'Their interesting pictures made me buy it': Exploring factors that influence Gen Y's buying intention on *Instagram*

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Abstract

For more than a decade, social media platforms have been used as a tool for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to market their products and services. However, many SMEs still believe in traditional marketing. With the recent age of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that have disrupted the global economy and restricted the physical movements of consumers, many sellers have quickly turned to social media such as Instagram due to poor sales. With thousands of businesses to compete with, small businesses are finding ways to market their products in an interesting and appealing way such as by posting attractive pictures and captions. This study aimed to explore the factors influencing Generation Y's (Gen Y) decision to purchase products sold on Instagram. Utilising a qualitative research method, this study gathered the perspectives of 15 Gen Y Instagram users living in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Findings revealed that beautifully captured pictures can influence the purchase intentions of the users. Also, captions that describe the product well and with price can stop users from scrolling their Instagram timeline.

Keywords: *Generation Y, Instagram, Millennials, Social Media,*

'Gambar mereka yang menarik membuatkan saya membelinya': Meneroka faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi Gen Y membeli di *Instagram*

Abstrak

Selama lebih dari satu dekad, platform media sosial telah digunakan sebagai alat bagi perusahaan kecil dan sederhana (PKS) untuk memasarkan produk dan perkhidmatan mereka. Walau bagaimanapun, masih ada PKS yang mempercayai pemasaran tradisional. Dengan menularnya wabak coronavirus (COVID-19) baru-baru ini yang telah merencatkan kepesatan sistem ekonomi global dan menyekat pergerakan fizikal pengguna, ramai peniaga dengan cepat beralih kepada media sosial seperti Instagram kerana penjualan secara tradisional mula merudum. Dengan beribu-ribu kluster perniagaan dalam talian untuk bersaing, pengusaha perniagaan kecil mencari inisiatif untuk memasarkan produk mereka dengan cara yang menarik seperti memuat naik gambar dan kapsyen yang menarik perhatian pengguna. Kajian ini bertujuan meneroka faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi keputusan Generasi Y (Gen Y) untuk membeli produk yang dijual di Instagram. Dengan menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan kualitatif, kajian ini mengumpulkan perspektif 15 pengguna Instagram Gen Y yang tinggal di negeri Selangor, Malaysia. Hasil kajian mendapati bahawa penggunaan gambar yang menarik dapat mempengaruhi niat membeli pengguna. Dapatan kajian juga menunjukkan kapsyen yang menggambarkan produk dengan baik bersama kadar harganya dapat menarik perhatian pengguna untuk terus menatap hantaran itu pada garis masa Instagram mereka.

Kata Kunci: *Generasi Y, Instagram, Media Sosial, Millennial*

Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) such as *Instagram* are an omnipresent global phenomenon with an everyday role in people's lives (Boström, 2020). *Instagram* has been used as a marketing tool for businesses for many years (Harun & Tajudeen, 2020; Khan, 2018). In fact, studies conducted in the past decade have shown that luxury brands such as *Gucci* believes in the power of *Instagram* as a marketing tool to promote their brand (Khan, 2018; Ng, 2014; Ulas & Vural, 2019). However, before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, many businesses still believe in the power of traditional marketing including small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (Ratnasingham *et al.,* 2021). For example, one of the largest coffee franchises in Jakarta, Indonesia called *Kopi Kenceng* had to quickly restrategise their marketing efforts and find ways to create a strong presence on social media when COVID-19 started to spread (Karima & Tjokrosoekarto, 2020).

With the spread of COVID-19 that is continuously posing massive challenges to businesses across the globe, it has forced many SMEs to turn to digital marketing to survive due to the shift in consumer behaviour (Horovits, 2020). In a survey conducted by National Retail Federation (NRF), they indicated that 9 in 10 consumers have changed their traditional shopping habits and that more than 50 percent of consumers purchase items online which previously they would purchase at the store (Horovits, 2020). Despite the usefulness of *Instagram* as a social media marketing tool for businesses, little is known what can influence consumers to purchase products online. Whether consumers purchase products due to reviews from celebrities, or perhaps recommendations from friends and family? In light of the above, this study addresses the following research question: What factors influence the purchase decision of generation Y when shopping on *Instagram*?

