

# Modern ethos: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of digital influencer credibility in building online consumer trust

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## ABSTRACT

Online consumer trust is a critical precedence that defines the success of digital marketing. The application of modern ethos investigates the credibility of digital influencers that plays a pivotal role in influencing behaviours and beliefs, managing doubts, and improving the level of trust among online consumers. The objectives of the study are to investigate the credibility strategies utilized by digital influencers in their content creation and to determine the employed methods in content creation for online consumers. Additionally, a qualitative approach was adopted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews involving a purposive sampling of ten respondents, divided into two groups of five digital influencers and five online consumers. The findings revealed two main superordinate themes: reputation and integrity. The subordinate themes under reputation are authenticity, relevancy, knowledge and experience, and attractiveness which were identified as the key strategies utilized by digital influencers to establish their credibility. Conversely, the integrity superordinate highlights four subordinate themes which are style, fact checking, truthfulness, and relatability. These subordinates represent the content creation methods utilized by digital influencers. This study contributes to the understanding of digital marketing phenomenology by focusing on the strategies that emphasize digital influencer's authenticity, consistency, and audience-centric approaches. The implications of the study also include the benefits for practitioners in maintaining their credibility through the aspects of reputation and

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integrity on social media. Furthermore, the importance of credibility suggests that digital influencers must uphold and prioritize their authenticity, consistency, and transparency in content creation. Audiences are becoming increasingly discerning, and any misconduct or perceived inconsistency may reduce their level of trust. Hence, digital influencers should invest in creating and demonstrating coherence in their personal brand, reflecting on genuine experience, expertise, and relatability.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Every single day, we are faced with choices, arguments, and pitches designed to sway our minds. But what truly drives us to say ‘yes’? The foundational answer lies in a concept crafted centuries ago. According to Aristotle’s Persuasion Theory, there are three facets that play significant roles in influencing people’s decisions. These facets are ethos, pathos and logos, usually used in tandem, can help people convince others that what they are saying is worth listening to (Durmonski, 2021). Ethos plays into the factor of a person’s credibility and the weight of trust that consumers have in them. Credibility is highly significant for individuals such as digital influencers as it influences online consumers’ behaviours and pose positive impacts on their purchase intentions (Coutinho et al., 2023). The application of modern ethos can be observed on social media through the utilization of digital influencer’s credibility in shaping online consumer’s behaviours, particularly purchase intentions.

There has been prior conducted research on the roles of digital influences impacting the online consumer’s decision making. A study by Abate et al. (2025), explored the positive impacts of digital influencer’s authenticity and social attractiveness towards promoting eco-friendly tourism destinations to online consumers. However, the results did not include the impacts on online consumer’s level of trust, both towards the digital influencers and the marketed tourism destinations. It is important to explore further the impacts of credibility towards gaining online consumer trust and the subsequent benefits that can be obtained once a high level of trust is achieved. Thus, it is pertinent for a study to be conducted with the purpose of investigating the extent of digital influencer’s credibility on impacting online consumer’s trust and whether this is a significant determinant of online consumer’s purchase intentions and behaviours.

As social media such as Instagram and TikTok evolved into platforms that are not only used for entertainment purposes, but rather an online marketplace for digital marketing as well, various businesses took this as an opportunity to further secure their place and relevance among the masses through the assistance of digital influencers and public figures. To ensure they are delivering a promising result for the companies that hired them, digital influencers rely on their persuasion skills to influence consumer’s decisions, garner their interests and promote strong brand awareness among their followers. Persuasive skills are valued by employers as these can affect many aspects of the performance in a job (Doyle, 2024). The reason why digital marketing is so popular in social media is due to the rise of influencer marketing. Geyser (2022) defined influencer marketing as a modern-day content driven marketing campaign featuring the collaborations between brands and influencers. Digital influencers act as a likeable ambassador compared to the marketing team in brands and companies, which makes them a powerful marketer and easier to gain consumer’s trust. Through this method, brands can increase awareness towards their presence and consumers can discover new and less popular products they might enjoy.

Moreover, credibility plays into the weight of trust that online consumers have on digital influencers. However, this privilege can easily be taken away through excessive product representations, resulting in declining trust towards digital influencers by their followers. People are becoming more aware and conscious through observing digital influencer's behaviour, finding them to be no longer authentic to be trusted (Shukla, 2023). Therefore, there is a need for a study to be conducted in investigating the types of credibility factors in utilized in building online consumer's trust and how these strategies influence online consumer's behaviour and consumption. In line with that, the study aimed to (1) investigate the credibility strategies used by digital influencers in content creation and (2) determine the methods utilized in terms of digital influencer's content creation.

