

Brand Engagement in Self-Concept for Influencer Marketing: The Role of Product Involvement as A Moderator

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rise of influencer marketing in creating brand engagement with customers on social media platforms, there exists limited understanding about the factors that contribute to brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) among social media followers. BESC is instrumental in increasing a brand's perceived value and word of mouth. This study aims to investigate the influencer-based factor (perceived influence), alongside consumer centric factors (value co-creation and social media marketing [SMM] activities) as antecedents for BESC in the influencer marketing context. Furthermore, the study tests the moderating role of product involvement on these relationships. Responses were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire which yielded a sample of 202 social media users in Malaysia. Analysis through IBM SPSS demonstrated that value co-creation and SMM activities of influencer-endorsed brands are significant predictors of BESC, while perceived influence does not contribute to BESC. Furthermore, product involvement exerted a moderating effect on all three direct relationships of perceived influence, value co-creation, and SMM activities on BESC. The research framework contributes to a greater understanding of BESC antecedents and the role of product involvement in influencer marketing context. The higher the level of product involvement, the larger the propensity for followers to form BESC through recommendations of influencers. This study can be beneficial to marketing managers that are building their own influencer marketing campaigns through incorporating value co-creation and SMM activities in their brand engagement strategy.

Keywords: *influencer marketing, brand engagement, social media*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Social network services (SNS) are integral for rapid dissemination of information (Lou & Yuan, 2019) and for continued promotional activities to engage current and potential consumers (Alalwan, 2018). In 2020, approximately 3.6 billion people were social media users, and the number is forecasted to increase by 122.5 percent by 2025 (Clement, 2020). A recent trend is influencer marketing on social media (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019) as it provides a dynamic environment for customer-brand interactions facilitated by opinion leaders (Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020). Digital influencers are microcelebrities with

a large following online who monetize their blogs/social media platforms through paid brand endorsements (Freberg et al., 2011). They are deemed more trustworthy than regular celebrities as followers find them more relatable due to parasocial attachment (Chung & Cho, 2017). Hence, followers feel encouraged to purchase from brands that the influencer recommends and share influencer generated content with their virtual community through e-word of mouth (eWOM) (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The COVID-19 outbreak is the first pandemic to occur in the social media age, which has inadvertently shifted consumption and communication patterns from offline to the SNS domain; making it crucial for marketers to uncover how consumers engage with brands online (Wang et al., 2022). Influencer marketing provides a solution to overcome the challenge of building brand engagement. The brand engagement concept has received ample attention from scholars and practitioners throughout literature (Hollebeek, 2011; Khan et al., 2016) and demonstrates why consumers choose to engage with brands (Hollebeek et al., 2014). However, brand engagement in self-concept (BESC), specifically in the marketing discipline is a relatively new concept that has received limited research attention (Leckie et al., 2016; Nyadzayo et al., 2020). A meta-analysis revealed that existing work on BESC has produced interesting findings; however, there is a lack of empirical results with regard to BESC and its impact on behavioural outcomes and attitudes (Vieira et al., 2023). BESC is unique to other brand engagement concepts as it does not refer to a specific brand, but rather a tendency for consumers to express themselves through certain brands over others (Spratt et al., 2009). Influencer marketing has been linked to the formation of BESC of followers through influencers' persuasive power which shapes their followers' self-perceptions through brand-related content. Consequently, they are more likely to purchase from endorsed brands and assume a higher brand expected value (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Hence, BESC is an undeniably important aspect in influencer marketing. However, several gaps remain in this area of research. Firstly, although studies show that engaging influencers in branding and social media marketing can add value to consumers (Ananda et al., 2016), it is unclear whether the perceived influence from influencer marketing is effective enough to improve perception and behaviour towards endorsed brands (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Secondly, the customer-centric predeterminants of BESC have not been examined in influencer marketing contexts. Thirdly, the level of product involvement for the brands being advertised were not taken into consideration (Ismail et al., 2021; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Therefore, the study intends to address these gaps by understanding the impact of influencer marketing on BESC with varying degrees of product involvement. In doing so, the study's findings can benefit marketers in curating effective influencer marketing programs.

