



Beyond the buzz: The role of KOLs' communication in affecting generation Z's purchase intention

Lim Ying San

Center of Excellence for Business Innovation and Communication,

Multimedia University, Malaysia

Faculty of Business, Multimedia University, Malaysia

Jeslyn Lee Jinn Yee

Faculty of Business, Multimedia University, Melaka

*Ng Tuan Hock

Center of Excellence for Business Innovation and Communication,

Multimedia University, Malaysia

Faculty of Business, Multimedia University, Malaysia

thng@mmu.edu.my

ABSTRACT

In line with the Malaysian government's effort to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 9, digitalization continues to proliferate the business world. Further, many businesses are now using social media to engage with consumers. The popularity of social media in business has created a new phenomenon in the market called Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs). KOLs are highly influential and can communicate as well as influence a large audience. However, not all KOLs have the same ability to communicate and to influence audiences. Hence, this research investigates the influence of KOL on consumer purchase intention in Malaysia's e-commerce landscape. The study adapted the TEARS model and examined how expertise, similarity, credibility, and attractiveness influence consumer purchase intention in e-commerce. Employing a well-designed online questionnaire, data was collected from 180 respondents aged 18–27 (Generation Z) to test the developed hypotheses. The study confirms that KOL's expertise, similarity, and attractiveness can influence consumer purchase intentions. However, credibility does not significantly predict purchase intention. Overall, this research contributes significantly to understanding the importance of influencer marketing in affecting Generation Z's purchase intention. The findings can provide valuable insights to businesses in planning their strategies. The study also extends the use of TEARS model to understand KOLs' influence.

Keywords: **Social media, SDG 9, key opinion leaders, TEARS model**

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, social media serves as an interactive technological intermediary, enabling the creation and dissemination of information, knowledge, ideas and various expressions within virtual communities, virtual worlds, and online platforms (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Social media enables users to generate content comprising text-based entries and comments as well as digital imagery or videos; this means most of the data in social media is derived from the users' online engagement, which serves as the fundamental essence of social media platforms (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

As of October 2023, the worldwide internet user count reached 5.3 billion, comprising 65.7% of the global population while 4.95 billion people, equivalent to 61.4%, actively participated in various social media platforms (Petrosyan, 2023).

According to the latest statistics (Howarth, 2025), people spent about 2 hours and 24 minutes daily on social media. Global social media usage is projected to reach 4 trillion hours, with over half (58.4%) of the world's population actively participating in social networks, accounting for just one-third of the total 12 trillion hours spent online globally in the previous year (Kemp, 2022). Another study from Smart Insights estimated that 61.4% of the world's population engages in social media, dedicating an average of 144 minutes daily (Chaffey, 2024).

Social media's rapid popularity has had a profound and expanding impact on many aspects of our lives, including businesses (Moosa, 2024). A survey found that 43% of consumers discovered products and services on social media, with Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok having the highest conversion rates. Of these, 21% of Instagram users and 24% of Facebook users buy online depending on their discoveries. In third ranking, 39 million TikTok users explored products and reviews, with 17% making purchases (Pymnts & Pymnts, 2023). In the US, 47% of its customers have bought something on social media, with 58% remaining intrigued. According to Hansen (2023), 39% of US consumers have purchased on social media and are eager to do so again while 34% would be more likely to shop on social media if they understood data privacy. Additionally, 46% of US consumers have attended live-stream events and would do so again.

Key opinion leaders (KOLs)

KOL, or key opinion leader, is an individual with a substantial social media following, and facilitates the widespread dissemination of information to a large audience (Dwidienawati et al., 2020). Through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), KOLs play a crucial role by expressing views on products that can sway potential buyers in their decision-making process (Weismueller et al., 2020). As the prevalence of social media usage continues to rise, many consumers seek input from other consumers (Weismueller et al., 2020). According to Lim et al. (2017), leveraging KOL in sales strategies has demonstrated a notably higher return on investment (ROI) than alternative digital marketing approaches. Thus, collaborating with KOLs enhances the efficacy of product marketing and surpasses the effectiveness of conventional marketing strategies (Dwidienawati et al., 2020).