## 2. MODERN ETHOS IN DIGITAL MARKETING

Trust is a strong indicator for behavioural change. It is generally understood as a decision taken by an agent A (the trustor) to rely on another agent B (the trustee) to perform a given action (Tagliaferri, 2022). In his study, Tagliaferri argued that trust can emerge in uncertain and risky environments and that it is possible to trust on-line identities when they are diachronic and sufficient data are available to assess their reputation. This shows how online reputation carries significant weight in dictating whether an individual is trustworthy or not. Digital influencers possess high value in credibility and are generally trusted by consumers especially in product endorsement. When lacking credibility, digital influencers face the implications of online consumers refusing to follow their advice and recommendations (Singh et al., 2025). When lacking the ability to be persuasive in their marketing, digital influencers are exposed to the possibilities of being ignored by online consumers as well as the refusal from hiring brands for collaborations.

In a study conducted by Belanche et al. (2021), they found that the digital influencer's online followers perceived the situation of when the influencers are paid to do any promotional activities, the action harms their credibility. Based on the answers provided by the respondents, they assumed product promotion to be lacking from truth as it is mediated by monetary purposes. However, this research focused more on improving managerial skills for both influencers and businesses to help consumers have better experience when exposed to future product promotions. In addition, it is crucial for digital influencers and brands to understand their audience and plan their marketing contents thoroughly to maintain consumer interest. Zhang and Zhao (2026) argued that when online consumers are constantly presented with a barrage of sponsored content, they are less inclined to engage and interact with both the influencers and brands. The key to this is a balanced approach in the spectrum of posting as doing too much or too little will both hurt the engagement with online consumers (Leung et al., 2022).

To ensure online consumers are successfully influenced into acting towards purchasing the endorsed products, digital influencers are required to arm themselves with sufficient credibility to generate trust. Among the factors that positively impact online consumer's trust towards digital influencer's content are the informative value, level of trustworthiness, the influencer's attractiveness, and the similarity between influencers and their followers, which ultimately affects the brand awareness and online consumer's purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). While both trustworthiness and attractiveness play a positive role in determining the brand's attitude, credibility, and online consumer's purchase intention, only trustworthiness is significant to low involvement consumers (Wang & Scheinbaum, 2017). This research

explored the importance of credibility and trust in influencing online consumer's behaviours and actions. Another finding by Saad et al. (2025) also discovered how the influencer's credibility becomes a driving factor in improving the University of Bisha's student's purchase intention.

On the other hand, the credibility of the endorsing brand also plays a crucial role in improving consumer's purchasing intention by affecting the conveyed message and positively impacting the attitude towards advertisement (Chin et al., 2019). In other words, the success of gaining consumer trust also lies within the brands themselves as well as the digital influencers. Furthermore, by appropriately collaborating with credible digital influencers, brands and businesses are also able to build trust with consumers and market their products successfully. This is relevant for brands to penetrate uncharted markets while attracting and acquiring new target audiences with the assistance of credible digital influencers. Furthermore, the credibility of social media influencers possesses the highest contributing value in influencing prospective English learners to enrol in Ho Chi Minh City's language centres (Dinh, 2025). Hence, it can be concluded that credibility is still important for digital influencers who are endorsing services other than physical products in digital marketing.

Conversely, a study by Elsharnouby et al. (2025) shows the positive yet different effects of influencer's credibility and their perceived similarity to consumers towards brand attitude, where similarity is more impactful compared to credibility. This provides an alternative perspective on other factors such as perceived similarity to be more significant than credibility in influencing consumer's attitude and acceptance towards endorsed brands. Moreover, while the digital influencer's credibility poses its contributions in generating online consumer trust, the value and quality of the content itself require credible sources for the persuasive strategies to be effective. Haroon et al. (2025) stated that the credibility of information, among other factors, has a crucial impact on Malaysian Gen-Z's purchase intention. This further indicates how the credibility of both digital influencers and the included information can instil the sense of trustworthiness within the target audience and persuade them into taking action. Particularly, this influence also impacts the younger generation, Gen-Z, who are arguably more tech-savvy compared to their older counterparts (Wiangkham et al., 2024; Latupasjana et al., 2025).

