The Lived Experience of Digital Trust: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Credibility as a Persuasive Mechanism

Wan Hartini Wan Zainodin, Wan Allef Elfi Danial and Wan Sukeri, Ireena Nasiha Ibnu
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia
wanhartini@uitm.edu.my

Received Date: 30/06/2026 Accepted Date:05/09/2026 Published Date: 30/10/2026

Abstract

The increasing dependence on digital influencers to be regarded as opinion leaders has made social media evolve into a dynamic environment where dimensions such as credibility and trust shape online consumers' beliefs, engagement, and behavioral attitudes. Previous studies have predominantly focused on the digital influencer credibility through quantitative approaches, while limited attention was given on how these phenomena are experienced and interpreted by both digital influencers and online consumers. Through the qualitative research design grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with five Malaysian digital influencers and five online consumers. The accumulated data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed using NVivo 15 to identify relevant experiential themes. The findings revealed two overarching dimensions of credibility, which are presence and authority, explaining how digital influencers establish and maintain digital trust with online consumers. Presence incorporates the subordinate themes of social image, engagement, and accessibility, while authority includes legitimacy, merit, appeal, and building trust. These dimensions demonstrate that credibility extends beyond expertise and trustworthiness by highlighting behavioral and communicative approaches that strengthen online dynamics while encouraging higher online consumer engagement and confidence. The study advances existing knowledge by proposing an experiential framework conceptualizing credibility as a multidimensional persuasive mechanism behind digital trust. The findings further contribute to communication and digital marketing literature with a deeper understanding of digital trust formation from both sides of perspectives, while providing practical implications for digital influencers and brands to promote trustworthy, credible, and sustainable relationships within the evolving digital environment.

Keywords: *Digital Trust, Digital Influencer, Credibility, Persuasive, Online Consumer, IPA*

1.0 Introduction

Social media has gone through immense evolution which transformed digital influencers into prominent public figures and crucial opinion leaders. These individuals play a significant role in influencing online consumers on their perceptions, behaviors, and purchasing decisions [1]. In comparison to traditional advertising, influencer marketing is fundamentally built on constant interpersonal interactions that create a sense of familiarity, authenticity, and relatability between digital influencers and their audiences on social media. Moreover, within these high intensity digital environments, credibility emerges as an important persuasive mechanism utilized by digital influencers to cultivate trust in their created contents and endorsements. Through the demonstration of authenticity, transparency, and consistency in content creation, digital influencers can forge deeper and meaningful connections while encouraging online consumers to trust their recommendations. Therefore, the credibility driven by these interactions, impacts the development of digital trust. The development of digital trust within online consumers leads them to provide further engagement while influencing their online behaviors [2]. This collectively shapes how

online consumers perceive and understand information as well as influencing their behavioral responses such as providing more engagement, developing purchase intentions, and advocating for brands. Hence, it is particularly essential to garner a deeper understanding on how credibility impacts digital trust and influences the contemporary dynamics between digital influencers and online consumers on social media.

Although the literature surrounding digital marketing has been steadily increasing, current research largely revolved around quantitative approaches in terms of conceptualizing digital influencer credibility and online consumer level of trust. Undeniably, these studies have provided valuable contributions and data on the dynamics of credibility, trust, and consumer behavior. However, the aspects of subjectivity and interpretive dimensions which investigate deeper into online consumer's lived experience and how their trust is fostered are often overlooked. Moreover, the formation of digital trust is neither instantaneous nor solely formed through persuasive contents and messages but rather depends on consistent interactions between digital influencers and online consumers. Thus, it is pertinent and necessary to place further emphasis on investigating whether credibility induces the creation of digital trust while looking into the experiences of online consumers affected by credibility utilized as a persuasive mechanism. By addressing this research gap, it creates an opportunity to provide a richer understanding of the complex relationship of digital trust and perceived persuasive strategies that exist in the digital environment.

In the modern online ecosystem, digital trust serves as a foundation that defines the meaningful relationship between digital influencers and online consumers. In the market of information abundance, online consumers rely heavily on trustworthy opinion leaders to reduce uncertainty and evaluate the credibility value of endorsed products and brands. Credibility is a crucial quality for digital influencers to possess as it aids in shaping online consumers' behaviours and positively impacts their purchase intentions [3]. Additionally, digital trust takes precedence beyond online consumer's confidence towards endorsed recommendations as it also shapes their willingness to interact and engage with the content, and ultimately, taking action. On the other hand, the diminishing value of digital trust can pose extensive consequences. Online consumers may develop skepticism towards the digital influencer's credibility when they perceive inauthentic messages and misinformation within content creation. Eventually, this leads to a higher resistance and refrain from online consumers in providing the desired engagement, rendering the digital marketing efforts unsuccessful.

Moreover, the level of trust from online consumers are positively affected by the digital influencer's credibility. However, an excessive amount of product endorsements can jeopardize the level of trust and negatively impact the engagement and interaction rate between online consumers with the digital influencers' content and messages. Audiences are prone to believing that digital influencers are less trustworthy when their authenticity is questionable [4]. Therefore, there is necessity in conducting a study to investigate the factors that lead to the utilization of credibility as a persuasive strategy and how these factors impact the digital trust between digital influencers and online consumers. In line with that, the study aimed to (1) investigate the contributing factors on the utilization of credibility by digital influencers as a persuasive strategy towards online consumer's consumption and (2) determine how the factors affecting the credibility utilization impact digital trust between digital influencers and online consumers.

2.0 Digital Trust in Digital Marketing

Breves et al. [5] claimed that influencer–brand fit had a positive impact on the image of the influencer and on the effectiveness of advertising, particularly for followers with low levels of parasocial relationships. A parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship that occurs when a media user engages in with a media persona [6]. Social-media interactions take place regularly through channel subscription and incorporate some relatively newly developed options to get in touch with the digital influencer, such as commenting on, sharing, or liking their posts. This even offers some level of reciprocity, although the interaction remains unbalanced [7]. The existence of the parasocial relationship between digital influencers and online consumers improves the levels of perceived trust and credibility [8]. In a digital environment where such relationships thrive, the level of digital trust can be further fostered and strengthened between digital influencers and online consumers.