KOLs are well-known to users on social platforms as they have cultivated a dedicated strong following by constructing an authentic online identity (Casalo et al., 2020). KOLs develop strong emotional bonds with their audience by divulging personal content about their lifestyle and passions (Audrezet et al., 2020). Generally, social media users perceive

KOLs as appealing, genuine, and relatable (Schouten et al., 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Thus, the positive perception of KOLs among their followers amplifies the efficacy of their messages in achieving the intended impact for brands (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

KOLs can be classified by their number of followers, which illustrates their online influence (Morteo, 2018). Celebrity KOLs, with over 1 million social media followers, often work in music or cinema (Carrillat & Ilicic, 2019). Mega-KOLs, with over one million followers, gain fame through social media content creation (Ismail, 2023). Macro-KOLs, with 100,000 to one million followers, charge lower prices and gain popularity online (Monacho & Slamet, 2023). Micro-KOLs with 10,000 to 100,000 followers usually have a local audience (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Lastly, nano-KOLs, with fewer than 10,000 followers, focus on friends, acquaintances, and close connections and often collaborate with merchants on their own (Liu et al., 2021). According to Statista (2025), the market size for media influencer has grown more than three times since 2020. In 2025, the market of influencer marketing is estimated to reach up to 33 billion U.S. dollars.

KOLs influence new trends and preferences, making items more appealing (Megane et al., 2019). Each year, they become more influential in consumer decision-making (Lou & Yuan, 2019). According to Megane et al. (2019), sponsored KOL posts have increased from 3.6 million in 2015 to 24.2 million by the end of 2018. In 2023, influencer marketing expenditure is expected to reach \$21.1 billion, a 29% increase from the previous year's \$16.4 billion (West, 2024). KOLs, as a brand's voice, boost product awareness and desirability, with attractiveness and trustworthiness influencing their positive correlation with purchase intent (Megane et al., 2019). Markets & Markets (2020) predicted that influencer marketing platforms will grow from USD 6.0 billion in 2020 to USD 24.1 billion in 2025. Similarly, Linqia (2020) contended that influencer marketing has matured, with KOLs developing the ability and understanding to assist brands in connecting with their target audience.

KOLs in Malaysia

The average time spent on social media is 2.25 hours per day worldwide (Kemp, 2021), while in Malaysia, it is notably higher at 2 hours 47 minutes (Liew et al., 2021; Statista, 2023). The report reveals that 44.8% of global internet users seek brand information on social media, with Malaysia leading at 59.5% (Liew et al., 2021). Essentially, the surge in social media growth and usage has significantly impacted marketing strategies (Chaffey, 2024), further emphasising the role and influence of social media influencers.

The significance of social media KOLs is growing in Malaysia, given that about 75% of Malaysian consumers are familiar with KOLs and have followed at least one on social media (Statista, 2023). Further, there is a shift in marketing strategies among Malaysian companies, allocating increased budgets to engage with social influencers ("Engaging the power", 2020). According to a 2023 survey by Rakuten Insight on social commerce purchases in Malaysia, 37% of participants reported engaging in regular shopping activities on social media over the past year (Statista, 2023).

The influence of KOLs on generation Z

Gen Z, also known as iGeneration, Post-Millennials, Gen Wii, or NextGen, is the next generation after Millennials and is subject to varied nomenclature (Raphelson, 2014; Turner, 2015). This generation's definition sparks considerable disagreement, with demographers placing its inception between the early 1990s and 2000 (Seemiller & Grace,

2017). Gen Z individuals, descendants of Baby Boomers, and in some cases, offspring of Millennials, have lived a significant portion of their lives in the era of Internet technology, where virtual connectivity has been a constant (Turner, 2015). The advent of internet and uninterrupted access to information have uniquely positioned this generation to comprehend global imperatives. Research indicates that Generation Z displays unprecedented diversity compared to previous ones in the USA (Shatto & Erwin, 2016). Notably, the impact of the internet, mainly through social media, is more profound on Gen Z than on its predecessor, Gen Y (Accenture, 2017).