The research questions this paper aims to investigate are:

1. Do value co-creation, SMM activities and perceived influence exert a positive, direct effect on BESC in the influencer marketing context?
2. Does product involvement play a significant moderating role with regard to BESC in the influencer marketing context?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Brand engagement in self-concept (BESC)

There are numerous interpretations of brand engagement. Brand engagement, according to Van Doorn et al. (2010), is a motivational condition that arises from an individual's interactive encounters with specific entities. According to Yang et al. (2016), brand engagement on social media requires both the firm and the customer to participate in order to manifest behavioural outcomes. The study echoes Razmus and Laguna (2019) concept of BESC, which states that the tendency to include important brands in the self-concept applies to brands from different product categories to the same extent. This pattern is supported by analyses of specific product categories as well as multilevel analysis. BESC incorporates social dimensions of engagement such as co-creation, brand-related content sharing, and customers' proclivity to incorporate brands into their self-concept, or how they view themselves (Liu et al., 2018). As a result, it differs from other related concepts in brand engagement (Brodie et al., 2013). More importantly, BESC is critical for understanding customer motivations in influencer marketing, such as customers' proclivity to include

brands recommended by influencers as part of their self-concept. These motivations result in increased expected brand value, purchase intention, and brand recommendation (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019), all of which are desirable outcomes for marketing practitioners and brand managers. Brand engagement has changed dramatically since the introduction of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TripAdvisor, LinkedIn and Instagram. SNS have transformed the way branded content is produced, disseminated and consumed, driven largely through consumer-driven brand engagements and virtual connections (Nyadzayo et al., 2020). In light of this, further research on BESC with regards to social media marketing would be beneficial, and especially relevant for brands to develop a competitive advantage in today's dynamic business environment.

2.2 Observational Learning (OL) Theory

Observational learning (OL) theory by Bandura (1977) explains the relationship between perceived influence and BESC by learning from others and adopting attitudes to simplify decision-making. Online marketing uses OL to study consumer behaviour and social media interactions (Wang & Yu, 2017). Xu and Liu (2019) found that social influence increases website post engagement. Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) used OL to explain how digital influencers affect followers' brand attitudes and behaviours. OL theory also suggests that when people interact with digital influencers, they may form their own opinions and behaviours (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). The brand message from a reference group, such as digital influencers, creates a psychological bond between influencers and followers (Abidin, 2015), causing followers to internalize a message and associate their identity with the brand (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Thus, the perceived influence of digital influencers can affect how followers engage with influencer-endorsed brands, which may cause them to include those brands in their personal identities, establishing BESC. Investigating the effect of anticipatory responses on OL is important in this study, owing to the frequency with which we expect them to appear in real life versus the frequency of observing others' direct responses to aversive stimuli (Xu et al., 2022).

2.3 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social exchange theory (SET) links customer-centric BESC antecedents (value co-creation, SMM activities) to influencer marketing. SET suggests that social behaviour results from an exchange process that maximizes benefits and minimizes costs (Davis-Sramek et al., 2022). Social media user engagement (Zheng et al., 2015) and online brand-consumer relationships have been studied using SET (Harrigan et al., 2018). SET suggests that people driven by self-interest make rational decisions about social exchanges based on cost-benefit perceptions. Consumers co-create brand interactions through social interaction with brands (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). The influencer-follower relationship facilitates value co-creation (del Águila-Obra et al., 2007) as followers develop brand engagement with influencer-endorsed brands, increasing their tendency to incorporate prominent brands into their self-concept (Sprott et al., 2009). Moreso, SNS users engage in brand-related activities and expect benefits (Zheng et al., 2015). Thus, SMM influencer marketing can lead to BESC (Nyadzayo et al., 2020). SET also suggests that consumers are more invested in a brand relationship when they receive useful resources (e.g., status, brand affiliation, sense of community) in exchange for their time and effort (Guo et al., 2017). These resources accentuate brand engagement depending on consumers' brand involvement (Blau, 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2014). SET states that exchanges cause social behaviour and people consider the advantages and disadvantages of social interactions (Kim et al., 2022). This forms the basis of this study's research framework.

2.4 Perceived Influence

Perceived influence is the tendency of followers to trust information from influencers (Shen et al., 2010). Digital influencers' followers are affected by their perceived influence (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Reference groups and role models like digital influencers help users behave (Gong et al., 2020). Due to their knowledge, expertise, and authenticity, these influencers are KOLs (key opinion leaders) (Tiautrakul & Jindakul, 2019). Brands use digital influencers as brand ambassadors and sponsor their social media posts to reach niche consumers (Childers et al., 2019). Digital influencers enhance media content (e.g., brand information) and share it with others (e.g., brand recommendations) to increase their influence on followers (Magno & Cassia, 2018; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Kelley and Alden (2016) found that customers influenced by KOLs seek brands that match their self-concept. Jiménez-Castillo and

Sánchez-Fernández (2019) also note that followers' perception of digital influencers boosts their BESC. Followers' perceived influence increases brand engagement, expected value, and behavioural intention (Wang et al., 2021). Brand engagement and expected value predict brand purchase intent. Based on these findings, followers of digital influencers can engage more with suggested brands by incorporating them into their self-concept and forming their personal identity (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Sprott et al., 2009). Thus, it is proposed that:

H₁: Followers' perceived influence of digital influencers positively affects their level of BESC.