In short, trustworthiness is a vital factor that affects the digital influencer's credibility. When the digital influencer is perceived as credible, that in turn also strengthens online consumer's trust, making them more susceptible to the persuasive strategies employed. Moreover, previous studies have also revealed the potency of digital influencers in comparison to celebrities. This is a clear indication on how digital influencers are the more suitable candidates for brand endorsement and representation. Lastly, in the efforts of driving online consumer engagement and improving their purchase intentions, digital influencers can also utilize their credibility as trustworthy public figures. This sense of trust that coexists between digital influencers and online consumers assists in building loyalty and improves brand attitude.

### 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative research design to complement the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In addition, this study is modelled based on qualitative research as it allows various insights and perspectives into the area of study (Nazara et al., 2025). Qualitative research revolves around the process of collecting and examining non-numerical data such as audio and text to further understand

experiences and concepts (Bhandari, 2020). 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 respondents to share their unobstructed, personal narratives, paving a clearer path towards understanding how credibility plays a part in impacting online consumer's 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 often used by interpretivists as these methods are great sources of knowledge and the formation of understanding (Nickerson, 2024).

Furthermore, this study focused on two groups of respondents, the digital influencers who were actively participating in product endorsements and online consumers who have experienced or observed digital marketing on social media. Due to the two opposing types of respondents present in this study (digital influencers and online consumers), it allowed the research to analyse the interchange between two sides of perspectives. Subsequently, this format also provided the opportunity for respondents to share unexpected insights while staying true to the topics. From this, the researchers were able to group the information into specific themes and categorize the obtained data accordingly in the NVivo15 software. Then, the generated information was integrated into theories and subsequently utilized and compared to prior literature concerning the engagement of digital influencers' credibility strategies with online consumers and how it drove the formation of their perception and experiences.

### 3.1 Respondent Selection

There are two key groups focused on the study, Malaysian digital influencers and online consumers ranging from the ages of 20 to 38 years old. The reasoning behind the selection of these respondents was based on the aim of understanding how social variations lead to the exploration of different perceptions and participation in digital marketing as well as the impacts on respondents. Furthermore, this sampling strategy was positioned to encapsulate the divergence of two groups under observation, the digital influencers utilizing credibility as a persuasive strategy and the online consumers who are providing engagement based on their level of trust. This approach allowed the researchers to examine the phenomenon from different points of view, gaining a better insight into how credibility was utilized in content creation and what drives online consumer's engagement on social media.

In total, 5 digital influencers and 5 online consumer respondents were selected to be part of the study, allowing the researchers to conduct a comprehensive cross-perspective analysis that is much sought after within interpretative phenomenological studies. Moreover, all respondents were made aware that the interview sessions would be recorded and utilized for research purposes as well as required to sign a consent form to provide their approval. Additionally, during the process of data collection, the researchers appealed to the non-probability sampling approach. Non-probability sampling carries the definition as a sampling technique where the sample is specifically selected by the researcher based on their subjective judgment rather than arbitrary selection (Nikolopoulou, 2022). As previously stated, only digital influencers who possessed experience in influencer marketing and brand collaboration were selected and those who do not meet this criterion were excluded.

### 3.2 Data Gathering and Analysis Technique

The data collection process involved in-depth interviews with two distinct groups of respondents, digital influencers and online consumers. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured in a semi-

formal environment for the respondents to be more comfortable in understanding and responding to the questions. All the data and insights obtained from the interviews were collectively analysed using NVivo 15 software. During the process of data collection, necessary and important notes were taken to be further utilized in the analysis stages. This is a crucial step with its own merits as it helps the researcher to contextualize the gathered information (Santos et al., 2025).

Once the data gathering process commenced, the researchers performed constant updates on the collected information in the NVivo 15 software. This assisted greatly in the process of recording data, assimilating the differently identified themes as well as keeping tracks on the data saturation progress rate. Aside from that, the researcher also utilized the software in the transcription process. Due to the tedious nature of this process, the software provided convenience for the researcher to efficiently go through all the recorded data from the interviews along with the excerpts obtained from observing the comment section. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that the codes formulated from the interview transcript will additionally contribute to the categorization of data. In other words, coding occurs when the collected qualitative data undergoes a labelling process which will then be organized accordingly to identify various themes and any underlying connections (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Below is the figure depicting the process of data analysis for IPA.