Breves et al. [5] also argued that the endorser-brand fit has a positive impact on the influencer's credibility, thus indirectly influencing the brand awareness and marketing campaign success. In other words, when a brand collaborates with a digital influencer whose persona fits with their brand description and values, it boosts their credibility and further persuades the online consumers to purchase their products. A study on the factors determining the effectiveness of digital influencers in promotional activity concluded that the credibility dimensions such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, influencer's expertise and similarity to be highly impactful on brand image, brand satisfaction, brand trust, and purchase intention [9]. These factors were listed as persuasive strategies used by digital influencers and ultimately assist in boosting their own credibility and garner trust from their followers. The study also concluded various other fundamental mechanisms affecting these factors such as the number of followers, providing transparency on the sponsorship and using multiple kinds of posts.

Persuasive strategies do not only assist in achieving a successful marketing but also increase the digital influencer's credibility among their followers. These strategies have intertwined effects in which they boost the influencer's credibility and in turn, makes the persuasive strategies more effective. Hassan et al. [10] concluded this in their study where the credibility of beauty 'gurus' in influencing young female millennial's choice of cosmetics brands is analysed. They found core evidence where credibility traits, such as knowledge, attractiveness and relatability to be the driving points of an influencer's capability in influencing young millennials choices. Aside from that, the study also identified multiple factors that defined an influencer's level of credibility. These factors are mainly to be knowledge, relatability, helpfulness, self-confidence and articulation which all posited positive impacts in gaining and maintaining consumer's trust. With all these factors going hand in hand, the effect ultimately funnels down to a high level of consumer trust, leading to a stronger purchase decision for cosmetic products. In short, when it comes to increasing brand awareness by targeting a wider demographic, digital influencers are identified as the new and effective marketing tool [10].

For young Malaysian adults, digital influencers are regarded as more credible due to their relatability and authenticity compared to celebrities [11]. This leads to the potentials of digital influencers affecting their online consumption as they are more open and susceptible to the employed persuasive strategies. Hence, brands can opt to collaborate with digital influencers who are able to effectively utilize their credibility in product endorsements. Digital influencers' credibility and their brand compatibility are sequential in impacting online consumer's purchase decisions [12]. By utilizing their credibility to persuade online consumers into believing that they are compatible with the brand, digital influencers can gain trust and effectively influence purchase decisions.

Moreover, credibility can also be utilized to convince online consumers into engaging with digital influencers and their contents. By having a high level of credibility, digital influencers can improve online consumer's attitude towards them by leveraging on the scale of trustworthiness between the two parties. The credibility of a digital influencer is crucial in shaping online consumer's attitude towards said influencer and ultimately increases the likeliness of purchasing behaviour [13, 14]. Therefore, by strategically creating the perspective of being credible, well-experienced and trustworthy, digital influencers can effectively shape online consumer's behaviour, beliefs and actions. To reiterate, digital influencer's credibility possesses the power to unlock possibilities such as improving online consumer's trust towards the endorsed brands, attract more interaction and engagement, and influence the changes in online consumer's behaviour and actions. Online consumer's trust towards the brands is positively influenced by the digital influencer's credibility, significantly impacting their purchase intentions [15].

Previous research has explored extensively on the impacts of credibility on online consumer's purchasing decisions. Online contents created by virtual influencers that showcased their credibility traits such as trustworthiness and expertise exhibited positive effects towards consumer's purchasing intentions and their engagement rate [16]. As online consumer's trust grows towards the digital influencer, they are more inclined to invest their time and efforts into interacting and engaging with the created contents, leading to the likelihood of them being affected by the employed persuasive strategies. In a study conducted by Ljungberg and Nilsson [17], they highlighted a key concept that defines the success of influencer marketing, which is trust. The results of the study concluded that the more consumers trust the influencers, the higher

the chances of their purchase decision. Among the factors that assisted influencers in obtaining trust from social media users are level of expertise and the engagement frequency between influencers and other users. In short, trust is one of the driving forces of persuasion and in the absence of it, any type of marketing will likely be unsuccessful.

The findings from Grafström et al. [18] stated that a new marketing regulation was introduced in 2016 to make consumers aware of the content on social media that is regarded as paid partnership, which ultimately changed how people perceive influencer marketing. Thus, it is more difficult to influence consumers as well as conserving the influence on them. The scene of the study was set to observe the millennial's attitude towards the influencer's promotional activities and how they are affected by it. Interestingly, it was found that the influencer's credibility and trustworthiness also played a significant impact on positive millennial's attitude towards promotional messages. Influencing consumer's purchase decisions will be difficult without proper marketing strategies and persuasion skills. Consumers may prove to be indifferent towards promotional activities and thus, more efforts are required to improve their experience towards such marketing [19].

Furthermore, the credibility traits of digital influencers also enhance the effects of parasocial relationships with online consumers. Wahab et al. [20] discussed the significant impacts of digital influencer's credibility on online consumer's parasocial interactions, which directly influences their purchasing behaviour. Consequently, findings from Breves and Liebers [21] demonstrated a more specific insight into this phenomenon through the measurement of the online consumer's duration of following, which resulted in increased parasocial interactions and ultimately, improves the digital influencer's perceived credibility in product endorsements. This is clear evidence on how the level of credibility of digital influencers carries weight in affecting the parasocial relationship with online consumers, creating an ideal and advantageous situation for digital influencers to achieve their intended goals. On the other hand, Connell et al. [22] explored the different impacts between celebrity influencer and micro-influencers towards online consumer's intent to follow by measuring the scale of parasocial interaction generated by the two influencer types. The study concluded that micro-influencers are perceived as more credible and generate higher parasocial interactions with online consumers. This is due to online consumers being able to relate closer to micro-influencers and find similarities akin to their daily lives. However, the findings from Khatimah and Sobarsyah [23] highlighted the comparison between the impact of parasocial relationships to beauty digital influencers credibility, with the conclusion of the former being less significant than the latter.

