculated measures to gain trust.

In a smililar vein, Prendergast et al. (2023) observed that while similarity can drive trust and purchase intentions, its impact diminishes when scepticism about the influencer's motives is high. Consumers may suspect that influencers feign relatability to appear more appealing, particularly in industries like beauty and fashion, where authenticity plays a significant role in purchase decisions. These findings suggest that while similarity remains a powerful driver of trust and purchase intention, its effectiveness is contingent on the level of consumer scepticism. High scepticism can erode the perceived authenticity of similarities, emphasizing the need for influencers to demonstrate genuine connections with their audience's.

H_{5d}: *Consumer skepticism moderates the relationship between similarity with the influencer and online purchase intention.*

Based on the discussion above, the theoretical framework for the present study is shown is figure 1 below:
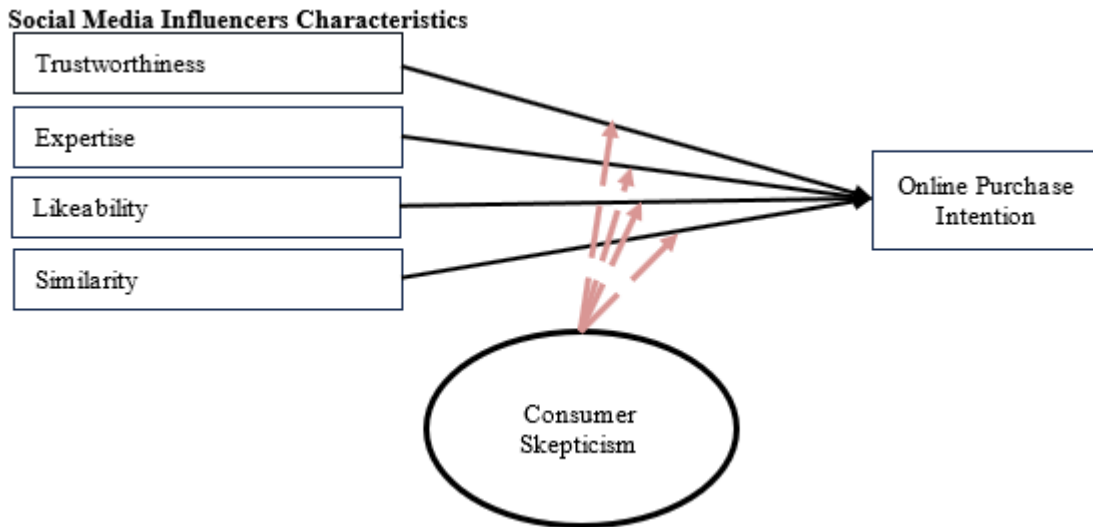
Figure 1: Research Framework.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is quantitative study used an online questionnaire to collect primary data. The objective of using a descriptive study approach was to identify the characteristics of social media influencers that influence users' inclination to purchase beauty products. This study employed a cross-sectional technique to examine the relationships between dependent variable, i.e., Online purchase intention, and independent variables namely influencer traits and consumer scepticism as the moderator. The questionnaire was developed and distributed online through google forms to consumers of beauty products in Malaysia. Moreover, online survey was administered for three months, encompassing four social media platforms which are YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