According to He (2024), Generation Z is a generation that continuously faces information overload, in particular advertisements and varied information. This renders traditional marketing communication tools less effective in capturing their attention. However, it is easier for Generation Z to accept recommendations from KOLs who present a fun image. Also, in terms of consumer behaviour, Generation Z's purchases are usually driven by self-gratification, in which they wish to have an emotional connection with the brand. KOLs are very good in creating the bridge between the consumer and also the brand. Hence, KOLs have more potency in influencing Generation Z.

Individuals belonging to Generation Z, specifically those aged between 16 and 24, exhibit the highest level of dependency on social media, especially females ("How much time", 2022). On average, Generation Z females spend approximately 3 hours and 11 minutes online, surpassing their male peers who spend 2 hours and 40 minutes. A recent study revealed the significant impact of social media influencers and KOL, on Gen Z's online consumer behaviour particularly on the Douyin platform (Liu, 2023). In Douyin e-commerce, Generation Z demonstrated significant purchasing power, representing the fastest growth rate among all demographics, with a collective spending of 4 trillion RMB (\$620 billion) in China in 2020 (Seo, 2021). Looking ahead, Generation Z is estimated to contribute to a substantial social media spending amount of at least 5 trillion RMB (\$740 million) in the coming years (Seo, 2021).

Research problem

Communicating with Generation Z is particularly crucial as it is very challenging to reach them through conventional media. Generation Z spends more time in social media platforms such as YouTube (65%), TikTok (43%), and Facebook (40%). These platforms are significant sources of communication for Generation Z (Brito, 2023). KOLs must continuously improve their communication to foster a shared interest and trust when they are communicating with their audience (Lou & Kim, 2019; Tazlia et al., 2023). However, the over-saturation of KOLs and the overwhelming content volume on social media, coupled with the transient nature of fame, pose challenges for audiences to trust KOLs.

In addition, according to a report by Advertising + Marketing (2019), the level of engagement with KOLs in Malaysia is notably lower compared to Indonesia and Thailand. The report presented audience quality rates, which explains the engagement between an influencer and their followers. Malaysian influencers received an audience quality rate of 31.2 percentile. In contrast, Indonesia and Thailand influencers scored higher audience quality grades, which are 51.0 percentile and 37.9 percentile, respectively. Further, Rakuten Insight reported that around 67% of Malaysian Generation Z did not make any purchases promoted by KOLs (Statista, 2023). Hence, this suggests that the KOLs in the Malaysian market are less influential than other countries.

The present study delves into examining Malaysian KOLs' influence on Generation Z's purchasing decisions. It looks into the significant role of social media KOLs in YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook in influencing the purchasing decisions of Generation Z. The study is important as it underscores the necessity for social media marketers to formulate targeted marketing strategies for Generation Z as they are the main users of social media. According to He (2024), each KOL carries different positioning. Hence, marketers have to be careful in selecting the most suitable KOL to promote their company products or services. Choosing the right KOL will enable a business to maximise its brand exposure and influence consumer purchase intention.

Based on this discussion, the research problem is to study the influence of the characteristics of KOL on Generation Z's consumer purchase intention. Correspondingly, the research objective is to investigate the relationship between KOL's characteristics: expertise, similarity, credibility, and attractiveness in influencing purchase intention among Gen Z.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The TEARS model, introduced by Shimp (2003), encompasses attributes that align with the source credibility theory and source attractiveness theory, as proposed by McGuire (1968). The model primarily centres on key factors influencing an endorser's effectiveness in communication, encompassing trustworthiness and expertise derived from the source credibility theory, along with attractiveness, respect, and similarity from the source attractiveness theory (McGuire, 1968). Celebrity endorsement studies frequently integrate attributes of the TEARS model to gain insights into consumer behaviour. The TEARS model is important for this study as it focuses on the credibility and attractiveness of KOLs in the communication process, which are important in influencing consumer purchase intention (Oteh et al., 2023).