Literature review

Instagram
Social networking sites such as *Instagram* provide opportunities for people to communicate and connect with other online users (Boström, 2020). Since its first launch in 2010, *Instagram* which is the combination of "instant" and "telegram" has been one of the popular social networking sites for users across the globe (Huang & Su, 2018; Salomon, 2013). It is generally known as a photo-sharing platform for users to share pictures online as a means of communication (Karimkhani *et al.,* 2014; Salomon, 2013). Also, users can apply different filters when uploading contents (Linaschke, 2011). In 2015, *Instagram* claimed that the platform is "a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures" (*Instagram*, 2015). The platform evolved quickly from users only able to share photos, to now users can share videos as short as 15 seconds in length on *Instagram* stories, one minute in a regular post, and up to 60 minutes uploaded on their *IGTV* video (Photofeeler, 2021).

Two years after *Instagram*'s launch, the number of users increased to 300 million (Huang & So, 2018). As of January 2020, there are nearly 1 billion monthly active users on *Instagram* (Gotter, 2021). Months later, *Instagram* saw a 40% increase in usage due to COVID-19 with views for *Instagram* Live doubled within a week (Loren, 2020). The reason for the increase is also due to the fact that modern youth prefer communication in a visual form (Huang & Su, 2018; Loren, 2020). Unlike other social networking sites, the purpose of a visual posted on *Instagram* is mainly to tell a story while text that is accompanied with the visual is considered secondary (Mohamed, 2019). In a study conducted by Abbott *et al.,* (2013), they indicated that pictures could engage more with its viewers compared to textual content. This is especially when products can at times be complexed to describe (Abbott *et al.*, 2013).

Gen Y and the use of Instagram in Malaysia
Generation Y or also known as *Gen Y* or *Millennials,* are well-known as the technology-savvy generation (Ang, Yee & Seong, 2009; Werenowska & Rzepka, 2020). In an article written by Ang and colleagues (2009), they indicated that economists are closely tracking Gen Y as they

are considered a major determinant of a country's growth trends and prospects. Furthermore, organisations are rushing to capitalise the generation's mind share and purchasing power across the globe (Ang, Yee & Seong, 2009). A total of 57% *Instagram* users who use the app multiple times per day comes from the Gen Y with 38% are Gen X, and 21% Baby Boomers (Iqbal, 2021). The highest percentage is Gen Z with 67% (Iqbal, 2021) however, this generation is not the focus of the current research due to their very young age (i.e., between 6 to 24 years old).

In the case of Malaysia, a total of 30% of the Malaysian population are Gen Y (How well do you know Millennials, 2019). Gen Y spend most of their time on social networks (San, Omar & Thurasamy, 2015). According to the Internet User Survey 2020 by the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia, it indicated that although *Facebook* remains the most widely used social media site in the country however, the users declined by approximately 6% from 97.3% in 2018 to 91.7% in 2020 (Ministry of Communication and Multimedia, 2020). Also, it is reported that only 37.1% are active users of *Twitter* (Ministry of Communication and Multimedia, 2020). Meanwhile *Instagram* users climbed from 57% in 2018 to 63.1% in 2020 (Ministry of Communication and Multimedia, 2020) making Malaysians as the most active *Instagram* users in Asia Pacific (Leng, 2016; Tinker Society, 2021). The platform too is considered more popular among young Malaysians (Ministry of Communication and Multimedia, 2020).

As of February 2020, a total of 36.6 percent or 4 200 000 *Instagram* users in Malaysia are aged 25 to 34, making Gen Y the largest user group (NapoleonCat, 2020). The number increased significantly the following year with 4 900 000 users within the same age group (25 to 34 years old) (NapoleonCat, 2021). The Internet User Survey 2020 also indicated that a total of 98.1% Malaysian internet users go online for social purposes and 64% used the internet for online shopping (Ministry of Communication and Multimedia, 2020).