The rapid expansion of influencer marketing has led us to focus on the beauty industry. Our focus is on Malaysian millennials aged 25–40 to maximize success. Convenience sampling was chosen as it is the most suitable method to gather market research data efficiently. This research uses the G-Power analysis to determine a minimum sample size of 146 respondents. However, to enhance the likelihood of a higher response rate, we distributed the questionnaires to twice the calculated number (n = 292) of respondents, with 250 willing to participate. Out of the collected data, 16 responses were eliminated for failure to meet the specified respondent requirements, and 34 incomplete responses were discarded, yielding 200 usable responses, which corresponds to a 68 percent response rate. The respondents were aged between 25 and 40 years. Approximately 65.8 percent of respondents were constantly logged into their social media accounts, 18.3 percent utilised social media 6–10 times daily on average, and 11.8 percent accessed social media 2–5 times per day.
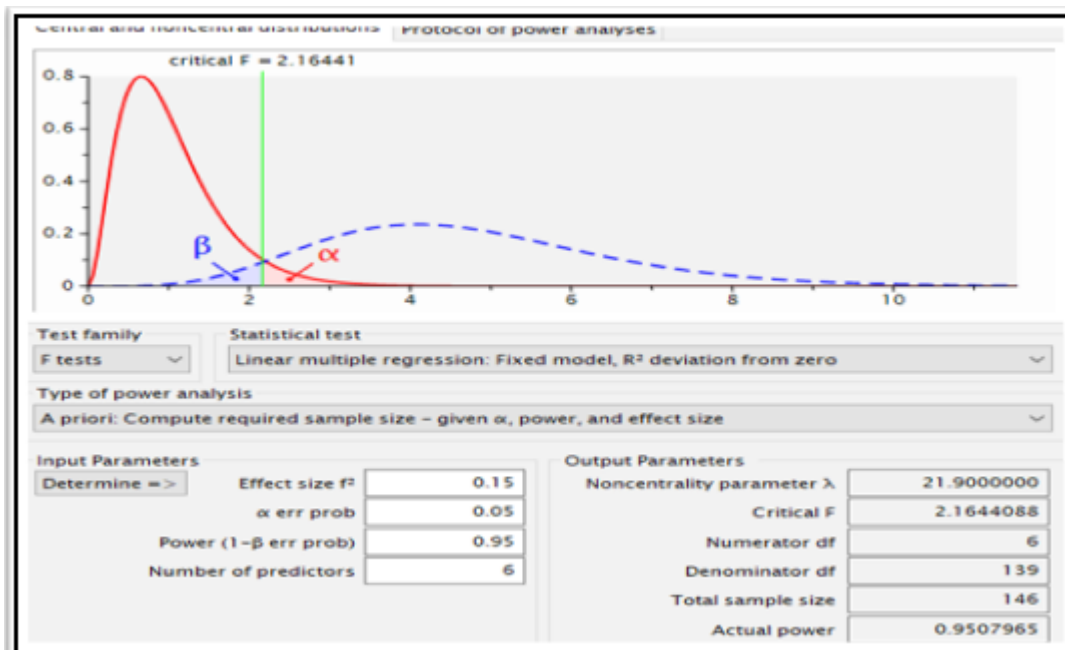

Figure 2: G-Power analysis.

3.1. Instrument Development

A 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree," has been used in the survey as

recommended by Alabi and Jelili (2023). A self-administered questionnaire disseminated and partitioned it into two segments. The first section sought demographic details, while the second section focused on the variables investigated in this study. The measurement items were adapted from previous studies. For online purchase intention, five items were adopted from Jiminez-Castillo and Sanchez Fernandez (2019) while consumer skepticism with five items were adapted from (Pitt et al., 2014). Five items adapted from Goldsmith (2001) were used to measure trustworthiness. To assess likeability, five items were adapted from Xiao (2023) and Singh and Banerjee (2018). The scale for measuring expertise and similarity were adapted from Ladhari et al. (2020) and Goldsmith (2000) which consists of five items respectively.

3.2. Data Analysis

This study analyzed the relationship between expertise, similarity, trustworthiness, likeability and online purchase intention of individual consumers in Malaysia with moderating variable of consumer scepticism. Thus, the data collected analyzed using PLS-SEM to evaluate the presented hypotheses. The model valuation, as per the rule of thumb, involves two steps: the inner (structural) model and the outer (measurement) model (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2018). PLS-SEM has demonstrated efficacy as a method for evaluating and analyzing structural modeling (Khan et al., 2021). Moreover, an effective model assessment should be a versatile methodology (Mishra et al., 2019). Furthermore, algorithmic and bootstrapping methods were employed to assess factor loadings for the purpose of testing construct validity and internal consistency reliability (Ali et al., 2021). Initially, we computed the measurement assessment model, followed by the evaluation of the structural model, from which estimations were derived.

4. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

4.1. Assessment of Reliability Test

In order to assess the consistency of the scales, this study utilized Cronbach's Alpha, a well-accepted metric known for its reliability. This score falls within the recommended range of dependability ratings (0.70 to 0.90) and is considered appropriate for academic purposes (Pallant, 2011). All variables in this investigation exhibited Cronbach's Alpha values surpassing 0.8, as seen in Table 1. It indicates a high level of reliability for all variables under investigation.

Table 1: Reliability Test Summary.