2.5 Value Co-creation

In a process known as co-creation, each customer has the ability to influence the creation of future products, marketing communications, and distribution networks for goods and services (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). Using expertise, resources, and knowledge sharing, for instance, co-production, co-design, and co-marketing of goods and services (Polese et al., 2017). By allowing customers to interact with KOLs on online platforms, these procedures are enhanced (Brodie et al., 2013). Customers can co-create value, for instance, by commenting on their ideas, feedback, and experiences (Hajli et al., 2017). In order to create interactive service exchanges between brands and their customers, value co-creation is becoming an increasingly crucial component for marketers (Polese et al., 2017). Companies can interact with customers and modify their product offerings in response to their comments (Kamboj et al., 2018). Because consumers were encouraged to engage and contribute to the co-creation of luxury fashion brand experiences, Nyadzayo et al. (2020) discovered that value co-creation had a positive impact on consumers' BESC. Due to the interactive social exchange that forms high engagement with online brand communities (Hajli et al., 2017) and induces a self-connection with those brands, influencer marketing is anticipated to be able to increase the propensity of followers to share ideas with endorsed brands. However, it is worth noting that interactions between service systems may also have negative consequences for a variety of reasons, not just value co-creation (Nyadzayo et al., 2020) (Kumar & Srivastava, 2022). Therefore, this study further investigates the influence of value co-creation on BESC in the influencer marketing context, and it is proposed that:

H₂: Value co-creation is positively related to BESC in the influencer marketing context.

2.6 Social Media Marketing (SMM) Activities

Social media marketing involves advertising on social media platforms through content such as images, videos, reels, stories, tweets, hashtags, geo-tagged locations and recruiting KOLs to endorse a brand. It benefits brands by drawing positive attention towards their brand, strengthening ties with online followers, and gathering feedback in real-time (Nyadzayo et al., 2020). E-marketing and digital marketing still dominate academia, but social media marketing is growing in popularity among practitioners and researchers (Althuwaini, 2022; Jamil et al., 2022). Social media encourages interaction and collaboration through shared content (Nyadzayo et al., 2020) by connecting users online. Companies use SMM to boost brand entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and WOM value (Godey et al., 2016). SMM marketing activities improve customer-brand experiences on social networks like Facebook pages, Instagram, and Twitter, turning customers into brand advocates (Tsai & Men, 2013). (Arenas-Gaitan et al., 2013). Social media lets businesses track customers and prospects. This helps marketers understand their target audience's likes, dislikes, and interests to create a better marketing strategy to attract them. SMM activities and BESC are positively correlated as per Nyadzayo et al. (2020). SMM's effective brand-related information exchange helps customers internalize brand content. Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) predict that engaging KOLs as an SMM activity to influence potential consumers can increase brand engagement. Thus, digital influencers in SMM can boost BESC among followers. Thus, to testify to the impact of SMM activities on BESC in the influencer marketing context; this study proposed that:

H₃: SMM activities are positively related to BESC in the influencer marketing context.

2.7 Moderating Effect of Product Involvement

Product involvement has been widely used in developing consumer behaviour theory since it first emerged as a concept in the marketing domain, playing various exploratory and intermediary roles. Understanding brand engagement topics requires an understanding of product involvement (Belanche et al., 2017; Ismail et al., 2021; Xue, 2008). Marketing experts have identified product involvement as a critical component in

modelling consumer behaviour, emphasizing its significance in gaining insight into consumer decision-making. According to product involvement theories, consumers' decision-making processes are characterized by longer periods of decision making in situations of high product involvement compared to situations of low product involvement. However, the outcomes of BESC relationships in the context of high vs. low involvement products are unknown. Gong et al. (2020) discovered that users seek product-related advice from reference groups such as influencers. Rajaraman et al. (2021) discovered no significant moderating effect of product involvement on perceived influence and intent to engage with brand posts. However, Kapitan and Silvera (2016) discovered that consumers with low product involvement are more likely to focus on the source of influence (i.e., digital influencers) to guide their behaviour than consumers with high involvement who have a pre-established brand connection.

In conditions of high product involvement, consumers expend more effort and energy scrutinizing a product and take longer to decide because the products contain embedded values. Evaluation can include analysing the good and bad features, comparing different brands and prices, and determining which product will best meet the individual's needs. According to Belanche et al. (2017), highly involved users developed positive brand relationships and were eager to interact with brands. Other research has found that consumers (i.e., followers) with low levels of product involvement with the product category may not be particularly interested in learning more about the product or purchasing it, despite having had a co-creational experience (Füller & Bilgram, 2017). As a result, they may not include the endorsed brand in their self-concept.