Additionally, the digital influencer's credibility also builds the sense of similarity and connection with online consumers, ensuring them to be more willing to engage and listen. Yoo et al. [24] suggested crucial strategies for brands and businesses to utilize textual clues in their marketing attempts such as emojis and self-disclosure as well as leveraging on digital influencers who represent their values accurately to the target audience. This allows online consumers to feel represented and more connected with the digital influencers and subconsciously, fosters the sense of brand trust. Factors such as credibility, interactivity and empathy lead to the build of relatedness and sense of similarity under the process known as identification, utilized to predict purchase intention [25]. Thus, by creating the sense of similarity and connectivity with online consumers, digital influencers can portray themselves as more credible and ultimately induce acceptance towards behavioural change.

To conclude, various research in the past have proposed factors that affect digital influencer's credibility, leading to the improvement of online consumer's consumption. These factors act as the cornerstone of the digital influencer's marketing strategies and enhance their source credibility. As revealed by previous studies, when online consumers perceive digital influencers to be credible and trustworthy, it significantly motivates them to be more confident in engaging with the content. This, in particular, also leads to a higher brand engagement and purchase intentions. Therefore, it is prudent for digital influencers to consider their strengths and appeal and utilize them accordingly to generate better engagement rate from online consumers.

3.0 Research Design

This study utilized qualitative research design in tandem with the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This approach allows various insights and perspectives into the area of study [26]. Qualitative research consists of the process of collecting and analyzing non-numerical data such as audio and text to better understand experiences and concepts [27]. Through the application of IPA, the study was able to obtain a nuanced understanding on how both digital influencers and online consumers experience, perceive and interpret the influencer marketing phenomenon as well as the persuasive strategies utilized in enhancing the effectiveness of product endorsements. Moreover, to achieve the aim of capturing the essence of lived experiences from first-person point of view, this study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This allowed the informants to share their unobstructed, personal narratives, paving a clearer path towards understanding how credibility plays a part in impacting online consumer trust. To ensure flexibility was provided to the participants, the researchers offered both face-to-face interviews and online interviews as per their requests. Additionally, qualitative methods are widely popular among interpretivists as these are great sources of knowledge and help the formation of understanding [28].

Additionally, this study placed the utmost focus on two types of informant groups, namely the digital influencers who actively participated in product endorsements and online consumers who experienced or observed digital marketing contents on social media. By utilizing the two opposing types of informant groups in this study, it allowed the research to observe the exchange between two sides of perspectives. Consequently, this format also allowed the informants to share unobstructed and unexpected insights while remaining true to the topics. Hence, the researchers were able to group the accumulated information into specific themes and categorize the obtained data accordingly in the NVivo 15 software. Then, the generated information underwent theories' integration and compared to previous literature concerning the utilization of digital influencers' credibility strategies towards online consumers and how it impacts the digital trust.

3.1 Informant Selection

In this study, two groups of informants were part of the investigation. They consisted of Malaysian digital influencers and online consumers ranging from the ages of 23 to 42 years old. The justification in selecting the informants lies within the purpose of observing and understanding how social variations on digital platforms lead to the exploration of different perceptions formations and participation in digital marketing. By selecting two different groups of informants, the study was able to obtain richer, in-depth insights of the lived experienced on the phenomenon. In addition, this sampling strategy was employed to better capture the divergence of two groups under observation, the digital influencers utilizing credibility as a persuasive strategy and the provided engagement by online consumers proportional to their level of digital trust. This approach allowed the researchers to analyze the phenomenon from different generated perspectives, obtain a clearer comprehension into the factors leading to credibility utilization in content creation and how these factors impact online consumer's digital trust social media.

In total, the researchers selected 5 digital influencers and 5 online consumer informants as part of the study, providing the opportunity to conduct an inclusive cross-perspective analysis pertinent to interpretative phenomenological studies. Moreover, all informants were informed that all the interview sessions would be recorded, analyzed and utilized for research purposes and they were required to sign consent forms to provide their approval. Furthermore, the researchers appealed to the non-probability sampling method during the stages of data collection. Non-probability sampling is a sampling technique where the researchers specifically select sample based on their subjective judgment as compared to arbitrary selection [29]. As part of this process, the researchers meticulously selected digital influencers who actively participated in product endorsements, digital marketing, and brand collaboration while excluding those who did not meet this criterion. Additionally, the researchers also utilized snowball sampling to obtain more suitable candidates through the referrals from the first group of participants.

3.2 Data Gathering and Analysis Technique

The data collection process was conducted through in-depth interviews with two different groups of informants, the digital influencers and online consumers. Within a semi-formal environment, the informants underwent semi-structured interviews to ensure their comfort and readiness in understanding and responding to the questions. Collectively, the data and insights produced from the interviews were analyzed using the NVivo 15 software. Moreover, the researchers participated in notetaking during the process of data collection, which was then further utilized in the analysis stages. This step is important as it assists the researcher to better contextualize the gathered information. Additionally, the interviews were recorded using multiple devices, mainly a smartphone for live interviews and screen recording software for online interviews. To ensure the audio was clear and audible, the researcher attempted to pre-record the introductory phase for each informant and reviewed the recordings before initiating the actual interview sessions.

Once the data gathering process began, the researchers ensured constant updates on the collected information within the NVivo 15 software. This significantly improved the process of data recording by incorporating the unique identified themes while monitoring the progress rate of data saturation. Furthermore, the NVivo 15 software was also utilized during transcription stages. The convenience of the software helped greatly in reducing the transcription tediousness and allowed efficiency for the researchers to sift through all the recorded data from the interviews. Braun and Clarke [30] stated that the code generated from the interview transcript will further contribute to the categorization of data. In other words, the process of coding takes place when the collected qualitative data is labelled and later organized accordingly to identify various themes and any fundamental connections [31]. Below is the figure demonstrating the data analysis process for IPA.