Dependent Variable	Cronbach Alpha	Number of Items
Online Purchase Intention	0.926	5
Independent Variables	Cronbach Alpha	Number of Items
Trustworthiness	0.936	5
Expertise	0.895	5
Likeability	0.937	5
Similarity	0.948	5
Moderating Variable	Cronbach Alpha	Number of Items
Consumer Skepticism	0.880	5

4.2. Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated, and convergent validity was determined by loadings, composite reliability, and average variance, as presented in Table 2 and Figure 2 below.
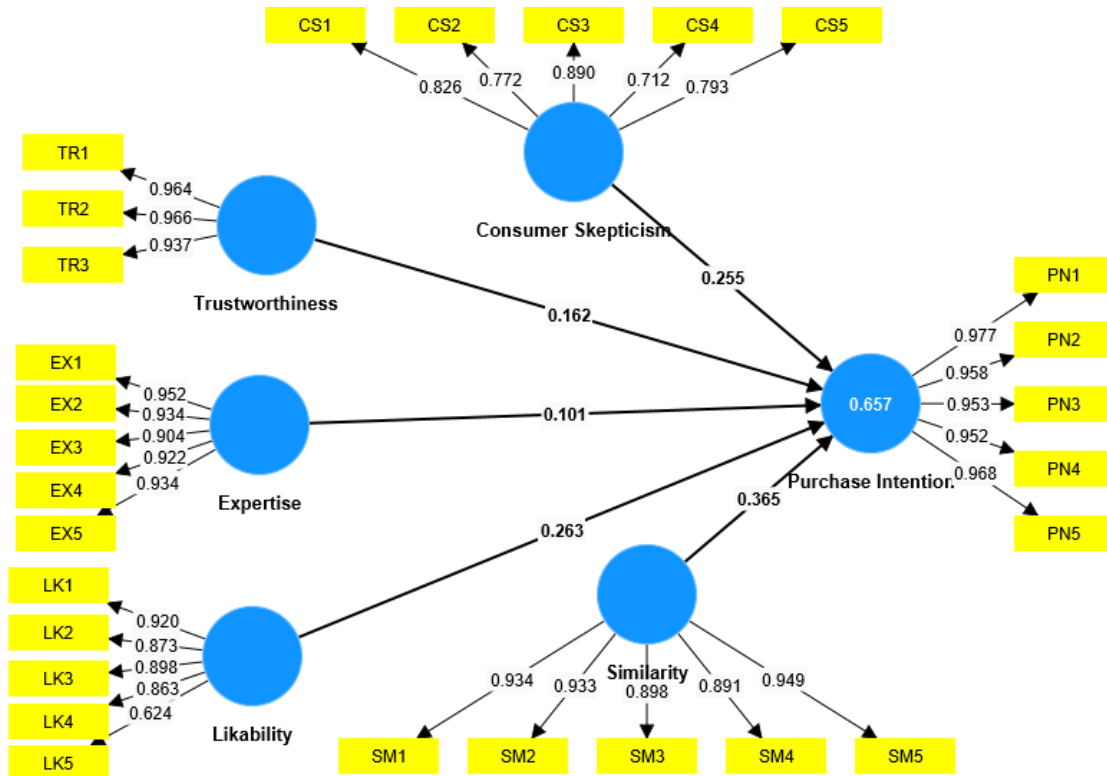
Figure 3: Measurement Model (Algorithm).

The composite reliability, an indicator of internal consistency, was employed to assess the reliability range of the instruments used in this study. Construct validity was assessed by examining the convergent and discriminant validity of the utilized instruments. A construct exhibits convergent validity if each measurement item demonstrates a standardized loading between 0.50 and 0.70 on its respective construct, the composite reliability (CR) exceeds 0.70, and the average variance extracted (AVE) is at least 0.50, as advised by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Significant convergent validity was observed across all constructs in the study, with item loadings between 0.624 and 0.977, standardized factor loadings (CRs) from 0.854 to 0.907, and average variance extracted (AVE) values ranging from 0.641 to 0.849, all meeting the criteria established by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The result of the measurement model summarized in the Table 2 below:

Table 2: Summary of Measurement Model.

Constructs	Items	Loadings	Cronbach Alpha	CR	AVE
Consumer Scepticism	CS1	0.826	0.869	0.899	0.641
	CS2	0.772			
	CS3	0.890			
	CS4	0.712			
	CS5	0.793			
Expertise	EX1	0.952	0.863	0.869	0.764
	EX2	0.934			
	EX3	0.904			
	EX4	0.922			
	EX5	0.934			
Likeability	LK1	0.902	0.907	0.923	0.710
	LK2	0.873			
	LK3	0.898			
	LK4	0.863			
	LK5	0.624			
Online Purchase Intention	PN1	0.977	0.880	0.884	0.725
	PN2	0.958			
	PN3	0.953			
	PN4	0.952			
	PN5	0.968			
Similarity	SM1	0.934	0.856	0.866	0.849
	SM2	0.933			
	SM3	0.898			
	SM4	0.891			
	SM5	0.949			
Trustworthiness	TR1	0.964	0.854	0.869	0.814
	TR2	0.966			
	TR3	0.937			

The study additionally assessed discriminant validity employing the techniques suggested by Fawcett et al. (2014) and found that the square root of the AVE for the construct exceeded the correlations obtained among the construct, while the standardized loadings of individual items varied from 0.624 to 0.977. All instruments demonstrated elevated levels of convergent and discriminant validity. The measurement results of validated discriminant validity from the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) indicate that the values, as discussed by Shehzadi et al. (2020), do not surpass the specified threshold of 0.85, hence confirming its discriminant validity as indicated in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Result.

