



Effect of strategic visual communication, eWOM, and personal attractiveness on consumer purchase intentions in Malaysia

*Kavitha Balakrishnan

Multimedia University, Malaysia

kavitha.balakrishnan@mmu.edu.my

Ajitha Angusamy

Multimedia University, Malaysia

Tarandeep Singh

Leo Burnett Malaysia, Malaysia

Mohamed Nur Fitri Razak

Xiamen University, Malaysia

Jayanty Kuppusamy

Multimedia University, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

With the rise of social media, consumers are increasingly influenced by digital interactions and peer recommendations, shaping their purchasing decisions. The study examined the relationship between consumer purchase behaviour and electronic word-of-mouth, while also examining the strategic visual communication strategies used by social media influencers, with personal attractiveness acting as a mediator. People generally accept that communication involves frequent social interactions between a sender and a recipient. This study, using a quantitative approach and a total of 384 valid respondents, employed purposive sampling. The analysis was conducted using PROCESS Hayes, a statistical tool for mediation analysis, to assess the indirect effects between variables. The findings support all four alternative hypotheses and reveal a statistically significant relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and strategic visual communication in relation to consumer purchasing behaviour. Additionally, PROCESS Hayes confirmed a statistically significant indirect effect of strategic visual communication and electronic word-of-mouth on consumer purchase intention through personal characteristics. The findings provide insights into the effectiveness of visual communication, electronic word-of-mouth, and the personal characteristics of influencers in influencing consumer purchasing behaviour. The study emphasizes the importance of building trust and authenticity, establishing genuine connections, being transparent, and maintaining a unique brand identity to build consumer loyalty.

Keywords: **Visual communication, influencers, electronic word-of-mouth, attractiveness, consumers, purchase intention**

INTRODUCTION

Social media comprises multiple user-driven platforms that make it easier to communicate with a wider audience, create engaging dialogues, and spread appealing content (Kaur & Kumar, 2020). According to previous studies, individuals can use social media not only to connect socially but also to acquire and share knowledge, which is the most fundamental purpose of social media (Kang, 2022). Furthermore, social media is fundamentally a digital space created by and for individuals that provides a setting conducive to networking and interactions at numerous levels, such as personal, professional, commercial, marketing, political, and societal (Kaur & Kumar, 2020).

Social media influencers are users online who have formed a strong following by sharing visual and textual details of their daily lives and who have influence and power over a certain audience (Taillon et al., 2020). As a result, influencer marketing has emerged as a dominant promotional strategy, allowing brands to approach interested audiences through personalities whom consumers perceive as trustworthy (Woodroof et al., 2020). This approach of influencer marketing is particularly effective because it efficiently and cost-effectively connects brands with engaged audiences. With social media's ability to help users build and manage networks of followers, some influencers have successfully monetised their reach, offering brand exposure and marketing opportunities (Taillon et al., 2020).

On social media, brands have a range of ways to engage with their target audience, including brand pages, sponsored posts, paid adverts, and electronic word-of mouth (Chu & Kim, 2019). Among these, influencer endorsements have gained prominence due to their direct impact on consumer purchasing behaviour. A more favourable perception of endorsed products often results in higher purchase intentions among consumers (Dinh & Lee, 2021). This study is guided by the Social Influence Theory, which provides a strong foundation for understanding the impact of influencer marketing on consumer purchasing behaviour. It explains how influencers shape consumer behaviour through credibility, expertise, and relatability. Hence, this study applies the theory to explore how influencer characteristics and communication strategies influence consumer purchasing intentions in Malaysia.

BACKGROUND

Social media platforms promote engagement through user-driven content, with social media influencers (SMIs) fostering brand loyalty more effectively than companies by forming authentic connections based on shared lifestyles and interests (Tafesse & Wood, 2022). Influencer marketing has gained momentum, offering better audience reach (Haenlein, 2020) and demonstrating higher ROI, with 65% of marketers increasing investments in 2018 (Atiq et al., 2022) and 89% reporting superior returns by 2019 (Woodroof et al., 2020), while nearly half of consumers trusted influencer recommendations and 40% made purchases based on them (Taillon et al., 2020).

