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THE ROLE OF TIKTOK MICRO-INFLUENCERS IN SHAPING GEN Z'S PURCHASE INTENTIONS TOWARD CLEAN BEAUTY SERVICES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has emerged as a powerful platform influencing consumer behaviour, especially among Generation Z. In Malaysia, the clean beauty industry is growing rapidly, with micro-influencers playing a key role in shaping purchasing decisions through authentic and relatable content. However, limited research has explored how micro-influencers affect Gen Z's intentions to try clean beauty services. This study investigates the impact of TikTok micro-influencers' credibility, perceived similarity, and engagement rate on Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean beauty services. A quantitative research design was employed using structured questionnaires distributed to over 200 Malaysian Gen Z respondents aged 13 to 28. Data were analysed using SPSS software through descriptive, correlation, and regression analyses. The results revealed that influencer credibility, perceived similarity, and engagement rate significantly influence Gen Z's purchase intentions, with engagement rate emerging as the strongest predictor. This study addresses an important research gap by focusing on TikTok micro-influencers and clean beauty services in the Malaysian Gen Z context. This area remains underexplored in the existing literature. The study also contributes theoretically by extending the application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to short-form video marketing and service-based influencer marketing. Practically, the study provides insights for clean beauty marketers to develop more effective influencer strategies. Theoretically, it adds to the understanding of influencer marketing and Gen Z consumer behaviour in Malaysia's digital landscape.

Keywords: *TikTok, micro-influencers, Gen Z, clean beauty services, purchase intentions*

INTRODUCTION

The global beauty industry is evolving through the rise of the clean beauty movement, emphasising non-toxic ingredients, ethical sourcing, and sustainability (Jamil et al., 2024). The clean beauty movement has evolved beyond product consumption and increasingly influences beauty and wellness experiences that emphasize sustainability, ethical practices, and holistic skincare approaches (Shim et al., 2024). This shift aligns with Generation Z (born 1997–2012), a tech-savvy group valuing authenticity and ethical consumption (Adi & Qastharin, 2024), with TikTok emerging as a key platform influencing Malaysian youth's purchase behaviour, where micro-influencers (10k–100k followers) are perceived as more authentic and relatable than celebrities (Sitorus et al., 2024; Jamil et al., 2024). Theoretically, this study expands the application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) in service-based influencer marketing, a previously under-researched area (Jamil et al., 2024), while validating perceived similarity and engagement rate as critical peripheral cues for Gen Z's consumption decisions on TikTok. Practically, it identifies influencer traits, namely credibility, relatability, and engagement, that most effectively drive bookings for clean beauty services, enabling a data-driven approach that prioritises authenticity over follower count (Putri & Dwityas, 2023). The findings further contribute to policy discussions for advertising regulators in Malaysia (Sitorus et al., 2024), highlighting the need for clearer disclosure standards to promote ethical and transparent influencer practices among young consumers.

Despite the clean beauty boom and TikTok's influence, existing literature suffers from a notable gap, as most studies focus on product-based marketing or macro-influencers, leaving a gap in how micro-influencers affect Gen Z's intention to purchase clean beauty services in Malaysia (Adi & Qastharin, 2024; Sitorus et al., 2024). Existing literature broadly confirms the rise of the clean beauty trend and its expansion into service offerings (Putri & Dwityas, 2023), highlights TikTok as a primary information and influence source for Gen Z consumers in Malaysia (Sitorus et al., 2024), and identifies the persuasive power of key influencer attributes, namely credibility (trustworthiness, knowledge, and authenticity) and perceived similarity, in shaping purchase intentions within the beauty and wellness sector (Jamil et al., 2024). However, research disproportionately focuses on macro-influencers and product endorsements, leaving an unmet need for empirical evidence concerning the combined effect of micro-influencers' traits, specifically credibility, similarity, and engagement rate, on Gen Z's intentions to purchase service-based clean beauty offerings within the localised Malaysian market. While established literature confirms the effectiveness of influencer marketing on purchase intentions, a theoretical contradiction exists between the focus of current academic efforts and the direction of market reality, as the majority of research utilises ELM to analyse the impact of macro-influencers and product marketing (Jamil et al., 2024), whereas the clean beauty sector is rapidly pivoting toward high-trust service offerings (Putri & Dwityas, 2023) driven by highly authentic micro-influencers (Adi & Qastharin, 2024).