Constructs	CS	EX	LK	PN	SM	TR
Consumer Scepticism						
Expertise	0.390					
Likeability	0.321	0.195				
Online Purchase Intention	0.651	0.495	0.534			
Similarity	0.541	0.594	0.269	0.694		
Trustworthiness	0.372	0.204	0.354	0.496	0.368	

4.3. Structural Model Assessment

Structural modeling was performed on online purchase intention of beauty product in Malaysia to assess the hypotheses following the establishment of the model's reliability and the evaluation of the measurement model. To evaluate the path coefficients of the model, t-values and standard errors are computed to ascertain the significance of the relationships with the obtained data. The path coefficient values indicated whether the theory was corroborated or refuted. The bootstrapping technique was employed in Smart-PLS 4.1.0.9 version to estimate moderating effects. This study examined the hypotheses utilizing a structural equation model. The finding presents the R-squared value, indicating the percentage of variation in the dependent variable that the independent variable accounts for. The model predicted online purchase intention with an R-squared value of 0.360, suggesting that expertise, similarity, likability and trustworthiness accounted for approximately 66 percent of the variance in online purchase intention. Meanwhile, the bootstrapping enables the calculation of confidence intervals, t-values, and p-values, which are essential for validating the statistical significance of the beta values. Figure 3 and Table 4 displays the findings of the structural model.
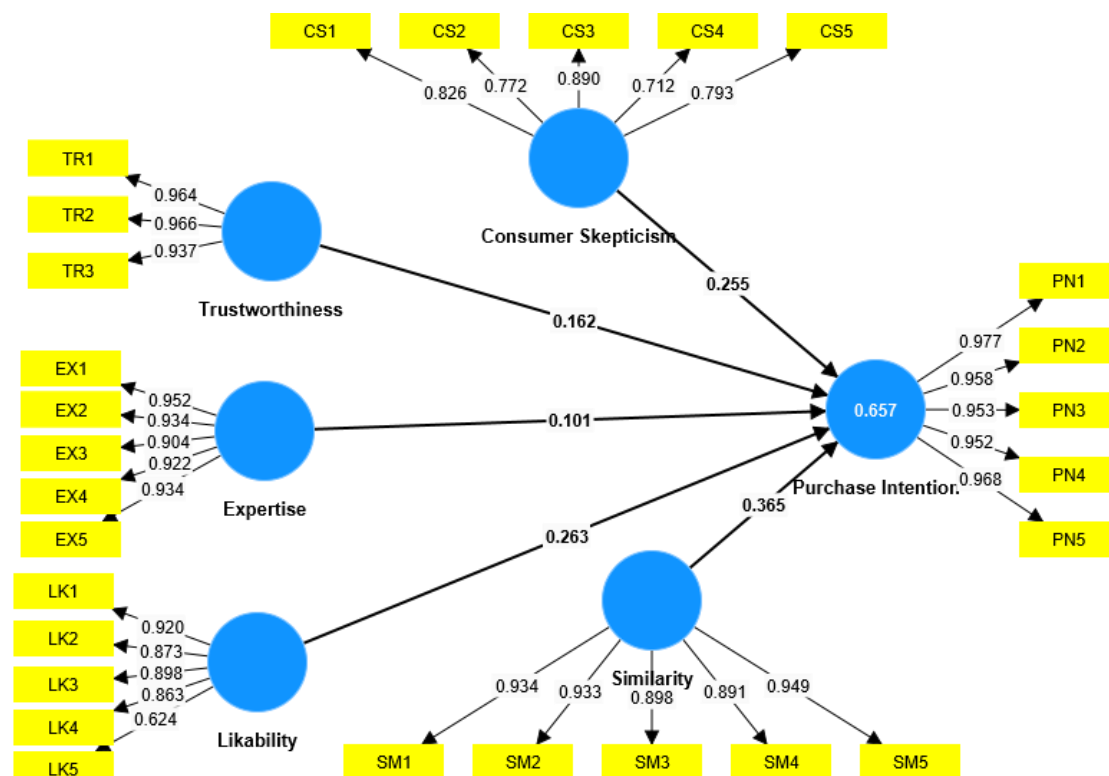

Figure 4: Structural Model.