Influencers gain credibility by producing visually appealing, self-generated content, often positioning themselves as experts or showcasing their lifestyles (Rohde & Mau, 2021). Consumers tend to relate more to influencers than traditional celebrities, leading to more effective product endorsements (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). In 2021, influencer

marketing was projected to generate USD \$9.7 billion, accounting for about 5% of the USD \$250 billion global online advertising market (Haenlein, 2020).

Influencers significantly shape consumer opinions and purchasing decisions through frequent interactions and trusted recommendations (Kim & Kim, 2022). Their influence is especially pronounced among younger audiences like Generation Z and Millennials (Taillon et al., 2020), with gender also playing a role—female consumers tend to adopt influencers' lifestyles and purchasing choices more readily (Kim & Kim, 2022). Notably, 72% of children reported increased product likability after viewing influencer content, and 80% believed their peers would buy those products (Folkvord et al., 2019).

The influencer marketing industry is steadily expanding, driven by consumers' preference for Instagram content that aligns with their interests and boosts happiness, ultimately shaping attitudes and purchase intentions (Joshi et al., 2023; Mazzarolo et al., 2021). Engagement on platforms like Instagram also stimulates electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), a critical aspect of social media marketing that marketers leverage to increase brand visibility and consumer interaction (Suhud, 2021; Mazzarolo et al., 2021).

Problem statement

One key gap in the study of social media influencers and consumer behaviour is the methodological gap. Social media influencers have become a dominant force in shaping consumer behaviour, leveraging digital platforms to engage audiences and promote brands. Many studies, such as Taillon et al. (2020), have employed qualitative methods to examine the relationship between influencers and followers, emphasising the “why” behind consumer behaviour. However, Rohde and Mau (2021) highlighted the need for more quantitative research to extend current frameworks and deepen understanding of how influencer marketing drives consumer persuasion. Responding to this call, the present study investigates how strategic visual communication and electronic word-of-mouth, with personal attractiveness as a mediator, influence consumer purchasing intention in the Malaysian context.

Additionally, much of the existing research on influencer marketing has been conducted outside of Malaysia, highlighting a population gap. For example, Khan et al. (2023) noted that influencer marketing's impact on consumer purchasing intentions is still a relatively new concept in Pakistan. Similarly, in Malaysia, influencer marketing is gaining traction as many local brands transition from traditional celebrity endorsements to collaborating with social media influencers to build brand awareness. This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the effectiveness of social media influencers and their communication strategies in shaping consumer purchasing intentions in Malaysia.

Most studies on influencer marketing focused on direct effects, often overlooking the relationship between visual communication, eWOM, and personal attractiveness. Existing theories lack a comprehensive framework integrating these factors, particularly in emerging markets like Malaysia. This study addresses this limitation by examining how personal attractiveness mediates the relationship between strategic visual communication, eWOM, and consumer purchase intention.

Research questions

The following four research questions arise when discussing the relationship between strategic visual communication used by social media influencers and electronic word-of-

mouth with consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia where personal attractiveness is used as mediator:

1. What is the relationship between strategic visual communication used by social media influencers and consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia?
2. What is the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia?
3. What is the role of personal attractiveness as a mediator in the relationship between strategic visual communication and consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia?
4. What is the role of personal attractiveness as a mediator in the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia?

Research objectives

Based on the research questions, four research objectives were formulated in regard to strategic visual communication used by social media influencers and electronic word-of-mouth with consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia where personal attractiveness is used as mediator.

1. To investigate the relationship between strategic visual communication used by social media influencers and consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia.
2. To investigate the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia.
3. To examine the mediating role of personal attractiveness as a mediator in the relationship between strategic visual communication and consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia.
4. To examine the mediating role of personal attractiveness as a mediator in the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visual communication strategically employs images to convey information strategically, influencing viewers' perceptions and behaviour (Kujur & Singh, 2020). As it transcends language barriers, visual content resonates globally in a similar manner (Gunay, 2021). With businesses increasingly prioritising visuals, 86% European businesses increasingly now rely on visuals over text-based content (Valentini et al., 2018). The Social Influence Theory explains how influencers shape consumer behaviour, highlighting credibility as a key factor in determining whether their influence is lasting or superficial (Tafesse & Wood, 2022). Influencers enhance engagement by rewarding positive follower behaviour and fostering trust through their expertise in niche areas (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). In this context, visual communication—defined as online behaviour driven by engaging visual content—plays a crucial role (Valentini et al., 2018).