The central research gap is two-fold. First, academic studies have primarily focused on the influence of macro-influencers and product-based marketing (Jamil et al., 2024), creating a void in understanding the impact of niche micro-influencers on consumers' intentions to purchase non-tangible services like clean beauty treatments (Adi & Qastharin, 2024). Second, there is a critical lack of localised empirical data specific to the Malaysian market, meaning the application of global influencer marketing trends may not accurately reflect the purchase behaviour of Malaysian Gen Z on platforms like TikTok (Sitorus et al., 2024). Therefore, the core research problem is the lack of empirical evidence detailing how the specific attributes of TikTok micro-influencers, namely their credibility, perceived similarity, and engagement rate, influence Gen Z's purchase intentions specifically for clean beauty services in the Malaysian market. Without this targeted understanding, brands risk misallocating resources on ineffective marketing strategies that fail to resonate with this socially conscious consumer base. This study therefore explores the role of TikTok micro-influencers in shaping Gen Z's purchase intentions, focusing on three attributes, namely credibility (trustworthiness, knowledge, authenticity) (Jamil et al., 2024), perceived similarity (relatability) (Adi & Qastharin, 2024), and engagement rate (social proof) (Maliavina, 2025), addressing this gap by simultaneously examining the effect of micro-influencer attributes on service purchase intentions within the specific local context.

The primary objectives of this study are to empirically examine the influence of TikTok micro-influencers' attributes on Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean beauty services in Malaysia. Grounded in the ELM, this study investigates how central- and peripheral-route persuasion cues influence consumer decision-making in TikTok's digital environment. Specifically, this research aims to examine the effect of TikTok micro-influencers' credibility on Gen Z's purchase intentions for clean beauty services in Malaysia, to investigate how perceived similarity between TikTok micro-influencers and Gen Z consumers influences their purchase intentions, and to analyse the relationship between engagement rates (likes, comments, shares) of TikTok micro-influencers and Gen Z's intention to purchase clean beauty services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the reviewed literature, previous studies consistently show that TikTok micro-influencers influence Gen Z's purchase intentions through factors such as credibility, perceived similarity, and engagement rate (Table 1). However, the strength of these relationships may vary across contexts and service industries, highlighting the need to examine these dynamics within the Malaysian clean beauty sector.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: TikTok micro-influencers' credibility has a significant positive relationship with Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean beauty services.

Table 1 Independent variable and dependent variable

Reference	Independent Variable	Method	Dependent Variable	Theory	Findings	Remark
Jamil et al. (2024)	Influencer Credibility (Trustworthiness, Knowledgeable, Authenticity)	Survey	Gen Z's Purchase Intentions Toward Clean Beauty Services	Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)	Credibility increases trust and purchase intentions	Positive
Farivar et al. (2023)	Influencer Credibility	Survey	Purchase Intentions	ELM	High credibility enhances trust and the likelihood of purchase	Positive
Adi & Qastharin (2024)	Perceived Similarity (Relatability)	Survey	Purchase Intentions	ELM	Relatability boosts emotional connection and intention	Positive
Thaichon (2022)	Perceived Similarity (Relatability)	Survey	Purchase Intentions	ELM	Similarity strongly predicts purchase behaviour	Positive
Salo (2024); Maliavina (2025)	Engagement Rate (Likes, Comments, Shares)	Survey	Purchase Intentions	ELM	Engagement improves brand awareness and intent	Positive
Felix et al. (2024)	Engagement Rate	Survey	Purchase Intentions	ELM	High TikTok engagement (8-12%) influences Gen Z	Positive
Sardar and Sarkar (2024)	Engagement Rate	Survey	Purchase Intentions	ELM	Authentic content enhances Gen Z response	Positive

H2: Perceived similarity between TikTok micro-influencers and Gen Z consumers has a significant positive relationship with Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean beauty services.

H3: Engagement Rate of TikTok micro-influencers has a significant positive relationship with Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean beauty services.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study (Figure1) illustrates how specific attributes of TikTok micro-influencers shape Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean beauty services in Malaysia. The framework connects three independent variables: Influencer Credibility, Perceived Similarity, and Engagement Rate, to the dependent variable, Purchase Intention.

This framework proposes that when micro-influencers are viewed as credible and relatable and maintain strong audience engagement, Gen Z consumers are more likely to develop favourable attitudes and intentions to try clean beauty services such as facials, skincare consultations, or eco-friendly treatments. The framework visually links these influencer characteristics as antecedents leading to purchase intention, reflecting both rational and emotional dimensions of persuasion within the TikTok environment.