Table 4: Structural Model and Testing of Hypotheses.

Hypotheses	Coef	SE	T value	P values	Decision	BCI-LL 2.5%	BCI-UL 97.5
CS -> Online Purchase Intention	0.255	0.079	3.237	0.001	Supported	0.104	0.409
EX -> Online Purchase Intention	0.101	0.067	1.500	0.134	Not Supported	-0.022	0.243
LK -> Online Purchase Intention	0.263	0.071	3.732	0.000	Supported	0.130	0.405
SM -> Online Purchase Intention	0.365	0.091	4.002	0.000	Supported	0.204	0.564
TR -> Online Purchase Intention	0.162	0.061	2.659	0.008	Supported	0.055	0.295

Note: CS – Consumer scepticism; EX – Expertise; LK – Likeability; SM - Similarity; TR – Trustworthiness BCI-LL – Bias Confidence Interval-Lower Limit; BCI-UP - Bias Confidence Interval-Upper Limit.

The findings presented in Table 4 show a significant and positive relationship between likeability and online purchase intention of beauty product in Malaysia (β =.263, t = 3.732, p =0.000), which support H3. Moreover, the findings also show a positive and significant relationship between similarity and online purchase intention of beauty product in Malaysia (β =.365, t = 4.002, p = 0.000), which also suggests support of H4. We also find a positive and significant relationship between trustworthiness and online purchase intention of beauty product in Malaysia (β =.162, t = 2.659, p = 0.008), which support H1. However, the study revealed that expertise have insignificant association with online purchase intention of beauty product in Malaysia (β =.101, t = 1.500, p = 0.134) which not support H2.

The overall result of the objectives indicated that social media influencer is a very good predictive factors for the online purchase intention of beauty product in Malaysia, most especially related to the trustworthiness, likeability and similarity characteristics of the influencer. This aligns with the broader literature emphasizing the influential role of social media influencer in shaping institutional behavior and strategic direction of beauty product in Malaysia (Pophal, 2019; Ki et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Leung et al., 2022).

4.4. Moderating Effect of Consumer Skepticism

Structural equation modeling (SEM) bootstrapping was utilized using 5000 bootstrap samples, a 95% bootstrap confidence interval, and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval. The outcome of bootstrapping is shown in Table 5 to test the indirect association; bootstrapping is performed twice. Also, the interpretation of the moderation effect in this study is based on the premise of Zhao et al. (2010). Toward that end, we initially created product terms namely, SM, LK, TR, EX and consumer scepticism were interacted. Consequently, the new terms were added to the intended model for consumer skepticism toward online purchase intention of beauty product in Malaysia indicated in the Figure 4 and Table 5 below:
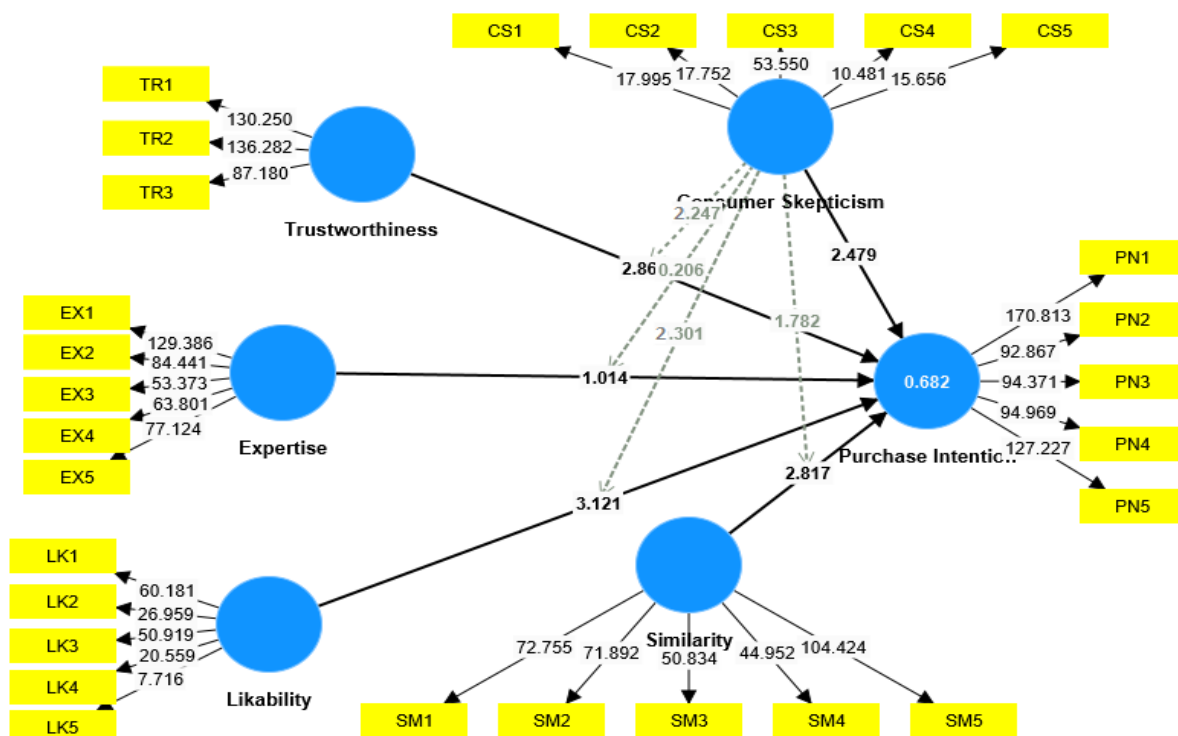