Factors influencing the purchase of items on Instagram
Online shopping is growing rapidly in Malaysia especially on *Instagram*. Past studies have suggested that the visual in an *Instagram* post plays a major role when it comes to influencing consumers to buy their products (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Valentini *et al.,* 2018). *Instagram* users are likely to engage with pictures that they could relate, and that are simple and easily understood (Abbott *et al.,* 2013). In an article written by Parks (2015), he indicated that *Michael Kors* had generated 33,000 new followers and garnered more than 218,000 likes within 18 hours after posting a picture of the brand's luxury watch which was surrounded by a table full of macaroons. Research shows that a human brain can process visuals 60,000 times faster than text, making images more appealing (Entrepreneur, 2018; McCoy, 2019).

Other than pictures, the use of hashtags on *Instagram* has played a major role in users' ability to discover a post (Bashari & Fazl-Ersi, 2020). Hashtags can create visibility for a company and it increases the chance for users to find the account (Abbott et al., 2013). A widely used hashtag on *Instagram* is #OOTD which is an abbreviation of *Outfit of The Day* (Permatasari & Trijayanto, 2017). Also, a café which intends to target a particular group can use informative hashtag categories such as #menu, #place, and #time and other hashtags according to the interests of the targeted consumers (Tomorn & Bao, 2020). With the appropriate use of hashtags or keywords, it can reduce the search time and help marketers reach their targeted consumers more quickly (Tomorn & Bao, 2020).

Previous research has also shown that users can also easily be influenced by their friends, family, as well as celebrities through endorsements and recommendations (Septiawan, Harini & Hasiholan, 2020; Shariffadeen & Manaf, 2020). In a study conducted by Jariangprasert and colleagues (2019), they found that user-generated content from friends, and families are more influential than contents posted by a business account. Augustinus and Agnes (2020) also indicated that reviews from family, peers or other consumers can influence an individual's decision to do a purchase online.

Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework is used in this study to examine the factors that influence consumers' online purchasing behaviour. This framework which was introduced by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) suggests that when a person is exposed to any environmental cue such as colour, lighting music, and layout or other external stimuli, it can trigger their emotions (e.g., love, joy, disgust) and precede with behavioural responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Peng & Kim, 2014; Wang, Hernandez & Minor, 2010). Mehrabian and Russell (1974) also indicated that the shopping environment contains stimuli (S) that can influence organisms (i.e., consumers), and result in approach or avoidance response (R) behaviours toward the store and in behaviours like store searching, intention to purchase, and even repurchase.

In a study conducted by Wang, Minor and Wei (2011) and Yoon (2012), they found that the atmosphere from a website can induce emotional and behavioural responses of a consumer. Also, online stores are able to create an atmosphere that affects shoppers' reactions (Eroglu, Michelet & Davis, 2001). Atmospherics on the other hand such as the store layout or retail space can attract a customer to enter the store and increase the odds of a purchase being made (Wu, Lee, Fu, Wang, 2013). Thus, in this case, the *Instagram* seller's posts such as layout, colour choice, and music may influence consumers' emotions and purchasing intention (Bahtar & Muda, 2016; Shergill & Chen, 2005). Layouts should not be too dull and cluttered (Bahtar & Muda, 2016; Shergill & Chen, 2005). With *Instagram* being a platform known as its simple interface, consumers are able to browse for information easily and have a positive and less stressful shopping experience (Bahtar & Muda, 2016).

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach. In order to cast more light on the factors influencing Gen Y's purchasing intention on *Instagram*, we draw on data from online, semi-structured interviews with 15 Gen Y social media users living in the state of Selangor in Malaysia. Gen Y

are those who were born between 1981 until 1996 (Dimock, 2019). The interviews were mostly conducted using *Google Meet* and some on *Skype*. To be eligible for this study, participants were required to satisfy the following criteria (1) Gen Y; (2) social media user; and (3) have purchased items on *Instagram*. The longest interview lasted for one and a half hours and the shortest was 40 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To guarantee anonymity, all personal information that could identify the participants were deleted and each transcript was assigned a number (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2).