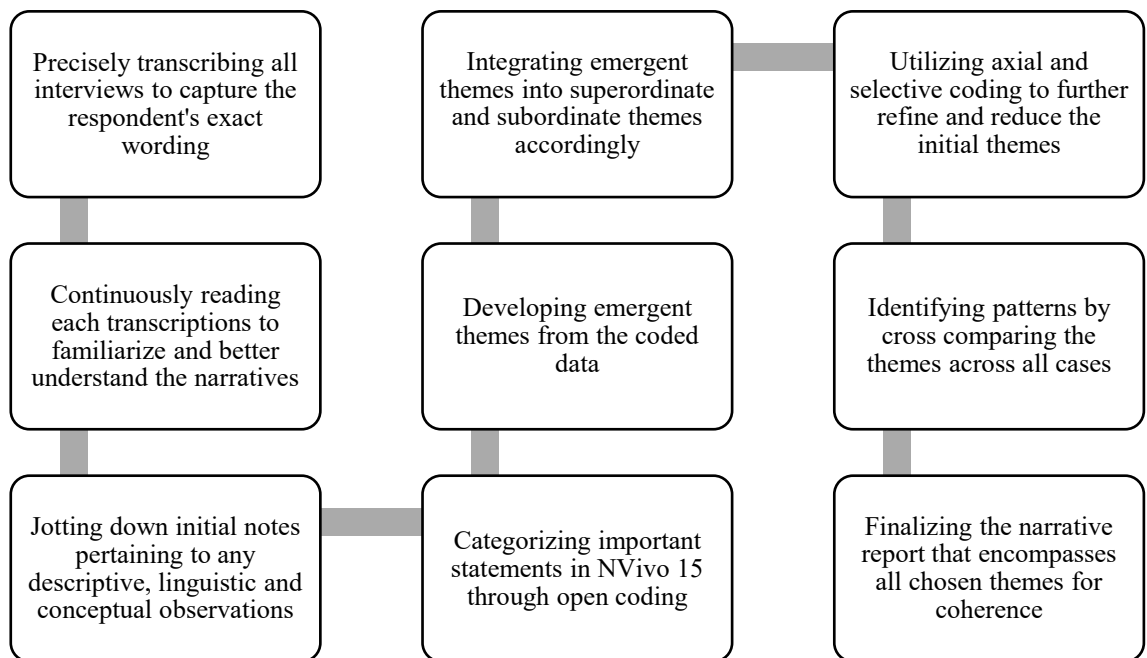


Figure 1 The data analysis process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

#### 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study carries the objective of investigating the credibility strategies used by digital influencers in content creation and determining the methods of content creation impacting online consumer's behaviour and consumption. The focus of the study revolves around the dynamic relationship between digital

influencers and regular social media users, known as online consumers. In achieving the objective, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with selected digital influencers and online consumers to obtain their valuable perspectives on the existing relationship between them on social media such as Instagram and TikTok. The accumulated data, coded systematically 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, was organized methodically according to emergent superordinates and subordinates. The dataset served as a foundation for the model to address and answer the questions which ultimately assists the researcher through discovering the impacts of digital influencer's credibility in building online consumer's trust.

Based on their accounts, two overarching themes, referred to as superordinate, were identified as key in understanding the methods utilized by digital influencers to build their credibility in gaining online consumer trust. These are Reputation and Integrity. Each superordinate consists of their respective subordinate themes such as authenticity, relevancy, the digital influencer's knowledge and attractiveness, style, fact checking, truthfulness, and reliability. This thematic framework assists in understanding how digital influencers strive to build their credibility as to appear more trustworthy to online consumers. Below is the table depicting the superordinate and subordinate themes obtained from the process of IPA data analysis.

Table 4.1 Superordinates and subordinates for the strategies and methods used by digital influencers in building their credibility to gain online consumer's trust.

| Superordinates | Subordinates             |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| Reputation     | Authenticity             |
|                | Relevancy                |
|                | Knowledge and Experience |
|                | Attractiveness           |
| Integrity      | Style                    |
|                | Factchecking             |
|                | Truthfulness             |
|                | Relatability             |

In the efforts of discovering and understanding the credibility strategies and content creation methods utilized by digital influencers to gain online consumer's trust, the researchers identified two superordinates through a thorough analysis process. These main superordinates represent a structured model while providing a deeper comprehension into both methods utilized and characteristics portrayed by digital influencers in their pursuit of gaining online consumer's trust and further ensuring interaction and engagement for their created contents on social media. The reputation superordinate examines the credibility strategies related to the digital influencer's authenticity, their relevance in creating contents matching with their reputation, the influencer's level of knowledge and experience, and the influencer's attractiveness used in farming interactions and engagements.

On the other hand, the integrity superordinate is explored from analysing the methods utilized in terms of digital influencer's content creation styles, their tendency to perform compulsory fact checking before posting any contents on social media, the indication of truth, both hinted and publicly presented in their created contents, and the relatability representing the mutual interests between the influencer's created contents and online consumer's preferred type of contents.