Theoretical Basis

This study is grounded in the ELM developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), which explains how individuals process persuasive messages through two distinct routes: central and peripheral. The central route involves careful evaluation of message quality, while the peripheral route depends on simple cues such as source attractiveness or popularity. In this study, Influencer Credibility serves as a central-route cue, as Gen Z evaluates the influencer's expertise and trustworthiness before forming purchase intentions. Perceived Similarity and Engagement Rate operate as peripheral cues that influence attitudes through emotional resonance and social validation.

The ELM provides a suitable theoretical lens for TikTok's short-form, high-interaction content environment, where consumers combine cognitive assessment and emotional heuristics in decision-making. The

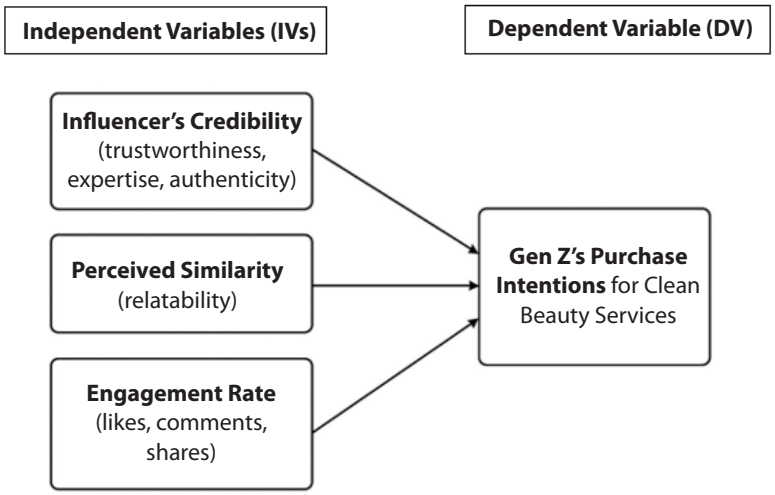

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

framework, therefore, integrates both rational (credibility) and affective (similarity, engagement) factors to explain how TikTok micro-influencers affect Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean beauty services in Malaysia.

The application of ELM is particularly relevant in TikTok's fast-paced digital environment, where users are continuously exposed to large volumes of short-form content. In such environments, consumers often rely on heuristic and emotional cues rather than extensive cognitive evaluation. Engagement indicators such as likes, comments, and shares function as peripheral cues that quickly signal popularity and social approval, influencing purchase intentions without deep message processing. Meanwhile, influencer credibility serves as a central cue as consumers evaluate an influencer's expertise, trustworthiness, and authenticity before making purchase decisions. Therefore, ELM provides a comprehensive explanation of how both cognitive and emotional persuasion mechanisms shape Gen Z consumers' behavioural intentions on TikTok.

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sampling

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the effect of TikTok micro-influencers on Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean beauty services in Malaysia. The target population comprised Malaysian Gen Z individuals aged 13 to 28 years old who are active TikTok users and have engaged with beauty-related content. Over 200 questionnaires were distributed through TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp, and 252 valid responses were collected. Although the Raosoft sample size calculator suggested 271 responses for optimal confidence, the collected data were still adequate and statistically reliable for regression analysis involving multiple independent variables.

Instrument Development

The questionnaire items were adapted from validated scales in prior influencer marketing and consumer behaviour studies (Jamil et al., 2024; Adi & Qastharin, 2024). The instrument measured four constructs: Influencer Credibility, Perceived Similarity, Engagement Rate, and Purchase Intentions, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The instrument underwent pilot testing with 21 respondents to ensure clarity, reliability, and internal consistency before full deployment.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected online using Google Forms, ensuring accessibility and efficiency among digital-native respondents. The dataset was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, following a systematic procedure:

1. Descriptive Statistics were used to summarise respondents' demographics and variable means.
2. Reliability Testing confirmed high internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.8 for all constructs.

3. Correlation Analysis (Pearson) was performed to test relationships between variables, revealing significant positive correlations among all constructs.
4. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis was conducted to examine the predictors of purchase intention.