The interviews were conducted in an informal, conversational style that encouraged the participants to provide as much information on what led them purchase items on *Instagram*. Interview topics included: a) background questions (e.g., How long have you been using *Instagram*? How frequent do you purchase items on *Instagram*?), b) the type of items frequently purchased on *Instagram* (e.g., What do you normally buy on *Instagram*?), and c) reasons why they purchase items on *Instagram* (e.g., Can you tell me why you opt to buy items on *Instagram*? What drives you to buy those items?).

Probe questions were also used to get detailed response from the participants when necessary. Anonymity was promised to the participants at the start of the interview. The collected data were then transcribed, and specific interview questions and answers were matched and annotated to answer the research question produced. The responses were analysed mostly based on each participants' drive to buying products on *Instagram* and does not seek to compare the difference of response in terms of gender, age, and culture.

Key Findings and Discussion

The findings are divided into three parts. First, responses that suggested elements within the *Instagram* post itself played a major role in their purchasing decision (e.g., picture, caption) are presented. Second, we present findings that suggested the recommendations of friends and family also played a crucial role. Finally, we show findings on celebrity endorsements.

Instagram posts

Uploaded pictures

One of the questions asked during the interview is whether the pictures posted by the sellers on *Instagram* had somewhat influenced their decision to purchase the products. All of the participants claimed that the interesting pictures posted by the sellers are one of the factors that influenced them to purchase the products on *Instagram*. Findings suggested that the beautifully captured pictures by the sellers can make them stop from scrolling the platform's timeline and visit the particular account that posted the picture. These results are similar to those reported by Jin and Ryu (2020) as well as Valentini *et al.* (2018). They had highlighted the importance of pictures on *Instagram* (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Valentini *et al.,* 2018). According to Participant 1, he said that one of the reasons he gets convinced to buy things on *Instagram* is due to the interesting pictures posted by the seller. In his own words:

> *…their interesting picture has captured my attention to follow their Instagram and now I have become their regular customer. The background of the picture posted is also very interesting and it matches with the concept of the product.*

Participant 3 also said:

> *Yes, a picture is worth a thousand words. If they post pictures that are not clear and not in full, it suggests that the seller isn't serious in selling their products. Us buyers want to see what the product looks like and how big it is and all. You know what I mean?*

Another participant (Participant 7) replied, "Definitely! Their interesting picture made me buy it." When asked whether the angle of the photographed product is important, all of the participants agreed. They felt that the way pictures are taken play a major role in their decision making process. For instance, Participant 4, 6, 8, 10, and 15 indicated that the angle of the picture can determine whether the product sold is interesting or otherwise.

In Participant 8's own words:

> *The angle is important. You can see how big or small the product is and the lighting is important. The contrast in colour and background can emphasise more the items and unconsciously grab my attention.*

Participant 10 also had said:

> *If the seller is selling food, I prefer if they take the picture in an overhead view kind of way. You know what I mean? Bird's eye view. Like you take it from the top and you're looking down at the food.*

Meanwhile Participant 15 explained in length:

> *The products have to be pictured close enough that people can actually zoom the products and still see it clearly. If the seller is selling a skirt, then it's best to emphasise that even if a model is wearing the skirt. I've seen sellers who tries to promote their tudung or hijab but the outfit is over the top and the background is filled with potted plans. It can create confusion to many especially for those who are not familiar with that brand. They might thing that the seller is selling the outfit or the plants.*

Captions

Other than well-presented pictures, the participants unanimously agreed that the captions played an important role in grabbing their attention. Majority of them (12 out of 15) indicated that those with clear description of the product together with the price can entice them compared to sellers who ask buyers to send them a direct message (DM) before revealing the price. The remaining three participants who felt otherwise indicated that catchy descriptions without the price of the product is sufficient.