Since visuals account for 75% of brain input, they significantly shape consumer perceptions and reactions (Kujur & Singh, 2020). Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube play a pivotal role in visual storytelling, where influencers use videos and subtle brand placements, to engage audiences and shape consumer perceptions (Atiq et al., 2022;

De Veirman et al., 2019). For instance, influencers like Ryan's World leverage relatable storytelling to impact purchasing decisions. Smiling, for example, fosters emotional connections and increases purchase intent (Trivedi & Teichert, 2019). Essentially, creative and dynamic content boosts engagement and brand awareness (Ekaputri et al., 2021; Wardhani, 2022).

eWOM involves sharing opinions online, which influences consumer perceptions and purchase intent (Daowd et al., 2021). Influencers play a critical role in generating eWOM, creating symbolic associations with products they endorse, boosting exposure and sales through trusted recommendations (Taillon et al., 2020). Brand loyalty, shaped by influencers' credibility and relatability, fosters positive eWOM and advocacy, driving sales and customer retention (Alkallas, 2023; Kim & Kim, 2022). In turn, influencer endorsements also enhance brand awareness by aligning consumer perceptions with brand expectations, amplifying reach and influencing purchasing intent (Sriram et al., 2021; Yeo, 2023). Since credibility is fundamental to this process, influencers' expertise and trustworthiness directly impact brand perception and purchase intentions (Helme, 2023; Sharipudin et al., 2023). As consumers trust online reviews, influencer endorsements act as persuasive tools for product validation (Chakraborty & Bhat, 2018). Thus, creativity, trust, and relatability play a pivotal role in driving engagement and brand success across digital platforms.

Personality traits significantly influence entrepreneurial and social media activity, impacting consumer decision-making and engagement (Lampropoulos et al., 2022; Mõttus et al., 2020). Brands benefit from selecting influencers with the right personality and attractiveness, as these traits enhance endorsement effectiveness, trust, and purchase intention, particularly among Generation Z (Ladhari et al., 2020; Saima & Khan, 2020; Taillon et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Attractiveness boosts advertising success and credibility, especially when the influencer's appearance aligns with the product, making them more persuasive and cost-effective for marketing strategies (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2021; Pinto & Paraminta, 2021).

Consumer purchase intention involves actions such as seeking, evaluating, and purchasing products to fulfil needs (Yin & Qiu, 2021). It comprises the process of obtaining information, analysing options, and making decisions based on experiences, preferences, and environmental factors (Lăzăroiu et al., 2020). Online purchasing intention indicates consumers' willingness to shop online (Fitri & Wulandari, 2020) and helps predict market sales and advertising effectiveness (Esmeli et al., 2021). In this context, influencer marketing shapes consumer purchase intention by fostering trust and engagement through personalised interactions. By leveraging influencers' relationships with consumers, brands can enhance recognition and purchasing intent, as consumers often rely on influencers' recommendations when making purchase decisions (Taillon et al., 2020; Zhang & Choi, 2022). Purchase intention reflects the likelihood of purchasing based on attitudes, perceptions, and trust built through social media interactions (Majeed & Kim, 2024). Influencers and well-known brands impact perceptions of quality and value, influencing Generation Z's purchasing intentions (Pinto & Paraminta, 2021). Understanding these intentions helps optimise marketing strategies and build long-term consumer relationships (Majeed & Kim, 2024).

Hypotheses construction

Visual content significantly influences consumer purchasing behaviour by increasing brand recall and trust through high-quality and visually appealing posts (Atiq et al., 2022). Consumers expect influencers to provide clear, engaging, and creative content, such as images, videos, and infographics, which boost credibility and drive brand awareness and sales (Wang et al., 2020). Informative and entertaining visuals enhance consumer trust, fostering stronger connections with brands (Jones & Lee 2022). Influencers' visually compelling posts positively impact electronic word-of-mouth, purchasing behaviour, and brand perception (Aggad & Ahmad, 2021). Creative and timely content improves engagement and reinforces the product's presence in consumers' minds (Saima & Khan, 2020). Additionally, mobile-friendly video content and user-friendly websites are vital to meet the preferences of digitally active generations (HubSpot, 2019). Thus, the strategic use of visual communication plays a pivotal role in driving purchasing intention, and the following hypothesis (H1) is proposed.