Product participation may also be influenced by current trends in the product's (goods and/or services) SMM activities. For example, if a wide range of SMM activities provide substitutes, this will increase the of product involvement for the customer, because they will have to compare more options to reach a final decision. Dessart (2017) discovered a link between product involvement and brand engagement via social media. Wang et al. (2012) also stated that product involvement influences how consumers behave in social media settings in an indirect manner. Furthermore, Belanche et al. (2017) state that when consumers are highly involved with the products being advertised by brands, they are more likely to process commercial details in brand posts. Based on the discussion, the following hypotheses were formed:

H_{4a}: Product involvement moderates the relationship between perceived influence and BESC.

H_{4b}: Product involvement moderates the relationship between value co-creation and BESC.

H_{4c}: Product involvement moderates the relationship between SMM activities and BESC.

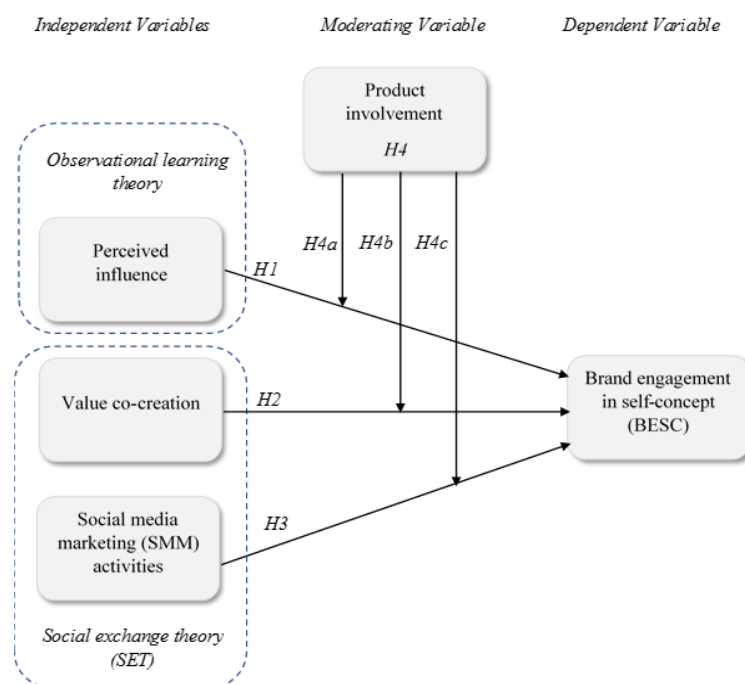


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design, Method, And Instrument

The quantitative approach (correlational research design) has been applied to examine the effect of the independent variables (value co-creation, perceived influence and SMM activities) on the dependent variable (BESC), as well as the potential moderating impact of product involvement (Creswell et al., 2015). Data was collected online through a survey instrument, since this approach is cost effective and quick to implement. Past studies on BESC and influencer marketing have also relied on similar data collection methods (Ismail et al., 2021; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Nyadzayo et al., 2020).

Scales were adapted from extant literature for the purpose of this study and respondents recorded their response on a Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Three items for perceived influence and four items for BESC were adapted from Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019), five items for value co-creation and four items for SMM were adapted from Nyadzayo et al. (2020), five items for product involvement was based on Dessart (2017). The measurement items were appropriate for this research as the context was similar to the extant studies from which these scales were adapted, which also examine factors related to social media engagement, self-concept and digital influencer marketing. This instrument consists of a total of 27 questions, which also includes a section on demographics.

3.2 Sampling Method and Size

This study has employed the nonprobability (convenience and snowball) sampling method to recruit target respondents. It was necessary for participants to meet certain suitability criteria: i.e. (i) aged between 18-34 (ii) actively follow influencers on any social media platform such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. Owing to the absence of a sampling frame meeting these specific requirements, this approach was considered a cost-effective method to identify suitable respondents (Saunders et al., 2009). Extant research by Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) related to digital influencers and studies by Casaló et al. (2020), Cosenza et al. (2015), Hsiao et al. (2013) and Magno (2017) measuring perceptions and behaviour of social media followers have also resorted to a non-probability convenience sample for multivariate data analyses. However, a weakness of this approach is the lack of representativeness and the limited ability to generalise results to the entire population (Proctor, 2005). The sample consists of 202 responses, which is considered an sufficient sample size for correlational studies (Kline, 2011). Over 70% of the sample was aged between 21-25 years old, 65% were female, 100% were Malaysian citizens, 68% were students and over 28% were employed, over 57% claimed to be signed-in to their social media APPS at all times while 26% claimed they used SNS APPS between 6-10 times a day.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through a self-administered online survey hosted via the Qualtrics platform, the link to the survey was disseminated to participants on social networks such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook. Past studies on BESC and influencer marketing have collected data through online questionnaires (Ismail et al., 2020; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2020; Nyadzayo et al., 2020), as this method is cost-effective and quick to administer. The survey would take an approximate of 10-15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire consisted of six sections, one section dedicated to each of the five constructs, and one for demographic data. A pretest was carried out with a panel of six experts related to practitioners in social media advertising, academics from the digital marketing discipline and avid social media users to ensure content validity. A pilot test was also carried out to ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs. The data was analysed using IBM SPSS software. Normality and reliability tests were carried out, followed by bivariate correlation and multiple linear regression. A moderation analysis was conducted through multiple regression as well (Van den Berg, 2020).