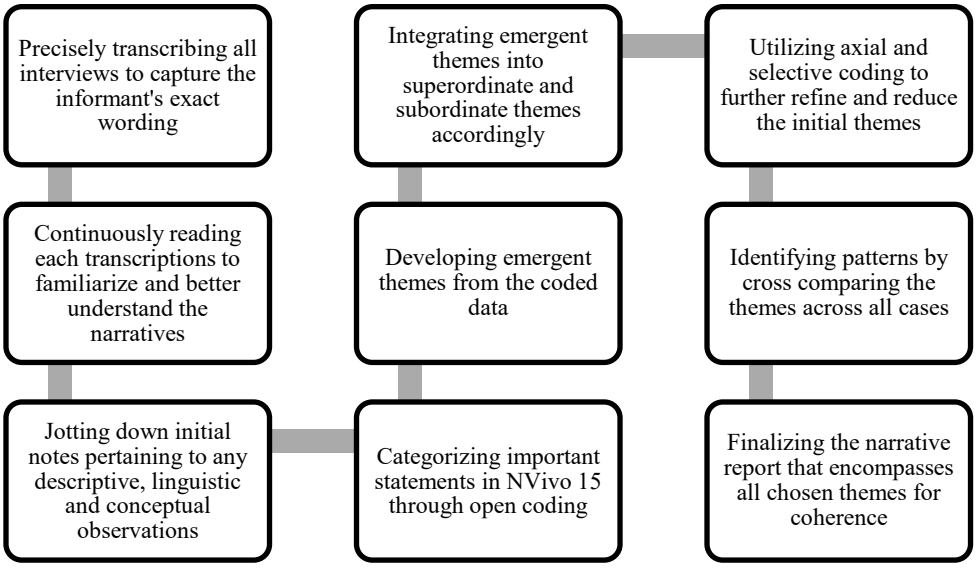


Figure 1 The data analysis process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

4.0 Research Findings and Discussion

This study carries the objective of investigating the contributing factors on the utilization of credibility by digital influencers as a persuasive strategy towards online consumer's consumption and how these factors impact online consumer's digital trust. The study placed heavy emphasis on the dynamic relationship between digital influencers and regular social media users. To achieve the objective, the researchers conducted semi-structure in-depth interviews with selected digital influencers and online

consumers to obtain valuable insights and perspectives on the existing relationship between them on social media. The accumulated data was systematically coded with specific identifiers such as Influencer 1 to Influencer 5 and Online Consumer 1 to Online Consumer 5, hereinafter shall be referred to as OC 1 to OC 5. These data were organized methodically according to emergent superordinates and subordinates and served as a foundation for the model to address and answer the questions which consequently helps the researchers through discovering the impacts of digital influencer's credibility in building online consumer's digital trust.

Based on their accounts, two overarching themes, referred to as superordinate, were identified as key in understanding the factors that contribute towards the utilization of credibility by digital influencers. These superordinates were Presence and Authority. Each superordinate consisted of their respective subordinate themes such as social image, engagement, accessibility, legitimacy, merit, appeal and building trust. This thematic framework helped in the efforts to comprehend how digital influencers utilize credibility as a persuasive strategy in building digital trust. By establishing a strong presence on social media, digital influencers can utilize various strategies such as improving and maintaining their social image among online consumers, ensuring healthy and consistent engagement as well as allowing accessibility for online consumers to be comfortable in further interacting and engaging with them. Furthermore, digital influencers also demonstrate their authority as credible public figures through ensuring legitimacy in their contents, showing their merit as impressionable influencers among online consumers, utilizing strategic and unique methods to appeal to online consumer's preferences and striving to build trust among online consumers. A strong connection can be established between digital influencers and online consumers through their authority and fostered trust [32]. Based on the Table 1 below, the researcher has extracted the relevant subordinate themes to be represented by their superordinate themes from data collection.

TABLE 1
Superordinates and Subordinates for the Utilization of Credibility by Digital Influencers as A Persuasive Strategy Towards Online Consumer's Consumption

Superordinates	Subordinates
Presence	Social Image
	Engagement
	Accessibility
Authority	Legitimacy
	Merit
	Appeal
	Building Trust

In the efforts of discovering and understanding the factors that contribute towards the utilization of credibility strategies and how these factors impact online consumer digital trust, the researchers identified two superordinates through a thorough analysis process. These main superordinates represent a structured model and provide a deeper understanding into the employed persuasive strategies in their efforts of fostering online consumer's digital trust and better securing the interaction and engagement for their created contents on social media. The presence superordinate examines the credibility strategies related to the digital influencer's social image, the rate of engagement with online consumers, and the level of accessibility granted by digital influencers to online consumers within the boundaries of social media.

On the other hand, the authority superordinate is explored from analyzing the approaches utilized by digital influencers in building their authority as influential opinion leaders to garner online consumer digital trust. These methods encompass their efforts in ensuring legitimacy in content creation, demonstrating their merit as trustworthy public figures, their merit that signifies their reputation on social media and the strategies used to gain trust with online consumers.

4.1 Presence

A digital influencer's presence on social media is crucial in determining their path and the effectiveness of their content to online consumers. Without presence, a digital influencer may struggle to compete with others as well as ensuring their created contents are well circulated in social media. One of the factors that impacts the overall presence of a digital influencer is their social image and how it is portrayed by online consumers. Social image affects how the digital influencers are perceived by other social media users, in which a positive social image leads to higher rate of acceptance from online consumers, making it easier for digital influencers to influence their rate of interaction and engagement. Moreover, a positive social image will also demonstrate a good reputation for hiring brands and companies in considering the digital influencers to be suitable candidates for collaboration and brand representation.

Similarly, a digital influencer's presence is also determined by their methods in engaging with online consumers. The effectiveness of a created content is influenced by its reach to online consumers and how well the content is received and consumed. By employing unique ways to ensure better engagement is achieved, digital influencers can safely secure online consumer consumption and make their presence more dominant among other content creators on social media. Conversely, substandard content will result in poor reach and rate of engagement with online consumers and render the digital influencer's efforts useless. Aside from that, digital influencers may also consider prioritizing the accessibility between them and online consumers to show their presence on social media. This includes but is not limited to addressing the inquiries from online consumers as well as acknowledging any feedback and criticism that they receive. In doing so, digital influencers will appear friendly and welcoming, providing direct gratification to online consumers and making them more comfortable to engage more in the future.

All in all, these aspects contribute greatly to a digital influencer's presence on social media and determines how effective their employed strategies will be in ensuring online consumers to interact and engage with their created contents. Ultimately, a digital influencer's social image, their engagement with online consumers and the accessibility demonstrated by them are among the factors that affect the strategic decision of utilizing credibility to impact the online consumer's consumption on social media.