TEARS model

Shimp (2003) introduced the TEARS model, emphasising two general attributes, which are credibility and attractiveness. Credibility involves trustworthiness and expertise, where trustworthiness relies on the endorser's believability and perceived motivations, and expertise is linked to specific skills or knowledge. The second general feature, attractiveness, is connected to the source's physical attractiveness, respect, and similarities (Chan et al., 2021; Freeman & Chen, 2015). Physical attractiveness increases audience brand judgment (Kahle & Homer, 1985), while personal characteristics and accomplishments garner respect (Freeman & Chen, 2015). When the source traits match audience traits, trustworthiness increases (Desphande and Stayman, 1994). The TEARS model shows how these traits affect KOLs' persuasive and communication skills (Shimp, 2003). However, this study will eliminate respect and trustworthiness for reasons that will be discussed next.

The exclusion of respect and trustworthiness from the TEARS model

Previous research indicates that respect of source does not yield a favourable and statistically significant influence on consumers' intention to purchase, especially in the online environment (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Taillon et al., 2020). The nature of KOL is more on fun and interesting content, which does not add to the KOL's respect and

trustworthiness (House of Marketers, 2023). Hence, these two variables were excluded from the present study.

Compared to trustworthiness and respect, previous research shows that credibility is a more suitable construct for studying the influence of online influencers on consumer purchase intention. Marketing literature shows that the perceived credibility of influencers is linked to the effectiveness of the communicated message, primarily relying on the acknowledged levels of trustworthiness and expertise possessed by the influencer (AlFarraj et al., 2021), while trustworthiness depends on the message of the communication. According to Manaher (2023), in the realm of online influencers, the distinction between credibility and trustworthiness holds significant weight, with credibility typically taking precedence over trustworthiness. According to Liu and Zheng (2024), if a trustworthy influencer was to have a negative encounter, it would not affect their credibility; they can still leverage their expertise to maintain influence and potentially sway consumer purchase decisions.

METHODS

Hypotheses development

Research indicates that individuals tend to trust specialists more than non-experts. When consumers perceive an influencer as an expert, their trust increases, leading to increased purchase intentions. Expertise in their field also establishes trust with their audience, increasing the likelihood of purchasing based on their suggestions (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Al-Mu'an et al., 2023). This positive correlation between expertise and attitude is evident in online shopping (Hussain & Ali, 2021). Based on this, the following hypothesis is formed:

H1: There is a relationship between KOL's expertise and consumer purchase intention among Generation Z.

Desphande and Stayman (1994) highlighted that people are more susceptible to influence when they trust those who share similarities with them. Numerous prior studies consistently demonstrate a favourable association between source similarities and the intention to make a purchase (Ahmad et al., 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Additionally, Rezai et al. (2020) found a positive correlation between similarities with influencers and purchasing intention, suggesting that perceiving similarities with an influencer, whether through shared hobbies, interests, or styles, can positively impact followers' trust in influencers and subsequently, influence their purchasing intentions. Based on this, we suggest the following hypothesis:

H2: There is a relationship between KOL's similarities and consumer purchase intention among Generation Z.

Based on Sertoglu et al.'s work (2014), the study confirms a positive and substantiated connection between Instagram users' perceived credibility of an influencer and their intention to make a purchase, indicating that increased credibility levels contribute to more effective purchase intentions. Rathnayake and Lakshika (2023) identified a noteworthy positive impact of influencer credibility on purchase intention. Influencers, recognised as credible sources, play a crucial role in furnishing valuable information to followers, positively

shaping attitudes, and potentially guiding purchasing decisions (Demba et al., 2019; Tanha, 2020). Similarly, a study conducted by Oracle (2022) uncovered that 37% of consumers trust social media influencers, with Generation Z and Millennials showing twice the reliance on influencers compared to other generations. Accordingly, the following is hypothesised:

H3: There is a relationship between KOL's credibility and consumer purchase intention among Generation Z.