H1: Strategic visual communication factors have a significant relationship with consumer purchase intention.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to consumers sharing, creating, and utilising information to influence others' purchasing decisions (Bhat & Bhat, 2020). Social media enables eWOM through reviews and recommendations, which significantly impact consumers' trust and purchasing behaviour (Leong et al., 2022). Positive eWOM fosters trust, enhances brand exposure, and drives product sales (Swärd Brattström & Habul, 2023). Interactions via eWOM build trust and shape consumer purchase intentions, positively or negatively influencing behaviour (Monfared et al., 2021). Post-purchase behaviours, including recommendations, are heavily influenced by eWOM in the digital age (Taillon et. al., 2020). Consumers' loyalty to influencers often leads to positive eWOM, stronger purchase intentions, and brand advocacy (Kim & Kim, 2022). Exploring products online and sharing information increases purchase likelihood, emphasising eWOM's role in shaping perceptions and consumer behaviour (Ngo et al., 2024). As digital platforms continue to evolve, eWOM remains a powerful tool that shapes consumer purchasing intention, and the following hypothesis (H2) is proposed.

H2: Electronic word-of-mouth factors have a significant relationship with consumer purchasing intention.

Strategic visual communication enhances consumer engagement and purchase intent by evoking positive emotions and increasing an influencer's authenticity, which fosters trust and encourages purchases (Liu et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2024). Influencers' personality traits, including trustworthiness and creativity, significantly impact consumer responses, strengthening brand awareness and purchase likelihood (Akhtar et al., 2024; Zhang & Choi, 2022). By aligning with target demographics, brands can effectively leverage influencers' personalities to drive positive consumer purchase behaviour (Slamet, 2019; Yuan, 2024). Given the pivotal role of influencers' personality on both visual communication and purchase intention, the following hypothesis (H3) is proposed.

H3: Personal attractiveness mediates the relationship between strategic visual communication and consumer purchase intention.

Trust generated through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) significantly impacts consumer purchasing behaviour by enhancing trust in products and services, leading to improved purchasing decisions (Liu et al., 2022; Taillon et al., 2020). eWOM fosters brand knowledge, credibility, and emotional connection, strengthening consumer confidence and influencing buying behaviour (Kim & Kim, 2022). Influencers' trustworthiness, attractiveness, and credibility are key factors driving eWOM, purchase intent, and brand loyalty (Es-Safi & Sağlam, 2021; Koay et al., 2024; Nafees et al., 2021), with influencer personalities playing a critical role in shaping both eWOM and consumer purchasing behaviour (Tien et al., 2019). Understanding the strong influence of influencer personality on both eWOM and purchasing intention, the following hypothesis (H4) is proposed.

H4: Personal attractiveness mediates the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and consumer purchasing intention.