4.1.1 Social Image

A digital influencer's social image highly contributes to their presence as credible individuals on social media. This allows digital influencers to attract brand partnerships and potential collaborations with other content creators that match with their social image. As a result, the opportunities for monetization and platform growth are amplified. Moreover, utilizing credibility to build their social image allows digital influencers to effectively persuade and influence online consumers by shaping their beliefs, consumption rate and purchase decisions. Thus, brands and companies are more likely to consider digital influencers with a strong social image to represent their name through the digital influencer's presence on social media.

However, utilizing this strategy also brings forth a few disadvantages. Digital influencers may be posed with challenges in showing and maintaining their credibility when they are constantly under pressure of having to work and collaborate with brands and other content creators who may possess different values and objectives as them. This may lead to the repercussions of appearing as dishonest in their content creation and product endorsements. Furthermore, digital influencers may find themselves in a predicament when they wrongfully represent a brand, leading to controversy. Thus, this misstep may not only damage a digital influencer's social image but also affect the overall trust from online consumers and other brands alike.

> *For me, credibility is like the thing that helps to boost your image. Or maintain your social image. And if you want to be a successful influencer and have a good standing with other people especially companies and brands, you need to maintain your image all the time - (Influencer 3)*

> *You do need credibility and a good image to be well liked and for the brands to see you as not problematic, so it won't jeopardize their name as well when they work with you - (OC 5)*

As mentioned by Influencer 3, credibility carries the importance of enhancing and maintaining a digital influencer's image on social media. By keeping a consistent digital persona in content creation, digital influencers can utilize their credibility to build on a strong foundation of trust among online consumers. Moreover, Influencer 3 also shared their opinions on the recipe for becoming a successful digital influencer, where the conservation of their social image is significant to ensure a positive reputation among online consumers as well as hiring brands and companies. This demonstrates a clear understanding possessed by Influencer 3 in curating themselves as a presentable digital influencer to online consumers. Additionally, a connection between social image and potential brand collaboration is established by Influencer 3, signifying their caution in preserving their online presence to avoid public backlash and losing brand endorsements opportunities.

A similar sentiment is echoed by OC 5, where the proper maintenance of a good image on social media ensures hiring brands to perceive the digital influencers as potential collaborators and good representatives for their names. This view further provides a deeper understanding on what a brand considers in taking risks that impact their reputation on social media by aligning themselves to a digital influencer's level of credibility. To reiterate, it is essential for hiring brands to work and collaborate with digital influencers who match their values and purposes as well as those who showcase an outstanding level of professionalism in their social image. Thus, to safeguard both the digital influencers and brand's social image, the proper utilization of credibility takes the utmost priority.

4.1.2 Engagement

In maintaining their presence on social media, digital influencers rely heavily on the online consumer's engagement with the created contents. In order to demonstrate their visibility and strengthen their influence and strategic approaches towards online consumers, digital influencers utilize engagement on social media such as likes, comments, content circulation between online consumers and direct messages. Furthermore, through establishing a direct connection with online consumers, digital influencers can show their activeness and approachability as credible content creators while creating a sense of community centered around their presence. Moreover, through consistent engagement from online consumers, this also allows digital influencers to remain relevant and visible among other competitors on social media.

For digital influencers, one of the significances of engagement is that they can actively engage with their online consumers to build trust and loyalty. Furthermore, online consumers would feel valued and heard when digital influencers make efforts to respond to their comments or actively engage in conversations with them, as this personal connection incentivizes them to recommend these digital influencers to other social media users. As such, digital influencers' engagement with online consumers would further lead to the growth in their follower's count. Moreover, hiring brands would often seek digital influencers who actively engage with online consumers when considering potential partnership and collaboration. Thus, digital influencers who possess high engagement rates are seen to have a more active and involved audience, meaning that their followers are more likely to respond positively to recommendations or promotions.

> *Because without credibility, people don't trust you. And if no one trust you, how can you call yourself an influencer? No one wants to watch your content then you will lose engagement. It won't take long for you to get cancelled - (OC 3)*

As observed from the shared narratives above, OC 3 stresses credibility as the key point for digital influencers to build and maintain online consumer trust. From their perspectives, the rate of engagement

owes its effectiveness to the level of trust from online consumers. In other words, the higher the level of trust, the more likely online consumers will consume and engage with the content created. Furthermore, OC 3 also highlighted the consequences of continuous lack of credibility, which are the inclination of online consumers disengaging from further consuming the created content, losing trust towards the digital influencer and ultimately resulting in the digital influencers being "cancelled" and losing their influence and platform on social media. The narratives from OC 3 demonstrate high awareness possessed by online consumers where they are not just mere media consumers, but also paying close attention to the types of content created. In addition, it can be observed that the lack of trust negatively impacts the engagement rate, resulting in the decline of the digital influencer's presence on social media. Thus, to prevent losing online consumer's engagement with their contents, digital influencers must ensure their credibility remains intact and their chosen strategies in implementing credibility in their content creation to be effective.

4.1.3 Accessibility

Among the strategic methods utilized by digital influencers in order to maintain their influence on online consumers is by making the process of communication between them to be easier and accessible. This straightforward yet effective means of interaction assists digital influencers in creating a better bond and connection between the two parties. Moreover, this can be achieved through likes, comments, direct messages or even live interactions. Through each positive interaction between digital influencers and online consumers that makes them feel valued and seen, the loyalty and rate of participation by online consumers would also be increased positively.

Furthermore, due to the existence of social media's algorithms which prioritize contents with high engagement, it is crucial for digital influencers to increase their visibility and maintain a steady engagement with online consumers. This can be done through frequent and positive interactions between the two parties, assisted by convenient accessibility by the digital influencers. Moreover, this would prove beneficial to digital influencers by allowing them to receive feedback in real-time, making it easier to curate their future contents to meet online consumer's expectations, preferences or demands.