4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results for Preliminary Analyses

Results from normality testing indicated that the data is normally distributed. The mean of variables is between 3.2611 and 3.800. The skewness and kurtosis values for perceived influence are -0.466 and -0.011,

value co-creation is -0.724 and 0.333, SMM activities are -0.566 and -0.154, BESC are -0.271 and -0.965, while product involvement are -0.53 and -0.626. Since the variables are within the suggested range, the data is normally distributed (Kline, 2011).

The Cronbach's alpha values for the variables of this study are as follows: perceived influence at $\alpha=0.660$, value co-creation at $\alpha=0.832$, SMM activities at $\alpha=0.728$, BESC at $\alpha=0.869$, and lastly product involvement at $\alpha=0.833$ (Field, 2013). The constructs demonstrate high internal consistency and are considered to meet the criteria for reliability. Thus, all measurement items were retained for further analysis.

Table 4.1: Reliability test results

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Item retained	Strength
Perceived influence	0.66	3	Moderate
Value co-creation	0.83	5	Very Good
SMM activities	0.73	4	Acceptable
BESC	0.87	4	Very Good
Product Involvement	0.83	5	Very Good

With regard to bivariate correlation analysis, there exists positive correlations between the predictors (i.e. perceived influence, value co-creation, SMM activities) on the outcome variable (BESC) at a significance level of $p < 0.01$ (all show 0.000). In general, a correlation coefficient of 0.9-1 is considered very strong, 0.71-0.9 is considered high, 0.41-0.7 is considered moderate, while values under 0.41 are weak (Hair, 2007). Thus, there are moderate positive relationships between BESC and value co-creation (Pearson Correlation= 0.619) and SMM activities (Pearson Correlation= 0.562). However, a weak positive relationship is observed between perceived influence and BESC (Pearson Correlation= 0.400). Since the significance (2-tailed) levels for each of the variables was 0.000 (i.e. $p < 0.001$) at 0.01 confidence level, the measurement items are considered to be valid.

Table 4.2 Regression Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.67a	0.45	0.44	0.74

a. Predictors: (Constant), SMM Activities, Perceived Influence, Value co-creation

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		95% Confidence Interval		
	Beta	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
(Constant)	-0.541	0.334		-1.620	0.107	-1.199	0.118
Perceived Influence \square BESC (H1)	0.106	0.093	0.071	1.143	0.254	-0.077	0.290
Value co-creation \square BESC (H2)	0.551	0.092	0.413	5.964	0.000	0.369	0.733
SMM Activities \square BESC (H3)	0.389	0.083	0.300	4.657	0.000	0.224	0.553

4.2 Results for Hypotheses Testing

Multiple linear regression was performed to test the hypotheses. According to Table 4.2, the R Square value of BESC is 0.452, which indicates that the variables of the conceptual framework of this study explains only 45.2% of variation in BESC namely perceived influence (H1), SMM activities (H2), and value co-creation (H3). In general, a higher R Square demonstrates a higher model-data fit. Following that, a R value of <0.3 shows weak predictive accuracy, 0.3 to 0.7 is moderate, while >0.7 is considered high (Cohen & Holliday, 1996). As stated in the model summary, the R value is 0.673, which means that the study achieved moderate predictive accuracy.

Result shows that the p-values for perceived influence (H1), value co-creation (H2), and SMM activities (H3) are 0.254, 0.000 and 0.000 respectively. The p-value for social-sciences is statistically significant if it satisfies the threshold of $p \leq 0.05$ (Dahiru, 2008).