Conceptual framework

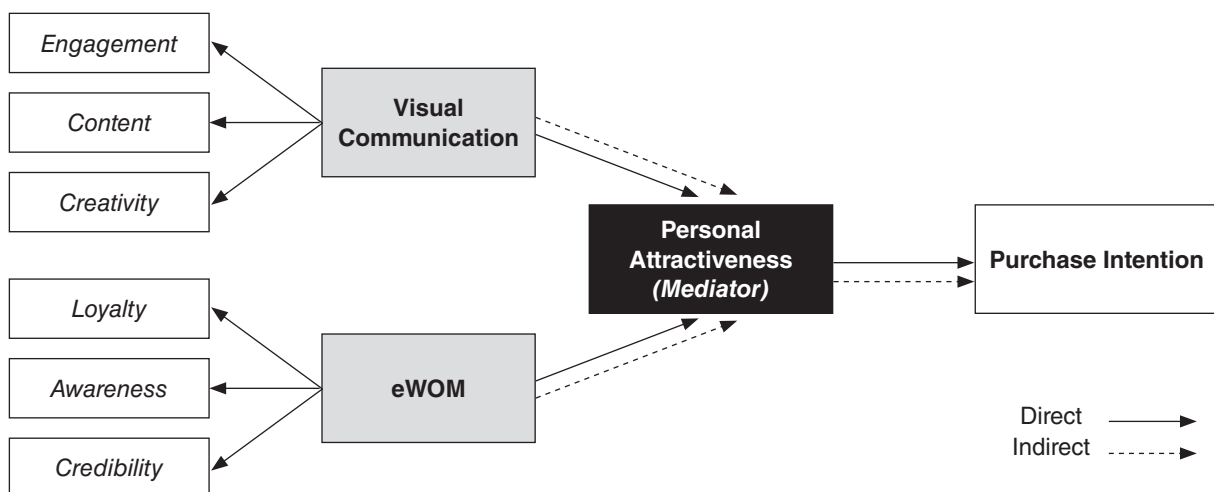


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study explored the relationship between strategic visual communication, electronic word-of-mouth, personal characteristics, and consumer purchasing intention in Malaysia. A quantitative approach was used for data collection and analysis, offering advantages such as efficiency, comparability, and simplicity. This method allows for standardised procedures, large data sets, and straightforward interpretation.

The targeted population was Generation Z and Millennials in Malaysia, who are heavily engaged in social media and online shopping. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table resulting in 384 respondents.

A structured questionnaire survey was used for data collection. The survey utilised a 6-point Likert scale, offering more sensitivity than a 5-point scale. It was distributed

via Google Form over various social media platforms WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook and Instagram. Regression analysis was chosen for its straightforward interpretation and suitability for testing mediation effects, despite some criticism regarding its rigidity. The Bootstrap method within regression offers a more accurate approach to mediation analysis (Abu-Bader & Jones, 2021; Sidhu et al., 2021), making it a robust choice for this study.

Reliability analysis

Table 1 shows the results of the reliability analysis. The items constructed are reliable and consistent as the Cronbach's alpha for all the variables are more than the minimum threshold value of 0.7.

Table 1. Reliability analysis results

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
VC_Engagement	0.876	6
VC_Content	0.864	6
VC_Creativity	0.918	9
eWOM Loyalty	0.885	4
eWOM Awareness	0.892	4
eWOM Credibility	0.898	6
Personal Attractiveness	0.879	6
Purchase Intention	0.964	11

Relationship between visual communication and purchase intention

Multiple linear regression analysis was used to investigate the direct relationship between the constructs of Visual Communication and Purchase Intention. The results are summarised in Table 2. The R-square value of 0.616 indicates that 61.6% of the variation in Purchase Intention is explained by the Visual Communication constructs. The F-value of 203.024 and the p-value less than 0.001, prove that the overall regression model is significant at 0.1%.

Table 2. Results of multiple regression analysis of visual communication factors and purchase intention

R-square	0.616
Adjusted R-square	0.613
F	203.24
Sig.	<0.001

Coefficients Table					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std. Error			
(Constant)	.342	.212	1.614	.107	
VCEngagement	.433	.046	9.311	<.001	1.948
VCContent	.590	.060	9.845	<.001	2.494
VCCreativity	-.146	.054	-2.709	.007	1.515

a. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

The results in the coefficient table reveal that Engagement (Beta = 0.433, p-value < 0.001), Content (Beta = 0.59, p-value < 0.001), Creativity (Beta = -0.146, p-value < 0.005), have a significant effect on Purchase Intention. Therefore, hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 are substantiated.

Relationship between visual communication and personal attractiveness

The results of the multiple linear regression analysis to study the relationship between the constructs of Visual Communication and Personal Attractiveness are presented in Table 3. The R-square value of 0.411 shows that 41.1% of the variation in Personal Attractiveness is explained by the Visual Communication constructs. The F-value of 88.37 and the p-value less than 0.001, prove that the overall regression model is significant at 0.1%.

Table 3. Results of multiple regression analysis of visual communication factors and personal attractiveness

R-square	0.411				
Adjusted R-square	0.406				
F	88.37				
Sig.	<0.001				
Coefficients Table					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std. Error			
(Constant)	1.135	.204	5.558	<.001	
VCEngagement	.135	.045	3.009	.003	1.948
VCContent	.347	.058	6.000	<.001	2.494
VCCreativity	.221	.052	4.244	<.001	1.515

a. Dependent Variable: Personal Attractiveness

The results in the coefficient table show that Engagement (Beta = 0.135, p-value < 0.005), Content (Beta = 0.347, p-value < 0.001), Creativity (Beta = -0.221, p-value < 0.001), have a significant effect on the Purchase Intention. Therefore, hypotheses H1 is supported.