The regression model was statistically significant ($F(3,248) = 258.747$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 75.8% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.758$). All three independent variables were significant predictors: Engagement Rate ($\beta = 0.395$, $p < 0.001$), Perceived Similarity ($\beta = 0.288$, $p < 0.001$), and Influencer Credibility ($\beta = 0.262$, $p < 0.001$), confirming their strong influence on Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean beauty services.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and variance), as shown in Table 2, were used to summarise the respondents' overall perceptions of the study variables.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics

Construct	Code	Sample (N)	Mean	Std. Deviation (SD)	Variance
Influencer Credibility	IC_Mean	252	3.9180	0.72045	0.520
Perceived Similarity	PS_Mean	252	3.9339	0.77327	0.555
Engagement Rate	ER_Mean	252	4.0238	0.74523	0.598
Purchase Intention	PI_Mean	252	3.9873	0.72045	0.519

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test

The KMO value was 0.907 (Table 3). According to commonly accepted standards, a KMO value above 0.90 is considered "marvellous" or "excellent," indicating that the sample size and the structure of the correlation matrix are more than adequate for conducting the factor analysis.

Furthermore, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Table 3) was statistically significant (Approx. Chi-Square = 3885.647, $p < .001$). This significant result indicates that the correlations among the items are sufficiently large to warrant factor extraction, thereby validating the fundamental requirement to proceed with Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

Table 3 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		907
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3885.647
	df	253
	Sig.	.000

Reliability Analysis

A reliability test, as shown in Table 4, was performed using Cronbach's Alpha to check if all the question items were consistent, and a value above 0.7 was considered acceptable for all constructs.

Table 4 Reliability analysis

Construct	No. of Item (N)	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability Assessment
Influeancer Credibility (IC)	6	**0.846**	Good
Perceived Similarity (PS)	6	**0.820**	Good
Engagement Rate (ER)	6	**0.825**	Good
Purchase Intentions (PI)	5	**0.790**	Acceptable

The dependent variable, Purchase Intentions, measured by five items, had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.790. While this falls just short of the 0.80 "good" benchmark, it is significantly higher than the widely accepted minimum threshold of 0.70. Therefore, the scale's reliability is deemed acceptable, indicating that the items accurately and consistently measure respondents' likelihood of purchasing clean beauty services.

Validity and Assumption Test

To ensure construct validity, EFA was conducted to confirm that all questionnaire items adequately represented their intended constructs. The results indicated acceptable convergent validity, as all items demonstrated satisfactory correlations with their respective variables. The KMO measure exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.6, while Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming sampling adequacy and factorability of the data. All factor loadings exceeded 0.60, indicating satisfactory convergent validity.

In addition, regression assumption tests were conducted prior to multiple regression analysis. Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values, which fell within acceptable ranges. The skewness and kurtosis values ranged between -1 and +1, indicating acceptable normality. Multicollinearity was examined through the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, all of which were below the threshold value of 5, confirming no serious multicollinearity issues.

To reduce common method bias, respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality during data collection, minimising social desirability bias and response pressure.

Correlation Test

To determine the preliminary association between the independent variables (Influencer Credibility [IC], Perceived Similarity [PS], Engagement Rate [ER], and the dependent variable (Purchase Intentions [PI]), a Pearson's Correlation analysis was conducted. The correlation coefficient (r) measures the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two variables, ranging from -1.0 (perfect negative correlation) to +1.0 (perfect positive correlation). The results of the analysis are presented in Table 5.

Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of the independent variables on purchase intention (Table 6).

Model Summary

Table 7 provides key information regarding the model's overall fit and its predictive strength.

Table 5 Pearson correlation matrix

		PI_Mean	IC_Mean	PS_Mean	ER_Mean
PI_Mean	Pearson Correlation	1	.801**	.795**	.809**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	252	252	252	252
IC_Mean	Pearson Correlation	.801**	1	.821**	.765**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	252	252	252	252
PS_Mean	Pearson Correlation	.795**	.821**	1	.741**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	252	252	252	252
ER_Mean	Pearson Correlation	.809**	.765**	.741**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	252	252	252	252

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6 Regression analysis

Hypothesis	Predictor	Beta (β)	t-value	Significance (p)	Result
H1	Influencer Credibility	0.262	4.375	0.000	Supported
H2	Perceived Similarity	0.288	5.003	0.000	Supported
H3	Engagement Rate	0.395	7.738	0.000	Supported

Table 7 Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.871a	.758	.755	.35665

[a] Predictors: (Constant), ER_Mean, PS_Mean, IC_Mean

$R^2 = 0.758$, $F(3,248) = 258.747$, $p < 0.001$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal that all three independent variables: Influencer Credibility, Perceived Similarity, and Engagement Rate, positively and significantly influence Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean-beauty services on TikTok. The regression model was statistically significant (F (3, 248) = 258.747, $p < 0.001$) and explained 75.8 % of the variance (R^2 = 0.758). Among the predictors, Engagement Rate (β = 0.395, $p < 0.001$) exerted the strongest effect, followed by Perceived Similarity (β = 0.288, $p < 0.001$) and Influencer Credibility (β = 0.262, $p < 0.001$). These results confirm that the level of interaction and relatability primarily influences TikTok users' feelings toward micro-influencers rather than traditional authority cues.