Figure 5: Structural Model.

Table 5: Result of the Moderating Effect of Customer Skepticism.

Hypotheses	Coef.	se	T value	P values	Decision	BCI-LL 2.5%	BCI-UL 97.5%
TR x CS -> Online Purchase Intention	0.124	0.055	2.247	0.025	Moderated	0.097	0.117
EX x CS -> Online Purchase Intention	-0.012	0.06	0.206	0.837	Not Moderated	0.136	0.099
LK x CS -> Online Purchase Intention	0.168	0.073	2.301	0.042	Moderated	0.119	0.162
SM x CS -> Online Purchase Intention	-0.149	0.084	1.782	0.075	Not Moderated	0.299	0.042

Note: CS – Consumer scepticism; EX – Expertise; LK – Likeability; SM - Similarity; TR – Trustworthiness BCI-LL – Bias Confidence Interval-Lower Limit; BCI-UP - Bias Confidence Interval-Upper Limit.

The result from Table 5 displays the results of bootstrapping consumer skepticism as a moderator that link between trustworthiness, expertise, likeability, similarity and online purchase intention of beauty product in Malaysia. The findings demonstrate that the relationships between trustworthiness (β=0.124; t=2.247; p=0.25) and likeability (β=.168; t=2.301; p=0.042) with purchase intention are moderated by consumer scepticism. However, the relationships between purchase intention with expertise (β= -0.012; t=.206; p= .837) and similarity (β= -0.149; t= 1.782; p= .075) are not significantly moderated by consumer scepticism. Path analysis in Figure 5 below highlight the indirect relationship between the trustworthiness variable and consumer scepticism (interaction of TR*CS). The outcomes also revealed that consumer scepticism significantly moderates between the nexus of trustworthiness and online purchase intention of beauty product in Malaysia indicated in the Figure 5 below:
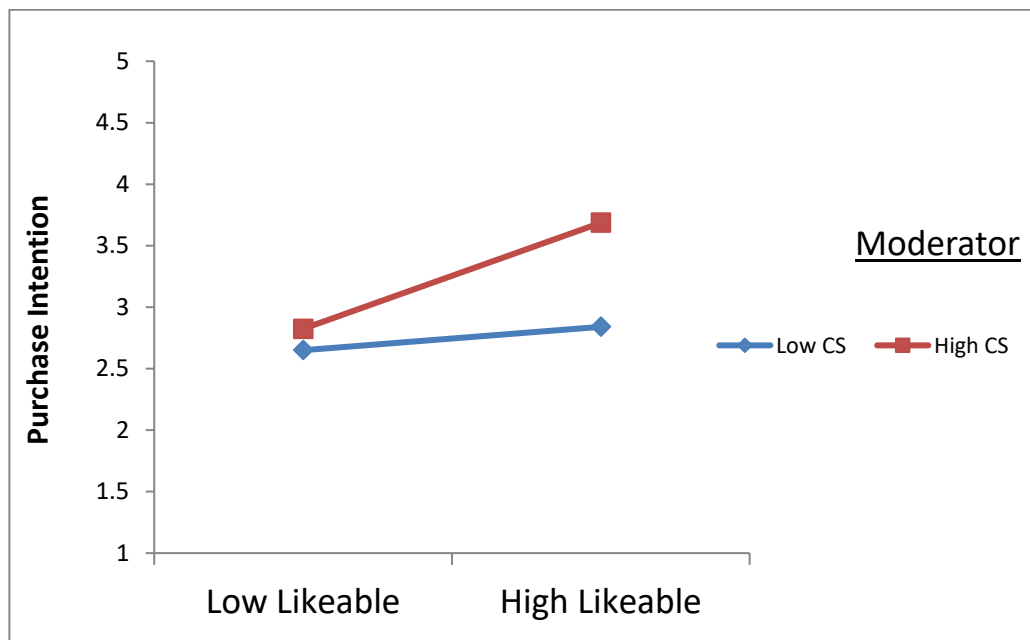
Figure 6: Interacting Effect of TR and CS towards Online Purchase Intention.