However, even persistent accessibility by digital influencers has multiple flaws. Digital influencers may find themselves feeling burnout and overwhelmed by constant expectations to always be available to the online consumers, especially once the following base has begun to grow. Moreover, this also can lead to unwanted behaviours from online consumers towards digital influencers such as harmful commentaries and unrealistic demands. As such, balancing personal boundaries and the amount of accessibility for online consumers can be a daunting challenge to digital influencers. Nevertheless, ensuring and maintaining the accessibility for interactions between online consumers and digital influencers retains its importance to promote better engagement and establish a strong, influential presence on social media.

> *Sometimes they will reach out to me through the linktree that I put in my bio and they can send me messages on Facebook, Instagram or TikTok. So sometimes they may watch my video or posts on Instagram, but they reached me in Facebook and ask me more about the products. I will try my best to help them with any questions and I will also send them the link for the brand website if they want to check further - (Influencer 2)*

As a digital influencer aiming to build a connection with online consumers, it is important to allow accessibility through the comments section or private messaging on the social media platform. As stated by Influencer 2, their followers opt for direct messaging regarding product questions across a variety of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. Furthermore, to ease their exploration process on the products and brands, Influencer 2 also provides additional information via direct links to the websites and social media pages owned by the brands. In doing so, online consumers will develop a sense of comfort and ease and oftentimes will reciprocate through their gratification of engaging further with the created contents. Aside from that, in understanding and adhering to the online consumer's needs and queries, it also

assists Influencer 2 to appear more responsive and helpful as well as driving product engagement for the featured brands.

In short, digital influencers are wise to acknowledge the importance of accessibility for online consumers with their created contents to successfully build a loyal base of following with a stronger sense of community. Interactions and engagements from online consumers are the driving forces that contribute greatly to a digital influencer's presence on social media and act as a benchmark towards the success and effectiveness of the strategic persuasion strategies that are utilized. However, it is also crucial for digital influencers to tread carefully as to prevent online consumers from breaching into the boundaries, leading to unwanted interactions such as harassment and threats. Moreover, created content should not only carry the notion of entertainment but also act as a safe space for online consumers to be able to express their thoughts, opinions and feedback without the concerns of any backlash. By carefully navigating through the interactions occurring in either public discourse spaces or private messaging, digital influencers are able to establish their presence effectively on social media among other competitors.

4.2 Authority

As influential public figures on social media, digital influencers are often scrutinized as individuals who are expected to keep up with trends and carry accurate information in their created contents. In accomplishing so, digital influencers are regarded as authoritative figures perceived as powerful forces in disseminating information alongside entertainment to online consumers from varying backgrounds and preferences. A method that can be utilized by digital influencers to robustly improve their authority on social media is to ensure legitimacy in their content creation. Since digital influencers possess a high value of credibility and trustworthiness among other social media users, they become a valuable component in online marketing. Through the application of thorough research and consistent data checking, digital influencers are able to demonstrate their authority as credible individuals who attract online consumers in further engaging with their contents.

Furthermore, by ensuring legitimacy applied within the contents, digital influencers can contribute to the online community on social media by showing transparency and acting as pillars of society to influence online consumers in the importance of seeking and consuming legitimate information. Ultimately, this action assists greatly in ensuring order and structure on social media which benefits both digital influencers and online consumers alike. Moreover, when a digital influencer's authority is acknowledged by online consumers, it also improves their merit which causes their recommendations and beliefs to be trusted further. This is crucial for any strategic approaches to be utilized as it determines the effectiveness of those strategies and how well they are received by online consumers. Without the establishment of merit, digital influencers struggle in convincing their target audience to engage with the created contents and promoting featured products to online consumers successfully.

Similarly, to gain interaction and engagement from online consumers, digital influencers must acknowledge the importance of creating appealing content. In other words, online consumers gravitate more towards contents they find appealing and interesting to their preference and needs. However, each social media user may possess individual needs and consume the contents differently, making it a consistent challenge for digital influencers to configure effective methods in content creation. Additionally, a digital influencer's authority can also be established by building trust among online consumers. Acting as the cornerstone of influence on social media, digital influencers benefit greatly from the cultivation of trust among online consumers, especially from their followers. Without trust, online consumers may refrain themselves from further engaging with the created contents, rendering the digital influencer's efforts useless and reducing the effectiveness of their authority on social media.

4.2.1 Legitimacy

Digital influencers demonstrate the credibility and accuracy of their content through their understanding gathered from prior research. This particular method shows both online consumers and hiring brands on

the digital influencer's capabilities in creating trustworthy and knowledgeable contents. In turn, their reputation is also improved, leading to a higher rate of engagement and interaction from online consumers. Moreover, by constantly maintaining content legitimacy, digital influencers are able to build and sustain a long-term relationship and loyalty with online consumers, especially those who seek for reliable and accurate information on social media.

Furthermore, ensuring legitimacy in contents assists in separating authentic and credible digital influencers from those who mainly create contents for commercial gains. By combining appealing content with reliable information, digital influencers are able to benefit from increased engagement and loyalty from online consumers. Additionally, when digital influencers create content with sufficient and legitimate information, they prepare themselves to provide insightful responses to online consumer's questions. In doing so, their authority as a trustworthy and credible figure also improves in the perception of online consumers on social media.

> *Always do your research before you post so you have something to answer when people ask you any questions. And then when you manage to answer their question, they will look up to you, you know. So that, so you will look more credible in their eyes - (Influencer 5)*

As highlighted by Influencer 5 in their shared narratives, conducting research prior to content creation helps to prepare digital influencers, should online consumers approach them with any queries. In doing so, Influencer 5 believes that a digital influencer's status as a credible and knowledgeable figure will be elevated in the eyes of online consumers. This further underlines the importance of obtaining and distributing accurate information as it also reinforces the digital influencer's legitimacy as a trustworthy source, solidifying their status of authority on social media. Moreover, this method also ensures online consumers to perceive digital influencers as credible sources of information and improves the likeliness of online consumers to continuously engage with the contents created in the future.