First, the causal relationship identified between perceived influence and BESC (H1) has a p-value of 0.254 which is greater than the ideal p-value of less than 0.05. The t-value is low at 1.143, Hence *H1 is not supported. Next, the relationship between value co-creation and BESC has a p-value of 0.000 ($p \leq 0.05$) and t-value of 5.964, which demonstrates a significant relationship exists between the two variables. *H2 is supported. Moreover, the p-value for SMM activities is 0.000 ($p \leq 0.05$). The t-value reported is 4.657, which indicates that there is a significant impact on SMM activities on the BESC of followers. *H3 is supported.

4.3 Results for Moderating test

This moderating effect is tested using the multiple regression analysis by observing the interaction predictor against the dependent variable of the study (Van den Berg, 2020). According to Table 4.4, the direct relationship between perceived influence and BESC is significant (p-value <0.05 , t-value=-2.573, Beta=-0.236). After considering the moderating effects of product involvement, the results remain significant (p-value <0.05 , t-value of 8.686, Beta= 0.797). The positive B-coefficient for the interaction predictor shows that the relationship between perceived influence and BESC becomes stronger with increasing product involvement. Hence, product involvement has a significant moderating effect between perceived influence and BESC. Thus, *H4a is supported.

The direct relationship between value co-creation and BESC is not significant as the p-value surpasses 0.05 (p-value=0.339, t-value=0.958, Beta=0.88). However, after including the interaction predictor, the results are significant (p-value=0.000, t-value=6.897, Beta=0.633) which indicates that the relationship between value co-creation and BESC becomes more positive with the increase of product involvement. Furthermore, it shows that the direct relationship between value co-creation and BESC is dependent on the level of product involvement. Thus, *H4b is supported.

Table 4.3: Moderating effect of product involvement

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	Beta	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.
(Constant)	2.215	0.334		6.625	0.000
Perceived Influence	-0.355	0.138	-0.236	-2.573	0.011
Perceived Influence*Product Involvement □ BESC (H4a)	0.175	0.020	0.797	8.686	0.000
(Constant)	1.076	0.272		3.954	0.000
Value co-creation	0.117	0.123	0.088	0.958	0.339
Value co-creation*Product Involvement □ BESC (H4b)	0.132	0.019	0.633	6.897	0.000
(Constant)	1.582	0.297		5.330	0.000
SMM Activities	-0.060	0.137	-0.047	-0.442	0.659
SMM Activities* Product Involvement □ BESC (H4c)	0.140	0.021	0.704	6.665	0.000

Moreover, there is an insignificant direct relationship between SMM activities and BESC (p-value=0.659, t-value=-0.442, Beta=-0.047). However, the significance of this relationship increases substantially when product involvement is included as a moderator (p=0.000, t-value=6.665, Beta=0.704). This indicates that the direct relationship between SMM Activities and BESC depends on the level of product involvement, in which there is an increasingly positive effect between the two variables as involvement increases. Thus, *H4c is supported.

4.4 Discussion

This study's findings suggest that perceived influence does not significantly impact BESC among followers of influencer marketing. This is inconsistent with prior studies by Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) which demonstrate that followers are more likely to form BESC towards brands through the

influential power of digital influencers. Similarly, Kelley and Alden (2016) deduced that the more a customer is influenced by KOLs, the more likely they are to internalize the message content. In general, these findings are not relevant in the context of Malaysian consumers' perception of digital influencers. This infers that the sample population is not likely to accept information from influencers and incorporate the endorsed brands as part of their self-perceptions. The discrepancy between previous studies and the findings of the current study could be caused by the type of information provided by the digital influencer (Wang & Chuan-Chuan Lin, 2011) and the lack of a pre-existing emotional attachment towards digital influencers (Moussa & Touzani, 2017) which may cause respondents to be resistant to internalizing brand content that is advertised by influencers even if they do perceive them as influential individuals.

Results indicate that followers form higher BESC as a result of higher value co-creation with the endorsed brand. This finding is in-line with prior research by Nyadzayo et al. (2020) which identified value co-creation as a main contributor to BESC in luxury brand contexts. In influencer-marketing contexts, value co-creation is also a key contributing factor, as followers that actively partake in the co-creation process evoke a stronger brand-self connection through exchanging their opinions and inputs. Furthermore, this finding is aligned with results by Leckie et al. (2016) which showed that active participation of consumers through co-creation is related to the self-expression of consumers using brands. This can be attributed to the social exchange aspect in SET (Blau, 2017) where the interaction between influencers and followers allows brands to exchange product information with their consumers, forming a collaborative experience (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) that encourages internalization of brand content (Nyadzayo et al., 2020). Overall, this finding contributes to literature by proving the significance of value co-creation in forming stronger connections with followers, thus establishing that BESC can further lead to brand loyalty and positive WOM (Luo et al., 2015). Consistent with past studies by Ananda et al. (2016) and Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019), engaging online influencers in SMM activities leads to BESC. Followers build a relationship with brands through interactions and forums on SNS platforms. Thus, the more they engage with brand SMM activities (e.g. liking, following, and commenting on influencer-brand posts), the more likely they will see those brands as part of their self-concept. This finding also supports the argument that customers who participate in online activities with a brand are more satisfied and involved with that brand, which strengthens brand engagement (Millen & Patterson, 2002).