Furthermore, path analysis highlights the indirect relationship between the likeability variable and consumer scepticism (interaction of LK*CS). The outcomes also revealed that consumer scepticism significantly moderates between the nexus of likeability and online purchase intention of beauty product in Malaysia as indicated in the Figure 6.
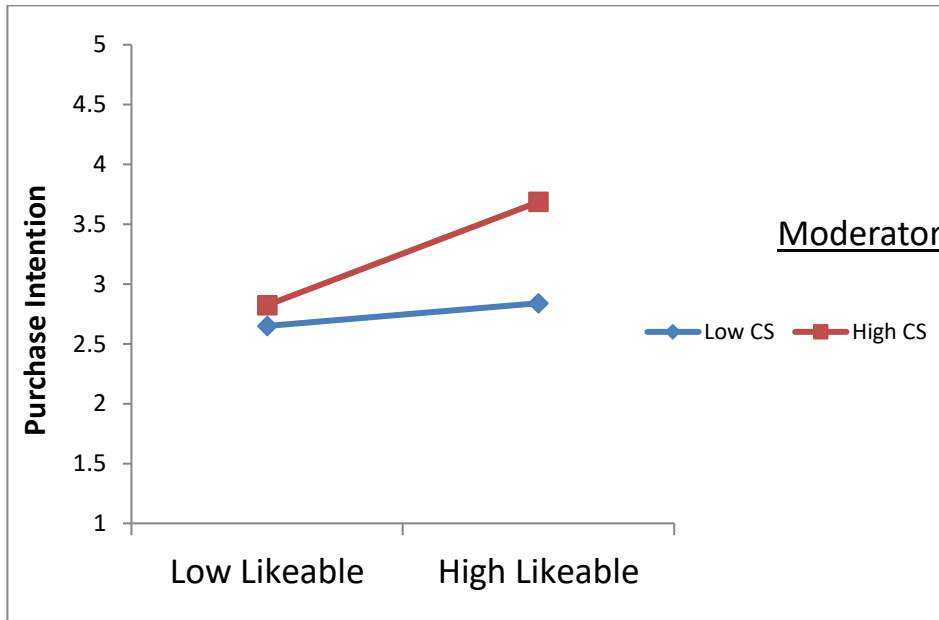
Figure 7: Interacting Effect of LK and CS towards Online Purchase Intention.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY

This study examines the impact of trustworthiness of social media influencers on the online shopping behaviour of Malaysian millennials within the beauty sector. It asserted that consumers are more likely to make purchases when they trust the influencer. The investigation validated that an influencer's trustworthiness substantially influences online purchasing intentions, consistent with the findings of Weismueller et al. (2020). Marketers aiming at millennials through influencer marketing should prioritise credible influencers. Researchers have discovered that millennials regard influencers as legitimate, preferring them to celebrity endorsements that were favoured by past generations.

The second hypothesis investigates the influence of social media influencers' expertise on online purchase intention. Contrary to some past studies, this study found insignificant relationship between expertise characteristic of the influencer with online purchase intention. This is likely due to the fact that when influencers exhibit expertise, they might appear like traditional experts or professionals which can sometimes create a distance between them and their audience. This is especially pertinent when the audience perceives influencers as "similar to themselves," valuing their experiences and relatable content rather than specialised knowledge. Prior research indicated that the experience, abilities, knowledge, and credentials of influencers favourably influence purchasing decisions (Albán-Sosa et al., 2024; Ahsan et al., 2024). The researchers such as Chekima et al. (2020) and Lou and Yuan (2018) substantiated the idea by identifying a direct association between influencer expertise and purchase intention.

The third hypothesis investigated the relationship between the likeability of social media influencers and customers' purchasing intentions. Findings indicated that influencer likeability significantly enhances the probability of purchase, implying that consumer preference drives product purchases. This study confirmed that influencer likeability significantly influences consumers' purchasing decisions, critically altering purchase intent. This finding aligns with previous study by Adnan et al., (2017), emphasising the favourable correlation between influencer attractiveness and consumer purchasing behaviour, especially in fashion marketing. Millennials regard influencers as entertaining and amiable, although some question their authenticity, appreciating the personal connection and friend-like attributes of influencers, which notably influence their beauty product purchases.