Relationship between e-WOM and purchase intention

The results of the multiple linear regression analysis to investigate the relationship between the constructs of eWOM and Purchase Intention are presented in Table 4. The R-square value of 0.8 indicates that 80% of the variation in Purchase Intention is explained by the e-WOM constructs. The F-value of 505.29 and the p-value less than 0.001, prove that the overall regression model is significant at 0.1%.

Table 4. Results of multiple regression analysis of eWOM and purchase intention

R-square	0.8				
Adjusted R-square	0.798				
F	505.29				
Sig.	<0.001				
Coefficients Table					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std. Error			
(Constant)	-.118	.097	-1.215	.225	
eWOMLoyalty	.316	.044	7.177	<.001	3.771
eWOMAwareness	.311	.050	6.181	<.001	4.605
eWOMCredibilitiy	.372	.042	8.813	<.001	2.801

a. Dependent Variable: Purchase Intention

Based on the coefficient table, the variables, namely Loyalty (Beta = 0.316, p-value < 0.001), Awareness (Beta = 0.311, p-value < 0.001), Credibility (Beta = 0.372, p-value < 0.001), have a significant relationship with Purchase Intention. Therefore, hypotheses H2 is substantiated.

Relationship between eWOM and personal attractiveness

Table 5 illustrates the results of the multiple linear regression analysis to investigate the relationship between the constructs of eWOM and Personal Attractiveness. The R-square value of 0.8 indicates that 80% of the variation in Purchase Intention is explained by the e-WOM constructs. The F-value of 505.29 and the p-value less than 0.001, prove that the overall regression model is significant at 0.1%.

Table 5. Results of multiple regression analysis of e-WOM and personal attractiveness

R-square	0.519				
Adjusted R-square	0.515				
F	136.428				
Sig.	<0.001				
Coefficients Table					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std. Error			
(Constant)	1.743	.117	14.860	<.001	
eWOMLoyalty	.021	.053	.390	.697	3.771
eWOMAwareness	.150	.061	2.467	.014	4.605
eWOMCredibilitiy	.462	.051	9.057	<.001	2.801

a. Dependent Variable: Personal Attractiveness

Based on the coefficient table, the variables, namely Awareness (Beta = 0.15, p-value < 0.05) and Credibility (Beta = 0.462, p-value < 0.001), have a significant relationship with the personal attractiveness. However, the p-value for Loyalty is greater than 0.05, hence it does not have a significant impact on the personal attractiveness. Thus, H2 is not

fully supported.

Mediation analysis by SPSS Process Macro

SPSS Process Macro Version 4.2 was used to perform mediation analysis. The indirect effect was studied based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. The bootstrapping confidence level that does not include zero indicates a significant mediation effect.

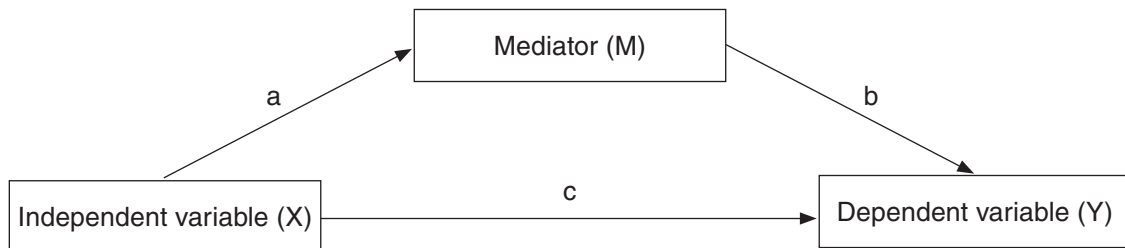


Figure 2. Simple mediation model

Table 6 presents the mediation analysis results for the relationships between Visual Communication (VC), Personal Attractiveness (PA), and Purchase Intention (PI). The analysis shows a significant positive relationship between VC and PA ($\beta = 0.7175$, $t = 15.9911$, $p < 0.001$), and between PA and PI ($\beta = 0.4380$, $t = 7.6595$, $p < 0.001$). The direct effect of VC on PI is also significant ($\beta = 0.6907$, $p < 0.0001$), and the indirect effect through PA, based on 5,000 bootstrap samples, is significant (CI = 0.2122, 0.4228), confirming that PA mediates the VC-PI relationship. Thus, hypothesis H3 is supported.