According to past studies, customers are attracted to beautiful people, and influencers with attractiveness, intellect, or charisma generally have a large following (Rahmah & Ren, 2019). Social media influencers improve brand image (Hermanda et al., 2019), and their attractiveness influences consumers' purchase intentions (Torres et al., 2019). Attractive celebrities inspire their followers to emulate their lifestyle. Influencers' appealing and attractive personalities often compel followers to buy the same items they use (Rahmah & Ren, 2019; Torres et al., 2019). With this, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H4: There is a relationship between KOL's attractiveness and consumer purchase intention among Generation Z.

Sampling plan

The study involved individuals who belong to Generation Z as they are the main users of social media. Generation Z are individuals aged 12 to 27 years old. However, data collection was conducted with those aged between 18 and 27 years old, excluding individuals aged 12 to 17 years old. This decision was guided by the Child Act 2001 in Malaysia, which defines those under 18 as children, and protected under the law in Malaysia. The exclusion of the younger age group is motivated by their legal status as minors, needing more capacity for independent financial transactions (Vignes, 2024).

Convenience sampling was chosen for the study due to its accessibility and cost-effectiveness. To ensure relevance and eligibility, study respondents must be aged 18 to 27 and have had recent purchase experiences through KOLs within the past 6 months. This method addresses research limitations and allows inclusion of friends or family members.

Data collection

Primary data was collected using a structured online questionnaire. The online questionnaire consisted of three sections, with the first section collecting data about respondents' profile, followed by consumer behaviour in social media, and lastly, the items to measure the study variables. A few filtering questions were used to check online purchase experience and engagement with KOLs. The filtering questions helped choose the right respondents to participate in the study. All the variables used in the questionnaire were adopted from past research (Dwivedi et al., 2015; Lou & Kim, 2019; Lou et al., 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Thusyanthy, 2018). The items were verified by experts from the industry and also academic. A pilot testing involving 30 respondents was conducted first before the actual data collection. The questionnaire used the 5-point Likert scale with for response options, ranging from "Completely disagree" to "Completely agree". The questionnaires were posted on Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and email to reach a broad target sample.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents' profile

In total, 180 respondents participated in the study. The majority were female (52%), with 48% male. The age range was 18–27 years old, with 51% being 22–23 years old. A quarter of the respondents were employed (26%), while 71% identified as students.

Education levels were diverse among the respondents, with 7% having O-level or SPM qualifications, 10% with foundation studies, 22% with diploma studies, and 59% bachelor degrees. Only 2% had a master's degree, and 4% had a PhD or higher qualifications. The majority of respondents were students with a focus on education and academic pursuits.

This survey also revealed a variety of KOL categories among respondents. Lifestyle KOLs had the most following, with 109 users choosing daily life content. This is followed by travel KOLs (91 respondents), beauty KOLs (85 respondents), food KOLs (85 respondents), health and wellness KOLs (71 respondents), entertainment KOLs (71 respondents), technological KOLs (64 respondents), gaming KOLs (59 respondents) and lastly, parenting KOLs (31 respondents).

Reliability analysis

All the variables in the study exhibit very high reliability, generating Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.899 to 0.945. Expertise is particularly notable, showing a robust reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.945. Next, similarity and attractiveness demonstrate commendable reliability, scoring above 0.9 with values of 0.942 and 0.932, respectively. Credibility follows closely behind with a reliability coefficient of 0.899, still within an acceptable range. Purchase intention also indicates solid reliability, with a score of 0.915.

Multiple regression analysis

The R-square value presented in the model summary (Table 1) explains the relationship between the independent variables and the influence of KOLs on consumer purchase intention.