Notably, a key finding obtained from the analysis was the moderating effect of product involvement on the relationships of all three independent variables (perceived influence, value co-creation, SMM activities) and BESC. As such, the strength of these relationships is dependent on whether the consumer has low or high involvement with the brand products that are being advertised by digital influencers. The results show that as product involvement increases, the relationship between perceived influence and BESC becomes stronger. In other words, followers are more likely to internalise brand content from digital influencers when they are more involved with the products advertised. This finding contradicts the results from Rajaraman et al. (2020) which failed to identify any significant moderating effect of product involvement towards perceived influence of influencers. Furthermore, this differs from Kapitan and Silvera (2016) which stated that lower product involvement results in stronger emphasis on perceived influence and internalisation as they need more guidance from opinion leaders to make decisions. In the current study, the difference of results could be explained by the fact that consumers with higher product involvement tend to assume a higher level of risk (Tejavibulya & Eiamkanchanalai, 2011), thus they might rely on KOLs expertise in forming BESC with the advertised brand. As such, this finding adds to current literature by showing the importance of product involvement in moderating perceived influence and BESC.

Following that, the moderation analysis demonstrated a significant moderating effect of product involvement on the relationship between value co-creation and BESC. The higher the product involvement, the more likely the customer will interact with brands through value co-creation and form BESC. This finding is consistent with Belanche et al. (2020) which mentioned that higher product involvement encouraged followers to interact with brand content and influencers, which co-creates value. This is supported by the notion that heavily involved followers show more positive attitudes towards advertising campaigns (Belanche et al., 2017). Furthermore, Cowan and Ketron (2019) also identified that high product involvement resulted in more impressiveness which aids the development of co-creation and leads to higher brand engagement. However, Füller and Bilgram (2017) established different results whereby product involvement had no significant effect on co-creational experiences. Thus, the current findings exemplify

that level of product involvement is a significant moderating factor in influencer marketing and should be taken into consideration when designing co-creational programs with influencer-marketed brands.

Lastly, the moderating effect of product involvement on the relationship between SMM activities and BESC is supported. Similar to value co-creation, the direct relationship between SMM activities and BESC is only significant when product involvement is considered. This could be explained by research from Dessart (2017) showing that consumers are more engaged with SMM content when they are highly involved with products advertised. Comparably, Gong (2020) found that in low involvement situations, followers are less likely to absorb brand content on social media compared to high involvement conditions thus less likely to engage and internalise the brand message. Since, influencers encourage conversation on their accounts in order to boost followers' engagement (Hughes et al., 2019), followers with higher product involvement tend to interact more with influencer-product campaigns (Belanche et al., 2020). Hence, in influencer marketing contexts, product involvement is a key metric in understanding SMM and BESC.

4.1 Theoretical Implications

Supported by SET, this study infers that value co-creation is the most significant factor that is positively related to BESC, implying that marketers designing influencer marketing campaigns should include conversational and value-exchanging aspects among influencers and customers. Similar to prior research by Leckie et al. (2016) and Nyadzayo et al. (2020), the results support that participation activities are fundamental to generate engagement among audiences, in this case, followers of influencer-endorsed brands. Second, SMM activities are significant in increasing followers' BESC, demonstrating that information-sharing with followers through social media platforms facilitates interaction and engagement, congruent with past research by Ananda et al. (2016) and Nyadzayo et al. (2020). These findings respond to the research gap by illustrating that customer-centric aspects of marketing are also essential in influencer marketing campaigns. Notably, perceived influence is not a significant determinant to BESC, contrary to previous research by Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019). This finding could be attributed to other factors such as lack of previous emotional attachment (Moussa & Touzani, 2017) and information type provided by the influencer (Wang & Chuan-Chuan Lin, 2011). Hence, further investigation on the link between perceived influence and BESC is encouraged to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon. Third, this research highlights the significance of product involvement in influencer marketing studies. Specifically, the study found that the direct link between antecedents and BESC can be altered by the level of involvement followers assume with influencer-marketed products. At a lower involvement, followers are less inclined to form BESC through influencer marketing campaigns, nor are they likely to co-create value with brands and engage in SMM activities (and vice versa). Hence, this study adds to current literature by verifying the importance of testing product involvement dimensions in influencer-engagement studies. Furthermore, the study encourages future studies to recognize product involvement as a moderator in BESC and influencer related marketing research.