Table 6. Mediation analysis results of Visual Communication (VC) → Personal Attractiveness (PA) → Purchase Intention (PI)

Variable/ effect	β	SE	t	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					LLCI	ULCI
VC → PA (path 'a')	0.7175	0.0449	15.9911	.0000	0.6293	0.8057
PA → PI (path 'b')	0.4380	0.0572	7.6595	0.0000	0.3256	0.5504
Effects						
Direct VC → PA (path 'c')	0.6907	0.0648	10.6599	0.0000	0.5633	0.8181
Indirect* VC → PA → PI	0.3143	0.0534			0.2122	0.4228

* Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 5,000

Table 7 presents the mediation analysis of eWOM, Personal Attractiveness (PA), and Purchase Intention (PI). The results show that eWOM significantly influences PA ($\beta = 0.6278$, $t = 19.745$, $p < 0.001$), but Personal Attractiveness does not significantly impact Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.0226$, $t = 0.0424$, $p = 0.5945$). Additionally, the direct effect of eWOM on PI is significant ($\beta = 0.9961$, $p < 0.0001$), but the indirect effect of Personal Attractiveness as a mediator is not significant, as the confidence interval includes zero (-0.0442, 0.0768). Therefore, hypothesis H4 is not supported.

Table 7. Mediation analysis results of eWOM → Personal Attractiveness (PA) → Purchase Intention (PI)

Variable/ effect	β	SE	t	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					LLCI	ULCI
e-WOM → PA (path 'a')	0.6278	0.0318	19.745	0.0000	0.5653	0.6903
PA → PI (path 'b')	0.0226	0.0424	0.5328	0.5945	-0.0608	0.1061
<i>Effects</i>						
Direct e-WOM → PA (path 'c')	0.9961	0.0375	26.5704	0.0000	0.9224	0.8181
Indirect* e-WOM → PA → PI	0.0142	0.0308			-0.0442	0.0768

* Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals: 5,000

DISCUSSION

The study highlights the importance of engagement, content, and creativity in shaping purchase intention. Engagement was found to foster trust and emotional connections, supporting Trivedi and Teichert's (2019) assertion that interactive and visually appealing content boosts consumer trust. The significance of clear, credible, and creative messaging was also reinforced, aligning with Wang et al. (2020), who emphasised the impact of authenticity and structured communication. Notably, while creativity typically enhances sensory appeal (Sriram et al., 2021), its negative effect in this study suggests that overly complex visuals may compromise clarity and trust, supporting Wardhani's (2022) cautionary view. These insights highlight the need for a balanced approach to strategic visual communication, integrating clarity, engagement, and creativity to effectively influence consumer decisions.

Loyalty, awareness, and credibility were identified as critical eWOM constructs driving purchase intention, collectively explaining a substantial variation in consumer behaviour. Loyalty's impact is consistent with Kim and Kim's (2022) assertion that sustained positive brand attitudes foster repeat purchases and advocacy. Similarly, awareness enhances brand visibility and recall, as noted by Yeo (2023), creating a favourable environment for purchase decisions. Credibility emerged as the most influential factor, aligning with Erdem and Swait's (2004) emphasis on trustworthiness as foundational to persuasive communication. These findings underscore the power of eWOM in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviours, particularly in digitally engaged demographics.

The study offers nuanced insights into the role of personal attractiveness. On one hand, it substantiates its mediating effect between visual communication and purchase intention, echoing Choi and Lee (2019) as well as Lou and Yuan (2019) who linked visually appealing content to enhanced consumer trust and emotional connection. Influencers perceived as attractive were shown to amplify brand credibility and purchase behaviour, consistent with Torres et al. (2019).

On the other hand, the hypothesised mediating role of personal attractiveness between eWOM and purchase intention was not supported. While eWOM significantly influenced personal attractiveness, the latter did not directly impact purchase intention. This divergence from prior research, such as Pinto and Paraminta (2021), suggests that in eWOM contexts, credibility and informational substance may outweigh physical appeal in driving consumer decisions.

These findings highlight the importance of context-specific strategies, such as leveraging engagement and content for visual communication or prioritising credibility in eWOM. Marketers should adopt a balanced and authentic approach, focusing on creating relatable, credible, and visually engaging content to resonate with target audiences. This study contributes to the literature by addressing gaps in digital marketing and provides valuable insights for optimising influencer marketing strategies. Additionally, it reinforces the Social Influence Theory by highlighting the role of physical attractiveness in influencing consumer purchase intention and advances theoretical understanding by demonstrating how digital engagement mechanisms like strategic visual communication and eWOM enhance persuasion and brand loyalty.