Participant 5 who is part of the majority explained:

I like it when the sellers put the price and describe the products clearly at the caption. Sometimes people don't have the time and patience to ask the sellers the price. For example, why can't people just put captions like Mickey Mouse t-shirt adult size from S to XL, 20 ringgit each?

Participant 5 added:

I know people say it's a marketing strategy but to be honest, it's a silly strategy cause like I said, not all potential buyers have the time and patience to ask the sellers. Sometimes people want things quick. One you have to ask them and next, you need to wait for them to reply.

Participant 8 who felt that catchy captions was sufficient indicated:

I think sellers should put catchy captions. I normally am attracted to those who put catchy captions and not dull ones. I've actually bought two items this week from Instagram. They don't need to put the price at their caption. People can ask if they want to buy it. I think that's a small matter if you're truly interested in purchasing their stuff.

Those who were part of the majority also spoke on the importance of affordable price tag. Five of the 12 participants indicated that when the items are affordable, it can entice them to purchase the products. Often they would look for items that are cheaper than those sold at the physical store. Three of the participants further claimed that they could get cheaper priced items on *Instagram* compared to elsewhere. For instance, Participant 11 explained:

I believe that Instagram is where you can get things cheaper than the shop. Probably because if it's at the shop, you need to pay for the service and also rental and so on. Plus you need to compete with hundreds or thousands of online sellers. If you sell things online, it's free. You don't have to pay the rent.

A few of the participants also mentioned that when purchasing items on *Instagram*, sometimes there is some room to negotiate with the seller. For instance, Participant 4 recalled that he had negotiated with a seller via *Instagram*'s direct messaging feature after coming across the seller's account on the platform. The seller was selling a fan made *Anime* t-shirt. After a brief negotiation, the participant indicated that he was offered a cheaper price than the price stated in the seller's account. He said, "The t-shirt was about 10 ringgit cheaper. On top of that, the seller gave me a free delivery. Otherwise delivery is five ringgit." Another participant (Participant 13) indicated that she was offered a discounted price for an off-season *Baju Kurung.* The seller who was trying to get rid of the previous year's Eid collection, agreed to lower the price by 60 ringgit. Participant 13 added, "That's why I like buying things on *Instagram*. Don't think you can get such bargain!"

Hashtags
One of the factors that helped the participants find products from small businesses on *Instagram* is the unique hashtag used by the sellers. With thousands of businesses now on *Instagram* due to the impact of COVID-19, the accurate use of hashtags has played an important role in ensuring that the businesses' potential buyers find their *Instagram* account through the search box. The importance has also been highlighted by Bashari and Fazl-Ersi (2020) as well as Permatasari and Trijayanto (2017). For instance, one of the participants (Participant 7) indicated that when she wanted to look for affordable clothes for her children when Malaysia implemented the total lockdown last year, she looked up for the hashtag #bajubudakmurah (translated as cheap children clothes). She also said in length:

> *You have to know what to search for in the search box. Sometimes if you put random hashtags, you won't be able to find what you're looking for. Sometimes general hashtags like kasut murah (cheap shoes) will lead you to many accounts too. So the trick is to be a bit more specific like kasut murah Shah Alam but not too specific. So sellers need to be smart when putting hashtags. They can't simply put their own hashtags like the name of their shop if they are not popular cause people will end up not being to find it.*

Participant 11 on the other hand explained:

I've always used hashtags to find things that I'm looking for. Through hashtags you could find sellers from a specific area like near my house. With Covid around, you can't really go out so you rely on online shopping and online sellers to deliver whatever you want.