#### 4.1 Reputation

The title of a digital influencer carries a significant meaning amongst other online consumers, especially regarding their social image. Thus, digital influencers are often under huge scrutiny on the things they say or do whether it is on or off social media platforms. While being a social media influencer offers both financial rewards and celebrity-like opportunities, they do not escape intense scrutiny from the public and constantly risking their reputation (Wong & Hung, 2026). In hindsight, possessing a good reputation ultimately assists digital influencers in maintaining their social status and increasing their number of followers. Hence, there are various strategies that can be employed.

##### *Authenticity*

An important note to consider for digital influencers is to aim for and preserve their authenticity in the process of content creation. By showing their authentic self to online consumers, digital influencers are seen as more credible and trustworthy. A successful influencer marketing is driven by both the influencer's credibility and authenticity (Zniva et al., 2023). A recurring pattern can be observed among digital influencer informants where they are highly aware of the online consumer's needs and desires to see authenticity and genuine personality portrayed by digital influencers. This highlights a significant persuasive method that can be utilized by digital influencers to improve their credibility by maintaining their online reputation.

*I would say just be honest with your followers, don't be fake because people can detect that very easily and they will hate you if you're fake. Just be yourself. I do that all the time. In my opinion, people want to see you, the real you. Not some fake personality that you cook up to show to people online -*  
(Influencer 3)

In the narrative shared above, Influencer 3 shared their insights on the consequences of digital influencers portraying a fake personality to online consumers on social media. Aside from that, Influencer 3 also provided their perspectives on what digital influencers ought to do, which is to stay true to their values and be honest with their followers. Another takeaway that can be summarised from the shared narrative is the awareness that Influencer 3 possesses in understanding the digital influencer landscape where an artificial personality is utilized as a front and a façade by digital influencers to portray to online consumers on social media.

A personal connection is established when online consumers detect genuine and trustworthy personalities from digital influencers, leading them to believe and accept opinions and product endorsements with little scepticism. This sense of trust and acceptance can be translated into a growth of loyalty and increased support from online consumers due to their preference in engaging with public figures who, in their eyes, are seen as reputable individuals with mutual values. Ultimately, the authenticity showcased by digital influencers are greatly appreciated by online consumers and their reciprocation is often in the forms of increased rate of interaction and engagement with the contents created by digital influencers.

##### *Relevancy*

Another important aspect to keep in mind is the digital influencer's relevance in content creation. In other words, digital influencers who keep to their niche and create contents that match their online reputation will appear more credible in other online consumers' eyes. Similarly, more brands and

companies are mobilizing to actively seek out individuals who possess great influence on social media to represent their names and ensure a deeper and stronger resonance with the audience they are targeting (Sarkis et al., 2026).

*One thing that I would understand usually is that if you want to trust a product explained by an influencer, you must see the background as well. You don't take a tech savvy influencer explaining about sport shoes, right? Because it's out of their field - (OC 2)*

From the shared narratives above, digital influencer's background and reputation are pertinent to their created content. OC 2 discussed the absolute necessity to take a digital influencer's background into consideration before coming to terms with the product endorsements. Moreover, OC 2 highlighted the importance of contemplating a tech-savvy digital influencer's niche as it would be illogical to trust them with sports shoes endorsements. This perspective brings an emphasis on how endorsements that do not match the digital influencer's reputation will not contribute to their relevance on social media.

To reiterate, it is definitively important for digital influencers to create content that matches their reputation and adheres to their areas of expertise all the while ensuring the content remains authentic and relevant. Furthermore, it will further boost the digital influencer's credibility and assist in preventing the loss of trust from online consumers.

#### *Knowledge and Experience*

Furthermore, a digital influencer's credibility is further heightened when they portray themselves to be knowledgeable and experienced in their content creations. A live streamer who possesses excellent product knowledge and strong communication skills is better in presenting products to online consumers, ultimately enhancing online consumers' confidence towards the products and potentially improves their purchase decisions (Wang et al., 2022). Therefore, this will improve the likeliness of them interacting and engaging with the digital influencer's contents and ultimately results in them consuming more of the digital influencer's future contents.