CONCLUSION

This study offers valuable contributions to the understanding of consumer behaviour, particularly in the context of strategic visual communication, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and influencer marketing. The findings reaffirm and extend existing literature while providing actionable insights for academics and practitioners. The research identifies the pivotal role of engagement, content, and creativity in influencing consumer purchase intentions through strategic visual communication. Clear and credible messaging emerged as paramount, complementing creative elements to optimize consumer trust and recall. These insights highlight the importance of a balanced approach to visual communication, suggesting that future studies should explore the remaining variance in purchase behaviour by examining factors such as emotional resonance and demographic preferences. The study also validates the substantial impact of eWOM on purchase intention, driven by loyalty, awareness, and credibility. This finding emphasises the strategic significance of eWOM in digital marketing, particularly in culturally nuanced markets like Malaysia.

The results also suggest that marketers should prioritise building trust and loyalty through credible influencer partnerships while leveraging high-quality, relatable content to amplify brand awareness across digital platforms. The mediation analysis offered nuanced insights into the role of personal attractiveness. While strategic visual communication significantly influences purchase intention, its effect is amplified when mediated by personal attractiveness. This finding underscores the need for marketers to collaborate with visually appealing, authentic influencers who resonate with target audiences. However, the assumed mediating role of personal attractiveness in the eWOM-purchase intention pathway was not supported. This challenges prior assumptions and highlights the dominance of informational credibility in driving eWOM effectiveness. These results call for a contextualised approach, urging brands to prioritise trustworthiness and expertise over physical appeal in eWOM-driven campaigns.

From a practical perspective, this study emphasises a dual-focus strategy: optimising visual communication through engaging and credible content while aligning influencer characteristics with audience expectations. Furthermore, it urges marketers to craft strategic eWOM campaigns that resonate deeply with target demographics, leveraging trust, loyalty, and awareness to enhance purchase intentions. Theoretical implications include the advancement of knowledge on how visual and personal factors interact to shape consumer behaviour, providing a nuanced understanding of the varying roles of attractiveness and credibility across different marketing mechanisms. Future research

should explore additional mediators such as emotional engagement and perceived authenticity, along with cross-cultural and demographic variations, to refine these insights further.

Finally, this study reinforces the transformative potential of both strategic visual communication and eWOM in influencing consumer purchase intentions. It invites a re-evaluation of influencer marketing strategies, encouraging a focus on authenticity, credibility, and relevance to maximise impact in the digital marketplace. By addressing both theoretical gaps and practical challenges, the findings provide a robust foundation for future exploration and application.

This study's findings are limited to a specific demographic in Malaysia, restricting generalisability across different cultural contexts. Additionally, the reliance on a quantitative approach and focus on personal attractiveness as a mediator may overlook deeper consumer motivations and other influential factors. Future studies should explore additional mediators such as emotional engagement and authenticity while adopting cross-cultural and longitudinal approaches to enhance understanding. Investigating platform-specific influences, AI-generated influencers, and multi-platform collaborations can also provide further insights into evolving digital marketing strategies.

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Kavitha Balakrishnan

is a researcher and the Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Applied Communication, Multimedia University, Malaysia. Her research interests are in new media, intercultural communication, leadership communication, and cultural studies. She supervises both postgraduate and undergraduate students.

Ajitha Angusamy

is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Business, Multimedia University, Malaysia. Her areas of expertise include social sciences research and quantitative research methodologies. She supervises both postgraduate and undergraduate students.

Tarandeep Singh

is a social content creator for SAMSUNG Malaysia at Publicis Groupe @ Leo Burnett, Malaysia. He creates content for brands like VISA, BMW, and MAGGI, handling storyboarding, shooting, and editing while staying updated on social media trends to boost engagement.

Muhammad Nur Fitri Razak

is a senior lecturer at Xiamen University Malaysia and specialises in Corporate Identity Management (CIM). His expertise includes social research methods, communication studies, halal branding, computer-mediated communication, and machine learning.

Jayanty Kuppusamy

is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Business, Multimedia University. Her research focuses on management, entrepreneurship, and international business. She supervises both postgraduate and undergraduate students.