4.2 Practical Implications

Digital influencer marketing is becoming an integral part of global marketing strategies (Schomer, 2019) including Malaysia where most citizens are exposed to digital platforms (Dhesi, 2020). The research framework of this study has several implications for marketing managers. First, the study suggests that organisations adopting influencer marketing campaigns should use non-traditional marketing communications such as value co-creation activities to engage followers and encourage them to interact with the brand, which leads to internalization of brand content. For example, using local influencers to crowd-source feedback and suggestions for new packaging, design, and even brand activities (Nyadzayo et al., 2020). Second, marketing managers should explore trending social media platforms to implement influencer marketing campaigns. Increasing SMM activities lead to BESC, thus brands should regularly update their influencer's SMM activities and create a consistent brand identity across multiple platforms. For example, organisations can use platforms like TikTok to personalise influencer campaigns that resonate with younger target audiences under 30 who are budget-conscious; while using Instagram for slightly more mature audiences with higher spending power (Katz, 2021). This strategy ensures customers remain engaged with the influencer which makes it more likely for consumers to incorporate the brand as part of their identity, subsequently increasing conversion rates and the overall effectiveness of the influencer-endorsed brand campaign. Third, the findings revealed that product involvement significantly influences

followers' willingness to interact and comprehend influencer-brand content. Therefore, marketers should assess the level of product involvement specific to the followers of the influencers they plan to partner with. This is significant since the outcomes of this partnership will be more productive if these users are involved with the sort of products that the company wishes to promote in the influencer marketing campaign.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the current research contributes to the body of knowledge by determining the factors leading to BESC in an influencer marketing context. The paper investigated perceived influence and customer centric variables (value co-creation and SMM activities) to determine their impact on BESC. Furthermore, the research findings show that both value co-creation and SMM activities have a significant impact on BESC in the influencer marketing context, while perceived influence does not significantly impact BESC. Moreover, the moderation analysis displayed a significant moderating effect of product involvement on all three direct relationships on BESC.

The study has several limitations and potential for future research that should be acknowledged. First, the outcomes are influenced by the culture, demographics, and unique follower traits and personalities of Malaysian consumers. The study uses cross-sectional data which captures only a snapshot of followers' responses and is unable to justify cause-effect relationships. Thus, longitudinal studies are recommended to investigate causality and further observe followers' attitudes over time. Second, the generalizability of findings is limited due to the convenience sampling method (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Thus, other sampling techniques such as random sampling can be considered in further replications of the study. Furthermore, studies on BESC in the influencer marketing context are limited in general (Casaló et al., 2020; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Future researchers can expand on the model and explore other antecedents of BESC for a well-rounded framework. Lastly, the study was unable to find a significant relationship between perceived influence and BESC. Future researchers who intend to replicate this study can examine other potential pre-determinants of perceived influence such as influencer-follower emotional attachment (Moussa & Touzani, 2016), and influencer's trustworthiness (Magno & Cassia, 2018).

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APPENDIX A: Measurement items

Variable	Measurement items
Perceived influence (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).	My perceptions often change when I receive information from the influencer that I follow. I value the opinion of the influencer that I follow as if they were someone close whom I trust. The influencer that I follow suggests helpful products or brands to me.
Value co-creation (Nyadzayo et al., 2020).	I am willing to engage in innovative activities for brands recommended by the influencer I follow. I am willing to engage in innovative activities for brands recommended by the influencer I follow. I would like to offer my support to the brands recommended by the influencer I follow. I would like to offer my knowledge and skills toward the brands recommended by the influencer I follow. I like to feel part of and be involved in a community of the brands recommended by the influencer I follow.
Social media marketing (SMM) activities (Nyadzayo et al., 2020).	I like to follow Facebook/Instagram/Twitter accounts of brands suggested by the influencer I follow. I like to talk about brands suggested by the influencer I follow by posting content related to this specific brand on my social media platforms. I will respond to the content posted by these brands on their social media platforms such as liking, following, commenting or sharing. In general, I consider myself an active user on social media mediums.
BESC (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).	I often feel a personal connection between the brands suggested by the influencer that I follow and myself. Part of me is defined by the brands suggested by the influencer that I follow. I feel as if I have a close personal connection with the brands suggested by the influencer that I follow. There are links between the brands suggested by the influencer that I follow and how I view myself.
Product involvement (Dessart, 2017)	The type of product recommended by the influencer I follow is very important to me. The type of product recommended by the influencer I follow matters to me. When you buy this type of product, it is a big deal if you make a mistake. I particularly like this type of product recommended by the influencer I follow. You can really tell a lot about a person by the type of product he/she picks out.