Frequency of posts
Another factor that had an influence on the participants' purchase intention is the frequency of posts by the sellers. Most of the participants felt that posting on *Instagram* regularly can show that the business is still active especially with the coronavirus pandemic, it has caused many businesses to close. For instance, Participant 5 said:

I normally look at date they last uploaded their recent picture. Was it a day ago? A few hours ago? Or a few months ago? If it was a few months ago, I normally find a different seller. I consider two months pretty long. With COVID-19, many shops had to close and go out of business so their Instagram will determine they are still doing business or not.

During the interview, the researchers found that the frequency of posts can provide an impression that the business is legitimate. Two participants (Participant 2 and 3) indicated that regular postings are important and that it shows that they are not scammers. Participant 2 for instance said, "When sellers post frequently whether it's the normal post or Instastory, it shows that they are still in business and that they are legit." Due to lack of clarity, Participant 2 was further asked to clarify what was meant by this. She then explained:

So far I've never seen scammers put a lot of effort into their marketing or selling. Whatever you call it. Cause it is time consuming and scammers normally want fast results. So they post once in awhile and they don't normally focus on one platform.

Participant 3 on the hand replied, "The more you post, the more it looks like you have a legit business and you are not trying to scam buyers."

Friends and family

When asked whether any of their friends or family had played any role in influencing them to purchase certain products on *Instagram*, surprising, only a small number of participants indicated that recommendations from friends and family had an influence on their decision making. This finding however, is consistent with the study conducted by Augustinus and Agnes (2020) who indicated that family can influence a user's purchase decision. The four participants who had mentioned this felt that those who are close to them and had experience in purchasing items from a certain seller on *Instagram*, can easily influence them to purchase the items. One of them (Participant 6) felt that purchasing items from a recommended seller is "more trusting". Another (Participant 10) said:

> *Sometimes, my friends influence me to buy things on Instagram when I meet them. They will quickly show a certain seller on Instagram through their handphone and say this seller is honest, this seller delivers things quickly, this seller can provide discounts and so much more. When that happens, I would buy from the sellers.*

Participant 2 added:

> *Normally, my friends would recommend a seller only when they have a good relationship with them. Good sellers would establish a relationship with their customers in order for them to buy their products regularly.*

Celebrity endorsement

Consistent with our current findings, previous research has shown that other than friends and family, celebrities who endorse products can influence users to purchase the products (Septiawan, Harini & Hasiholan, 2020; Shariffadeen & Manaf, 2020). Although this was a less popular

factor compared to the other factors mentioned, two participants who had highlighted this believe that celebrity endorsement influenced them to purchase certain products on *Instagram*. For instance, Participant 2 said:

> *Normally I would watch videos of celebrities endorsing certain products. I'm not a fan of beauty products so I normally watch videos on their reviews about certain food or clothes. If they present and explain it well, I normally buy it. Of course, if the price is OK.*

Also, Participant 9 who is a fan of the local Malaysian celebrity Nora Danish, indicated that one of the factors that drives her to purchase items on *Instagram* is due to the celebrity's endorsement. She explained:

> *Sometimes I see her posting pictures of drinks and food. Sometimes lipsticks. She is beautiful and the way she presents the products is always nice and attractive. It can persuade me to buy the things she uploads on her Instagram.*

Conclusion and Recommendation

Before we address future research, the strengths of the present study, and limitations related to the methodology used in this research, must be addressed. Firstly, as this study was conducted using the qualitative research method, the sample size selected cannot be generalised to a wider population. Furthermore, this research focused on the perception of Gen Ys in Malaysia, therefore it is important to note the findings may differ with other generations and other countries. Despite these limitations, our study expands the literature on social media marketing especially in the times of the coronavirus pandemic. We present various factors that Gen Y believes can influence their purchase intention such as quality of picture, caption, price tag, celebrity endorsement, and recommendation from friends and family. With the rising number of sellers marketing their products digitally due to COVID-19, our findings are able to shed some light on what can attract buyers to purchase their products and how to make their businesses more visible. Also, another

strength of this research is that most of the available studies were conducted in countries other than Malaysia (e.g., Indonesia, China). To further extend this study, the researchers hope to interview more participants in the next study.

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