Table 1. Multiple regression analysis

Model	R	R-square	Adjusted R-square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig
1	0.727 ^a	0.528	0.517	0.72395	48.995	<0.001 ^a

^a. Predictors: (Constant), Attractiveness, Expertise, Similarity, Credibility

^b. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

Based on Table 1, the R-square value of 0.528 indicates that the four independent variables, attractiveness, expertise, similarity, and credibility, collectively explain 52.8% of the influence exerted by KOLs on consumer purchase intention. The adjusted R-square value of 0.517 also refined this estimate to adjust for the number of predictors in the model. The standard error of the estimate, at 0.72395, reflects the average deviation between observed and predicted purchase intention values. Furthermore, the regression model is deemed statistically significant with an F-statistic of 48.995 and a corresponding p-value below 0.001. In conclusion, these results highlight the considerable impact of online influencers' attributes, such as attractiveness, expertise, similarity, and credibility, on shaping consumer purchase intentions.

Table 2. Coefficients

Model	Beta	Sig.
Expertise	0.193	0.014
Similarity	0.328	<0.001
Credibility	0.012	0.880
Attractiveness	0.296	<0.001

Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

The p-value obtained for expertise and purchase intention was 0.014, which is less than 0.000, indicating there is the relationship between expertise and consumer purchase intention. Thus, H1 is supported. Similarly, the p-values for similarity and attractiveness are also less than 0.05; hence, H2 and H3 are supported as well. On the other hand, the p-value obtained for credibility was 0.880, which is more than 0.05, hence H3 is not supported. The overall results show that similarity is the most influential variable, with the highest beta value (0.328), followed by attractiveness (0.296) and expertise (0.193).

The results suggest that as the expertise of KOLs increases, the purchase intention of their Generation Z followers also increases. Previous research have shown the substantial influence of KOLs' knowledge on customer behaviour (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Al Jaed & Badghish, 2021; Hussain & Ali, 2021; Jamil & ul Hassan, 2014). AlFarraj et al. (2021) highlighted a notable tendency of KOLs to hold a bachelor's or master's degree, reflecting a significant focus on education among them, which enhances their perceived expertise (Hussain & Ali, 2021). Additionally, when influencers are regarded as experts, it cultivates a favourable disposition towards online buying (Al Jaed & Badghish, 2021; Jamil & ul Hassan, 2014).

The results also demonstrate that similarity significantly influences Generation Z's purchasing decisions. Source similarity has been consistently linked to purchase intention in earlier studies. Lou and Yuan (2018) discovered that source similarity increases brand trust, brand awareness, and purchase intentions. Similarly, Ahmad et al. (2019) found that social media celebrity endorsements significantly influence customers' purchase intentions by boosting a brand image. Studies also found that influencers' familiarity, likeness, beauty, and likability boost their persuasive power when marketing products and services (Ohanian, 1990; Prendergast et al., 2014).

In addition, KOLs' attractiveness does affect the purchase intention among Generation Z consumers. This corroborates with Lou and Yuan (2019) who found that influencer appeal in branded content increases follower trust and purchase intentions. Digital influencers' attractiveness affects consumer behaviour, with high brand attachment mirroring purchase intentions (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2019; Wiedmann & Mettenheim, 2021). Likewise, Chekima et al. (2020) revealed source attractiveness to be a favourable predictor among Malaysian consumers. Liew et al. (2021) also found that social media influencers' physical attractiveness (beauty, handsomeness, sexiness, and elegance) strongly influence Malaysian female consumers' purchasing decisions.