However, this approach poses its own drawbacks as well. The process of content creation may be slowed down due to the extra meticulous steps involving time and thoroughness in ensuring the contents to be legitimate and accurate. This raises the challenges for digital influencers to constantly keep their pace with current trends and issues, and without proper resource delegation, the created contents may contain false information which leads to various repercussions. Furthermore, when the created contents are overfilled with complex information and perceived as uninteresting by online consumers, it may also significantly lower the engagement rate. Therefore, digital influencers must always keep a keen eye in curating their contents to disseminate legitimate and accurate information while ensuring that online consumers stay entertained and satisfied.

4.2.2 Merit

Merit stands as the bread and butter of a digital influencer's trade when strategies involving influencing purchase decisions are involved. A digital influencer's merit solidifies their authority on social media as their recommendations and suggestions are considered more seriously by online consumers. Through ensuring their content remains credible and trustworthy, digital influencers can grow and maintain their merit which assists greatly in influencing online consumer's decisions and beliefs. Furthermore, by possessing a strong merit on social media, online consumers are more likely to perceive any product promotions and endorsements as legitimate and worthwhile. Therefore, the value of a digital influencer with a considerable merit will attract both online consumer engagement as well as potential collaborations with hiring brands and companies.

Conversely, the constant pressure and challenges faced by digital influencers to maintain their merit may be too overbearing, causing them to feel restricted by their portrayed personality on social media. Moreover, when the expectations of online consumers towards the quality of the created content is not met or up to satisfaction, a digital influencer's merit may decline rapidly which leads to the loss of engagement

by online consumers as well as reconsideration by potential brand partnerships. Consequently, it is important for digital influencers to acknowledge the limits of their capabilities while playing to their strength and niche as content creators. Although possessing a strong merit will benefit digital influencers in having their recommendations appear trustworthy, it also demands consistent management and quality control.

> *Honestly sometimes I'm jealous with the influencers. They matter a lot. Their words matter and whatever they say have value. Personally, I feel like their credibility correlates directly with how people take their recommendations seriously. Just like celebrities back then when social media was still not a thing yet - (OC 1)*

As observed from the narrative shared above, it can be surmised that merit possesses a crucial value in determining the effectiveness of digital influencers' influence and persuasive strategies. OC 1 relates to how currently digital influencers hold the same power and influence as celebrities before the rise of social media. This denotes the roles of digital influencers to transcend beyond mere content creators to public figures with weight in their words. Hence, the position of merit for digital influencers transforms them into individuals whose opinions, beliefs and product endorsements are to be valued and regarded by online consumers. Moreover, by having their recommendations taken seriously, digital influencers can ensure online consumers to engage further with their created contents, making the recommendations appear as authoritative and credible.

4.2.3 Appeal

Digital influencers often utilize unique and personalized strategies in their content creation to attract more engagement and interaction from online consumers. As such, these methods are curated in a way that appeals to the online consumer's preferences and liking. As an example, some digital influencers create distinctive contents that demonstrate their niche and expertise. In doing so, online consumers who are attracted to those qualities gravitate more towards the created contents, making their appeal and interests towards the digital influencer to also be increased. Furthermore, when a created content matches the online consumer's preference, they are more likely to engage and circulate the contents to other social media users.

Appeal brings forth a crucial element of online consumer engagement where their consumption is enhanced when the created contents resonate deeply with their interests. This further benefits the digital influencers in ways where the trust and loyalty of online consumers can be gained and strengthened, leading to a consistent streak of engagement with future contents as well. Additionally, when digital influencers appeal to online consumers on a personal level, they can foster a stronger bond and establish a community that revolves around their brands. Therefore, their authority status can also be built and maintained through a dedicated circle of following among online consumers. However, there are still drawbacks to this approach that prove to be burdensome to the digital influencers. In order to appeal and satisfy a wide range of preference from online consumers, digital influencers are often pressured to be innovative and think outside of the box, to avoid their created contents from becoming dull and repetitive. To reiterate, online consumers may lose interest in further engaging with the created contents if digital influencers fall short in producing fresh materials that appeal to them.

> *I actually…like to do live sessions on Instagram and TikTok but mostly on TikTok lah. I would act as your "online boyfriend" and I will treat everyone nicely. As long as they are respectful, I don't mind the flirting. I think they like the attention so I'm okay with giving them that and honestly, that makes it easy for me to promote a product also to them in my live because they would be asking a lot of questions and I find this way to be effective. Most of the brands working with me would say their sales have improved - (Influencer 1)*

An effective method to utilize persuasive strategies on social media is for digital influencers to appeal to online consumer's preference and interests through their credibility. This approach forges a deeper bond with online consumers while successfully highlighting their product endorsements and collaborations. From the narratives shared by Influencer 1, their method of presenting themselves as the online boyfriend makes it fundamentally easier to engage with online consumers during live sessions on TikTok. Influencer 1 appeals to online consumers by providing them with attention while simultaneously engaging in product promotions. The persona that is utilized assists greatly in connecting with online consumers through the approach of genuine interaction, paired with Influencer 1's credibility. As a result, the process of introducing and endorsing the product becomes effortless and appears to be less forceful. This coincides with the findings by Shen et al. [33] on digital influencer's characteristics such as attractiveness and trustworthiness combined with the online consumer's need for arousal and their level of vulnerability towards influential information, resulting in the establishment of parasocial relationship and psychological ownership. Furthermore, as stated by Influencer 1, this particular and unique approach has been proven to be effective in improving product sales. Therefore, by ensuring online consumers are given the attention they seek and the feeling of being appreciated, Influencer 1 manages the online consumer's expectations by utilizing credibility to appeal to their preference and interests and further establish their status of authority on social media.

4.2.4 Building Trust

Trust contributes immensely towards establishing a digital influencer's authority on social media. It is important in forging a deeper connection between online consumers and digital influencers as the strategic persuasive methods, recommendations and beliefs are strengthened to have a better impact on online consumers. Moreover, digital influencers are also able to build trust through authenticity in content creation and transparency in their endorsements. Ultimately, this leads to digital influencers growing their following base and attracting more online consumers for better engagement, resulting in the improvement of their credibility and making their presence more authoritative on social media. Additionally, digital influencers who garner more trust from online consumers are better at influencing decisions and behaviours due to online consumers believing in the product or services endorsements made by the digital influencers.