*In the D&D community especially the local scene in Malaysia, people care about accurate and correctly researched content and if they appear trustworthy, the advice and recommendations are taken seriously. I feel like credibility helps a lot in building a loyal audience, and if the influencer is lacking in that department, I'll just look for information elsewhere - (OC 5)*

OC 5 stated the significance of credibility among digital influencers in the Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) community. To achieve the level of credibility valued by OC 5, the digital influencer must possess a deep understanding of how the board game is played as well as the lore or storyline that drives the D&D campaign. Furthermore, within such a specified community, information accuracy in a well-versed content is also important. Therefore, by possessing all the qualities, a digital influencer can secure a loyal and engaged follower base through their credibility as well as having their endorsements and recommendations met with high regards and respect.

In short, the digital influencer's knowledge and experience contribute to their credibility on social media. Even in the unconventional field such as tabletop gaming, online consumers have a higher tendency to trust and accept a digital influencer's recommendations and opinions as well as engaging with their created contents if a deep and sufficient understanding of their niche is demonstrated. On the other hand,

when a digital influencer fails to show a sufficient level of knowledge and experience in their content creation, this may lead to severe repercussions that pose threat to the success of their reputation and career.

### *Attractiveness*

It is fair to note that not all online consumers have similar preferences in determining their interaction and engagement with a digital influencer's contents. While some may uphold a higher standard in terms of requiring the digital influencers to be authentic, relevant, knowledgeable and experienced, others may also consider the digital influencer's attractiveness as a prerequisite before deciding to follow, interact and engage with the digital influencer's contents. In endorsement campaigns involving brands and products to enhance one's attractiveness, the influencer's own attractiveness carries a significant impact towards the success of the campaigns (Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2022).

*Honestly, I would follow content that matches my interests. Like funny contents, funny videos as long as it's not offensive or rude. Also, if the influencer is good looking \*laughs\* I mean...there's nothing wrong in having a preference, right? This is a free country! - (OC 1)*

OC 1 stressed that attractiveness does impact their decision in following digital influencers on social media. They argue that they only follow content that is in line with their preference which stands out to be humorous but non-offensive content. Furthermore, they also outlined the physical attractiveness of the digital influencer as another reason in following as they openly admitted that they prefer digital influencers who are better groomed. This goes to show that their engagement choices are indeed affected by content aligning with their preference as well as the digital influencer's level of attractiveness. Moreover, OC 1 also indicated that there is nothing wrong with their choices and way of thinking due to these being personal and do not infringe on breaking any laws.

In a nutshell, a digital influencer's credibility is determined by various factors that help boost their reputation. A constant challenge faced by digital influencers would be the broad market of audience that needs to be satisfied. In other words, it is highly advisable for digital influencers to be the jack-of-all-trades rather than the master-of-none, whereby they have a higher chance of satisfying the consuming needs of most online consumers. Additionally, they will also be seen as a versatile content creator and thus increases the opportunity to be considered by hiring brands and companies to represent their products. In addition, online consumer's purchase decisions are also strongly influenced by the digital influencer's trustworthiness, level of expertise and physical attractiveness (Baudier & Boissieu, 2024). On the contrary, either neglecting usage or failure in properly navigating through these factors pose various threats to a digital influencer's reputation where online consumer's trust will begin to decline, affecting their rate of interaction and engagement and overall impacting the digital influencer's reputation on social media.

## **4.2 Integrity**

A digital influencer's integrity can be represented by various methods. One of the ways is to utilize editing style into their content creation. This is done to ensure the content appears professional, understandable and well refined. Furthermore, by editing through their contents, digital influencers are also able to enhance the content quality and produce an interesting and well-organized post, improving the online consumer's overall experience. In addition, conducting factchecking before proceeding with any content creation can also enhance a digital influencer's integrity as it assists in the process of producing

accurately curated posts containing the right information. Moreover, this practice also helps to ensure online consumers to be comfortable in engaging with the content created.

Another method that can be utilized by digital influencers to safeguard their integrity is by being truthful in their content creation. This approach can promote more engagement from online consumers as they are more confident in consuming genuine content on social media. Lastly, producing relatable content that aligns with online consumer's interests and preferences can also improve a digital influencer's integrity. This practice not only assists in maintaining and strengthening their influence among online consumers but also attracts new followers to grow their reputation.

### *Style*

Incorporating editing styles in content creation makes a digital influencer appear unique from the masses. A strong fan base among online consumers can be harnessed by digital influencers creating a distinctive image for the brands through the usage of visually appealing and concise editing style that highlights the product. Thus, this can lead to better production of quality content which in turn increases the engagement rate by online consumers.