Link to Research Objectives and Theory

The findings fully achieve the study's objectives: to identify how TikTok micro-influencer attributes affect Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean-beauty services. Guided by the ELM, the results demonstrate that both central-route cues (credibility) and peripheral-route cues (similarity, engagement) drive persuasion. In the TikTok context, peripheral cues dominate because content consumption is fast-paced and visually stimulating, leading users to rely more on heuristic judgments than on message elaboration.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The outcomes of this study align with previous research on influencer marketing. A study from Jamil et al. (2024) found that perceived similarity and authenticity strongly influence Gen Z consumers' trust and purchase intentions, supporting the current finding that relatability enhances persuasive impact on TikTok. Likewise, Adi and Qastharin (2024) emphasised that the level of engagement between influencers and followers significantly affects consumer attitudes and behaviours, consistent with this study's result that engagement rate is the strongest predictor of purchase intentions.

The stronger influence of engagement rate suggests that Gen Z consumers are highly responsive to social validation cues within TikTok's interactive environment. High numbers of likes, comments, and shares may create perceptions of popularity, trustworthiness, and collective approval, encouraging users to perceive clean beauty services as desirable and socially accepted. This reflects Gen Z users' tendency to rely on digital social proof when evaluating services on social media platforms.

Furthermore, TikTok's algorithm frequently amplifies highly engaged content, increasing repeated exposure and reinforcing persuasive effects among users. As a result, engagement indicators may exert stronger behavioural influence than traditional credibility cues because they create immediate emotional resonance and community-driven validation.

The relatively weaker effect of influencer credibility suggests that, unlike traditional social media platforms, TikTok audiences prioritise authenticity and interaction over perceived expertise, reflecting a shift toward emotional and community-driven persuasion among Gen Z consumers.

Implications

Although previous studies have explored influencer marketing broadly, this study contributes contextual originality by examining TikTok micro-influencers specifically within Malaysia's clean beauty service industry, rather than product-based settings commonly examined in prior research. Additionally, the study extends ELM to the context of short-form video marketing, where peripheral persuasion cues such as engagement and relatability appear more dominant than traditional expertise-based persuasion cues.

Theoretically, the study extends the application of ELM to short-form video platforms, emphasising that emotional and social cues may outweigh cognitive evaluation in digital persuasion. In practice, beauty-service marketers should prioritise partnerships with micro-influencers who maintain high engagement and genuine relatability, rather than focusing solely on follower counts or professional endorsements. Policy-wise, the findings suggest the need for clearer disclosure standards and authenticity guidelines to preserve consumer trust in influencer-driven marketing, especially among young consumers in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Using the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this study examined how TikTok micro-influencers shape Gen Z's purchase intentions toward clean beauty services in Malaysia. Results show that influencer credibility, perceived similarity, and engagement rate all positively affect purchase intention, with engagement rate emerging as the strongest predictor. This suggests social validation through likes, comments, and shares is the primary persuasive cue for Gen Z, while perceived similarity fosters emotional connection and credibility builds trust. These findings confirm ELM's relevance in the TikTok context, showing that Gen Z's purchase decisions are driven more by peripheral cues, namely engagement and relatability, than by cognitive evaluation, extending ELM to short-form video marketing and indicating that brands should prioritise authentic, relatable, interactive micro-influencers over follower count or authority. Limitations include convenience sampling, which may restrict generalisability to the broader Malaysian Gen Z population, and the cross-sectional design, which may not reflect evolving behavioural trends on rapidly changing platforms such as TikTok. Future studies should explore demographic segmentation, examine how content types—tutorials, testimonials, short clips—affect credibility and similarity, and apply Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to validate an expanded framework where credibility and similarity form a higher-order construct, "Source Authenticity," with engagement rate as a mediator or moderator.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

The author conceptualised and designed the study, collected and analysed the data, drafted the manuscript, and critically reviewed and revised it for intellectual content. The author read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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