Building trust among online consumers is a crucial process that benefits digital influencers in various ways. The rate of interaction and engagement with a created content can be increased exponentially when online consumers perceive the digital influencers as trustworthy and credible. Furthermore, with trust acting as the main driving force of the relationship between digital influencers and online consumers, it can also open doors for opportunities of potential collaborations with hiring brands. Moreover, with the heightened sense of loyalty among online consumers who trust the digital influencers, any product endorsements or promotions are also likely to be more successful, leading to higher rate of sales or interactions. Likewise, trust provides digital influencers with more breathing room in navigating through challenging and difficult topics as online consumers would often provide them with the benefit of the doubt, especially when the digital influencer's authority has been established with trust.

Nevertheless, there are still disadvantages to this particular approach. Digital influencers may experience burnout from the constant efforts required to build trust, leading to them to consistently be vulnerable and uphold the quality and standards in their content creation. Moreover, when online consumers perceive digital influencer's endorsements as insincere and their behaviour as unethical, it can quickly devolve into them losing credibility and followers. This can commonly be seen as the aftermath of "cancel culture". In short, while building trust yields many beneficial impacts for digital influencers, it also comes with the burden of constant maintenance of content quality, authenticity and perceived behaviour.

> *For me, I always speak in calm tone to appear trustworthy. Also I think as a teacher, people already trust me mostly. If you're doing a good thing and they begin to trust you, they will always come back to you for more information - (Influencer 2)*

There are various methods utilized by digital influencers in their content creation in order to build trust with online consumers. An interesting approach to be considered is by communicating with online consumers in a calming tone and respectful manner. This approach is utilized by Influencer 2, as per their shared narratives, where they focus on building trust and establishing a trustworthy personality with online consumers through speaking calmly and maintaining their composure. Furthermore, combined with the established background of being a teacher, Influencer 2 ensures that they position themselves as a digital influencer who is approachable and reliable. In turn, online consumers feel more comfortable returning and engaging further with Influencer 2. Hence, it can be stated that a calming and trustworthy presence will lead to positive interactions between digital influencers and online consumers and eventually build a stronger foundation of trust between the two parties.

5.0 Conclusion

This section consolidates the findings from the preceding section, providing a comprehensive overview that enhances the understanding of the credibility strategies utilized by digital influencers in fostering digital trust with online consumers. The study addressed two research objectives, namely: (1) to investigate the contributing factors on the utilization of credibility by digital influencers as a persuasive strategy towards online consumer's consumption and (2) determine how the factors affecting credibility utilization impact digital trust between digital influencers and online consumers.

The findings reveal that two interrelated dimensions primarily influence credibility, which are presence and authority. Their presence is contributed by their perceived social image, their methods in securing better engagement with online consumers, and the accessibility that they enable within their created contents. Moreover, digital influencers can build on their credibility through the establishment of their social image. When their online persona is perceived positively, it benefits digital influencers to appear more credible and trustworthy. While creating suitable contents to match the interests of online consumers bear its own importance, the approaches utilized in securing better engagement has its own significance. To reiterate, when digital influencers create contents that demonstrate their credibility, it assists them greatly in encouraging online consumers to engage more, hence growing the digital influencer's presence on social media. In addition, digital influencers also indicate the credibility that they possess when they enable accessibility to online consumers to be more comfortable in interacting and engaging with them.

Conversely, a digital influencer's authority is contributed by the legitimacy of their created contents, their level of merit to indicate the effectiveness of their opinions and recommendations, the appeal of their created contents towards online consumers and the level of trust in persuading online consumers to engage more with the contents. Furthermore, to build credibility, digital influencers are required to conduct prior research to ensure legitimacy and accuracy in their contents. This benefits digital influencers greatly in making their perspectives and recommendations to appear trustworthy. Moreover, through the strengthening of their credibility, digital influencers are also able to grow and maintain their level of merit, resulting in their words and actions to carry value and be considered more seriously by online consumers. Additionally, when digital influencers create content that appeals to online consumers' preferences and interests, it increases the rate of engagement and attracts more followers to grow their account. This can be achieved through various unique methods such as live interactions, collaborations or focusing on creating niche contents. Aside from that, digital influencers can also establish their authority on social media by building trust with online consumers. This ensures long lasting impacts where digital influencers can secure a better rate of engagement as well as extend their reach on social media, all the while retaining a loyal base of followers. This is particularly significant in growing digital trust between digital influencers and online consumers as their legitimacy, merit, appeal and efforts in building trust, collectively contribute to their authority as trustworthy public figures on social media. All in all, digital influencers utilize their credibility to grow their presence and establish their authority on social media, setting them apart from the vast sea of competitors.

This study contributes to the better understanding of digital marketing by emphasizing that successful digital influencer persuasive strategies rely on their presence, influences and audience-centric approaches.

For practitioners, the findings highlight the importance of showing credibility by maintaining the aspects of presence and authority on social media. For researchers, the study offers a framework for examining the effectiveness, impacts and influences of digital influencer in the current digital marketing through the utilization of persuasive credibility strategies within content creation. In terms of practical applications, digital influencers, companies, and brands operating in the digital ecosystem can benefit from the findings of this study. Furthermore, the core value of credibility suggests that digital influencers must prioritize transparency and reputation in their content creation. Social media users are increasingly perceptive, and any contradiction such as misinformation or disingenuity may reduce the level of digital trust. Thus, digital influencers should prioritize in building a consistent, clear and positive personal brand that reflects authenticity and reliability.

The limitations presented in the study cover the aspects of IPA interpretive nature, where the findings are context-specific and not meant for broader generalization. The accumulated results reflect on the limited experiences of a specific group of participants, existing within a specific cultural and digital context. Furthermore, the researchers' role in interpreting the data also implies a degree of subjectivity, even though this is an acceptable aspect of qualitative inquiry. Therefore, future research may consider merging IPA with other existing methodologies for the possibility of gaining extended findings across larger populations. However, IPA remains highly valuable for generating rich, theory-building understandings in emerging research areas such as digital influencer marketing, even with limitations.

6.0 Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Cawangan Selangor, Kampus Shah Alam and the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia for providing the facilities and financial support on this research.

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