*I can do basic Photoshop so for simple picture posts, I will edit the picture to be nice and attractive and then post on social media. For video posts, I usually just record myself talking about the products or sometimes the brand will send me promotional videos for me to share so that's easier for me and I just need to give the caption only – (Influencer 5)*

Based on the narratives shared by Influencer 5, it can be observed that even by utilizing basic Photoshop skills in their content creation, the goal to create visually attractive content can still be achieved. In terms of video content creation, Influencer 5 discussed two methods of recording themselves showcasing the products or utilizing the promotional videos that were provided by the brands. This approach assists them greatly in their process of creating content as well as simplifying their workflow and reducing their strain down to drafting only captions to pair with the videos.

All in all, the styles of editing play a vital part in their content creation process by improving the overall quality and ensuring the visual essence of the content to appeal to online consumers. Although the specifications of editing tools and software may differ from using Photoshop, digital influencers are provided with a wide array of choices in making their content visually appealing and interesting. This further showcases the very significance of understanding the audience preferences and utilizing personalized editing styles to both attract and retain followers on social media.

### *Factchecking*

Among the many ways of building and retaining trust with online consumers, digital influencers can also form the habits of conducting fact checking before creating contents. In doing so, not only will the presented information be verified, but their reputation as a trustworthy digital influencer can also be established. The advantages of conducting fact checking before content creation entail the risk reduction from spreading false information and forging a deeper connection with online consumers who value information authenticity and truthfulness, leading to them gaining confidence in the created content.

*I will ask what the ingredients and products are highlights first before I create the posts. I will also google online reviews to see what other people think about the products and then share the reviews to my*

*followers also. Also, one more thing, I will ask my group members if they have used the products or not - (Influencer 1)*

Based on the narrative shared above, Influencer 1 entails their process on content creation by seeking more information on the product such as the featured highlights and ingredients to obtain a clear understanding of the product. In doing so, Influencer 1 ensures that they remain accurate and transparent with what they are promoting, which makes it easier for them to share the information with online consumers. Furthermore, in their attempts to gain a better perspective and view on the product itself, they also seek out relevant reviews online with the purpose of adding a layer of authenticity. Additionally, Influencer 1 consults the members of their group to obtain extra information from those who may have used the products themselves. This multilayered approach further validates their credibility, increases online consumer's trust towards them, and ultimately increases the engagement rate.

All in all, preparing themselves with sufficient and accurate information, digital influencers can communicate the product highlights and effectiveness to online consumers, all the while addressing the product's downsides to demonstrate transparency and unbiasedness. This, in turn, assists in building the digital influencer's credibility and fosters trust within online consumers to further interact and engage with the contents.

### *Truthfulness*

Digital influencers who present themselves as honest tend to attract online consumers to engage with their content. Through being truthful in all aspects, digital influencers can foster trust with their audience and become better at influencing online consumers with their opinions and recommendations. Subsequently, the digital influencer's brand and reputation can also be strengthened as online consumers are more likely to endorse public figures who have gained their trust in other social media users. Thus, the digital influencer's reach and influence will be boosted organically.

*Yes, I think being truthful to your followers is important. Because that is what builds your name, you know, and then affects your presence in social media. Like imagine if you keep on lying and they catch you and then people don't like you, they don't trust you so it's hard for you to do reviews or get good engagement for your contents and no brands want to work with you - (Influencer 4)*

Influencer 4 shared their views on how digital influencers can build their reputation and maintain their presence on social media, particularly by being truthful to online consumers. Conversely, when digital influencers continue to be dishonest with online consumers and eventually get exposed for their wrongdoings, it will significantly impact the effectiveness of their influence as trust from online consumers diminishes. This will further lead to a chain of effects where it becomes more difficult for digital influencers to do reviews and achieve good engagement, leading to less brand collaborations. Therefore, it can be surmised that incorporating truthfulness in the content offers manifold advantages for digital influencers such as improving their influence and overall relationship with online consumers as well as attracting potential brand partnerships.

In short, the gist pointed out by Influencer 4 illustrates the vital role of truthfulness in content creation. By demonstrating honesty, digital influencers can ensure their recommendations and perspectives are trusted and accepted by online consumers. Subsequently, this leads to higher interaction and engagement

rates as well as inducing brands to consider partnerships with digital influencers who present themselves as genuine advocates for their products.

### *Relatability*

Digital influencers aim to create content that can effectively satisfy online consumers. One of the best ways to achieve this is to ensure their contents reflect a semblance of relatability and similarities on online consumers. By incorporating the relatable aspects such as daily experience and life challenges in their contents, digital influencers can establish a strong connection with online consumers. Furthermore, the power of content relatability also impacts the interaction and engagement rate of online consumers as they feel understood and seen by the digital influencers. Consumers are more inclined to bond with both live contents and social media influencers (SMI) when the content appears relevant, credible and the level of professionalism portrayed by the SMIs is satisfactory (Shao, 2024).