Lastly, in regard to the relationship between credibility and purchase intention among Generation Z consumers, the results reveal that it is not statistically significant. Generation Z distrusts KOLs due to their "inauthentic authenticity" (Edwards, 2023). According to Speller (2019), consumers believe most content is manufactured, filtered, and manipulated when KOLs recommend products or services. KOLs are also perceived

as intentionally promoting items that they themselves do not utilise. Kemp (2022) also found that consumers favour user-generated content (UGC) over KOLs' material. Kemp's survey found that 86% of consumers trust brands that post customer-created content, compared to 12% who buy influencer-promoted products. This suggests that customers believe UGC as more honest and relatable. Based on these findings, the association between internet KOLs' credibility and consumer purchasing intention is unsupported.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS / CONCLUSION

Managerial implications

The findings highlight the importance of KOLs in today's marketing. Since, KOL marketing is rapidly proliferating, governments should take heed and formulate legislation and regulations that can regulate KOL marketing transparency and ethics. These legislations and policies are very important to protect consumers, businesses and also KOLs. The government can draft KOL marketing rules by analysing how KOLs' credibility affects consumer behaviour. The government can also require KOLs to disclose sponsored content publicly using hashtags like #ad or #sponsored. They can also fine or suspend influencers and brands that engage in deceptive advertising. Related government agencies can also work together with industry stakeholders like KOLs, brands, and advertising agencies to develop best practices and ethical standards in KOL marketing. This can safeguard consumers and make the digital economy more safer.

Businesses implications

Based on the findings, attractiveness is the most influential variable of KOLs, followed by expertise and skills. Businesses can utilise this finding to modify their marketing strategy to attract more customers. First, they should work with visually appealing KOLs who match their target audience's style. Investing in charming, elegant, stylish KOLs can boost brand and product appeal. Visually appealing content that showcases products and services can also boost consumer engagement. Additionally, brands should carefully choose KOLs whose lifestyles, hobbies, and values match their target consumers. Collaborations with KOLs who match audience interests and inclinations can boost marketing efforts and consumer purchase intention.

Since there is no correlation between Generation Z consumer purchase intention and KOLs credibility, businesses may not need to focus on credibility in their marketing efforts.

Limitations of the study

This research focused on Generation Z in Malaysia, which may limit its generalisability to other regions and generations due to cultural, economic, and social differences. To address this, a comprehensive background research comparing KOL marketing dynamics in Malaysia with that of other Southeast Asian countries was included. Future research could expand the geographic scope to include multiple countries for a more comparative analysis. Next, data collection relied on voluntary survey responses, which can lead to non-response bias. To address this, the survey was distributed widely through social media platforms, follow-up was carried out through reminders, and demographic data analysis was done to ensure a more representative sample. Future research may consider expanding

the study to include different generations or platforms to compare the influence of KOLs on different generations and platforms.

Conclusion

KOLs are now essential for businesses to promote their products and brands on social media. Many companies use KOLs to reach their target customers, especially Generation Z. However, as the number of KOLs grows, businesses must find ways to evaluate which KOLs are best at promoting and communicating their products and services. The present study examined the impact of knowledge, similarity, credibility, and attractiveness on consumer purchase intention. Using the TEARS model, the study found that KOLs' expertise, similarity, and attractiveness affect the purchase intention of Generation Z. This research fills a vacuum in the literature by providing demographically relevant and localised perspectives on how the TEARS model can be applied on Malaysia's Generation Z in terms of KOLs' influence. The findings also has implications on marketing for Generation Z, bridging theoretical study and pragmatic practice. In particular, the study guides businesses on the types of KOLs they need to employ to influence their target consumers.

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Lim Ying San

is currently a lecturer specialising in marketing at the Faculty of Business (FOB), Multimedia University, Melaka. She received her Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Universiti Putra Malaysia and her Doctorate of Philosophy from Universiti Sains Malaysia. She has been teaching and supervising undergraduate and postgraduate students, mainly in the area of marketing.

Jeslyn Lee Jinn Yee

is currently pursuing her BBA (Marketing Management) in the Faculty of Business (FOB), Multimedia University, Melaka.

Ng Tuan Hock (Dr)

is a senior lecturer in banking and finance at the Multimedia University, Melaka campus, where he has been teaching since 2007. Dr. Ng received his Diploma in Technology Management (Accountancy) from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, BBA (Hons) Banking and Finance, Master of Philosophy (Management) and PhD from Multimedia University. He has been teaching and supervising undergraduate and postgraduate students, mainly in the area of finance.