The fourth hypothesis examined the influence of similarity between influencers and customers on purchasing intentions. The research established that perceived similarities positively influence purchase intention, suggesting that congruence with an influencer's lifestyle or age enhances the probability of purchase. Studies by Lou and Yuan (2018) and Prendergast et al. (2023) validate the relationship between similarity and trust, hence augmenting brand awareness and purchase impulse. Millennials are attracted to influencers possessing comparable characteristics, enhancing their trust in promoted beauty items. Consumers who have a strong attachment with influencers are more likely to purchase the beauty products endorsed by those influencers.

Pophal's (2019) study found that integrating consumer scepticism as the primary moderating factor offered significant insights into the dynamics of marketing by public figures and influencers. This aligns with Lou and Yuan (2019), who emphasized that scepticism diminishes the positive impact of influencers' trustworthiness and likability on purchase intentions, as skeptical consumers prioritize authenticity and transparency over charm or perceived credibility. Similarly, Balabanis et al. (2019) noted that while expertise and credibility are valuable traits, their effects are often undermined by heightened scepticism, particularly when consumers suspect ulterior motives or excessive commercial bias. These findings resonate with the results of this study, which demonstrate that higher

consumer scepticism reduces the significant influence of trustworthiness and likeability on the desire to purchase beauty products.

Such comparisons underscore the need for marketing professionals to address consumer scepticism proactively. Ensuring transparency and authenticity in influencer partnerships remains critical for maintaining and enhancing campaign effectiveness. By aligning with previous research, this study reaffirms the importance of fostering genuine relationships between influencers and consumers to mitigate the adverse effects of scepticism and build long-term trust. In the e-marketing or the digital marketing for beauty products, it is crucial for marketers to prioritize trustworthiness, similarity and likeability of influencers. This research provides practical and clear insights while also investigating philosophical and theoretical implications. It addresses the method in how an influencer's trustworthiness, similarity and likeability characteristics greatly influence consumers' intentions to make online purchase of beauty products. This research addresses the gap by clarifying how influencers' characteristics influence millennial purchases of beauty products. Moreover, it underlines the necessity in tackling consumer scepticism to enhance the whole notion of effectiveness of influencer marketing projection.

In the realm of e-marketing or digital marketing for beauty products, it is essential for marketers to emphasise the trustworthiness, likeability and similarity of influencers. This research offers pragmatic and lucid insights while also examining philosophical and theoretical implications. This study examines the influence of an influencer's credibility, expertise, similarity and likeability on customers' online purchase intentions of beauty items. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of addressing consumer scepticism to improve the overall perception of the effectiveness of influencer marketing initiatives. In conclusion, this study affirms the power of SMIs in shaping consumer choices within the digital landscape. The results serve as a practical guide for marketers to harness influencer attributes effectively, particularly in managing consumer skepticism, thereby optimizing engagement and purchase outcomes in competitive markets.

5.1. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study, while valuable, is limited to a single industry and geographic context, focusing on the beauty market in Malaysia. Future research could expand the scope by exploring different industries or countries to validate these findings. Additionally, incorporating other variables, such as brand equity or product quality perceptions, as moderating or mediating factors, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumer decision-making in the context of influencer marketing.

6. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates the powerful impact of social media influencers (SMIs) on consumer online purchase intentions for beauty products, emphasizing how influencer traits such as likeability, trustworthiness, and similarity can drive consumer engagement. This study finds that likeability, similarity and trustworthiness are particularly influential in shaping purchasing behavior, suggesting that consumers are not only attracted to relatable influencers but also value those with perceived knowledge and credibility in the beauty industry. These findings support existing literature on influencer marketing, which identifies credibility and engagement as critical to successful consumer influence. Moreover, this study introduces consumer scepticism as a key moderating factor. The findings reveal that high levels of scepticism reduce the positive effects of influencer traits on online purchase intentions, highlighting the challenge marketers face in navigating consumer doubts over influencer authenticity and transparency. As misinformation and commercial bias remain prevalent concerns, the need for transparent and authentic influencer marketing strategies becomes evident. These insights carry practical implications for marketers. In selecting and working with influencers, brands should prioritize authenticity and transparency to build trust among consumers. Overall, this study provides a clear framework for leveraging influencer marketing effectively within the beauty sector, advancing both theory and practice in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

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