*I would go for the content they push out, and whether they align with my current interests. I am a huge fan of video games, and I solely watch contents about the gaming industry like the AAA companies, what new games they are releasing or any new updates to the current existing ones - (OC 4)*

From the narratives shared by OC 4, they highlighted the requirements that need to be fulfilled before deciding to follow the digital influencer. Aside from the type of content matching their current interests, OC 4 also places their consideration on engaging with a digital influencer who creates contents specifically related to the gaming industry. Furthermore, being a huge fan of video games and having preference on engaging with contents regarding AAA gaming companies, OC 4 possesses specific requirements that not all digital influencers are able to satisfy. Thus, this further proves that contents created by digital influencers who are not within the gaming industry and niche are less likely to be interacted and engaged by OC 4.

To conclude, the digital influencer's integrity on social media is documented through their methods of editing content and specialized styles, conducting fact checking before content creation, ensuring truthfulness in both product endorsement and information circulation as well as creating relatability within their contents to adhere to online consumer's needs and interests. These practices benefit the digital influencers by ensuring their created content remains relevant and quality induced for online consumers. Moreover, through the implementation of these practices, a digital influencer is also able to maintain their positive influence and reputation on social media, making efforts in utilizing persuasive strategies to be impactful in their career growth.

## **5. 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 to gain online consumer's trust. The study addressed two research objectives, namely: (1) investigate the credibility strategies used by digital influencers in content creation and (2) determine the methods utilized in terms of digital influencer's content creation.

The findings reveal that credibility is primarily constructed through two interrelated dimensions which are reputation and integrity. Reputation is shaped through the digital influencers' ability to present themselves as authentic, relevant, knowledgeable, and visually appealing. Furthermore, authenticity emerges as a

cornerstone, as audiences increasingly value genuine and transparent content over overly curated or artificial portrayals. At the same time, relevancy ensures that digital influencers remain aligned with current trends and online consumer interests, while demonstrated knowledge and experience reinforce their authority within specific niches. Physical attractiveness, although more surface-level, still plays a role in capturing initial attention and sustaining audience engagement.

Integrity, on the other hand, reflects the ethical and relational aspects of credibility. A unique content style allows influencers to differentiate themselves in a saturated digital space while factchecking and truthfulness contribute to perceived reliability. Relatability further strengthens this bond, as online consumers are more likely to trust digital influencers whose experiences and perspectives mirror their own. Together, these elements suggest that credibility is both performative and perceptual, requiring consistency between what digital influencers present and what online consumers believe.

This study contributes to the understanding of digital marketing by emphasizing that successful digital influencer strategies rely on authenticity, consistency, and audience-centric approaches. For practitioners, the findings highlight the importance of demonstrating credibility by maintaining the aspects of reputation and integrity on social media. For researchers, the study offers a framework for examining digital influencer effectiveness in digital marketing through the utilization of credibility strategies within content creation. In terms of practical applications, digital influencers, marketers, and brands operating in the digital ecosystem can benefit from the findings of this study. Furthermore, the centrality of credibility suggests that digital influencers must prioritize authenticity, consistency, and transparency in their content creation. Audiences are increasingly discerning, and any perceived inconsistency such as misleading claims or lack of sincerity may undermine trust. Hence, digital influencers should therefore invest in building a coherent personal brand that reflects genuine experience, expertise, and relatability.

The limitations presented in the study include the interpretive nature of IPA, meaning that findings are context-specific and not intended for broad generalization. The results reflect the experiences of a particular group of participants within a specific cultural and digital context. Furthermore, the researchers' role in interpreting the data brings forth a degree of subjectivity, albeit being an acceptable aspect of qualitative inquiry. Therefore, future research may consider combining IPA with other methodologies to ensure extended findings across larger populations. Despite these limitations, IPA remains highly valuable for generating rich, theory-building insights in emerging research areas such as digital influencer marketing.

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## **7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

## 8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

**Wan Allef Elfi Danial Wan Sukeri:** Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing-original draft; **Wan Hartini Wan Zainodin:** Conceptualisation, methodology, supervision and validation; **Ireena Nasiha Ibnu:** Conceptualisation, supervision, and validation.

## 9. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## 10. ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (Approval No: REC/07/2023 (PG/MR/242). All procedures involving human respondent subjects were in fulfilment of the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and data anonymity was strictly maintained throughout the study.

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