

# Perceived Social Media Influencers' Reputation of a Beauty Cosmetics Company: A Perspective of Customers

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## Abstract

In the digital age, social media influencers (SMI) have become a pivotal promotional strategy to persuade and influence consumers. However, many of the previous studies only focused on the characteristics and traits of the influencers, but lack of studies was examined on the reputation aspect of the influencer. Thus, this study aims to examine the consumers' perception of SMI's reputation of a beauty company, which comprised of Communication Skills, Influence, Authenticity, and Expert. The study applied a quantitative design through a survey method to solicit 190 usable responses via purposive sampling. The findings demonstrated that the four dimensions of SMI's reputation are positively perceived by the respondents, where the Expert dimension was highly perceived by the consumers of the beauty company, followed by Influence, Communication Skills, and Authenticity. Thus, the beauty brand and marketing managers should examine the qualities and reputation of the SMIs before allowing them to endorse or promote the products, to ensure they have favorable images in the public eye. Conclusion, implications, and future research were discussed.

**Keywords:** social media influencers' reputation, communication skills, influence, authenticity, expert, decent work and economic growth, beauty industry

## 1. Introduction

Collaboration between companies and social media influencers (SMI) has been mushrooming in the digital age (Ao et al., 2023; Bell, 2023). SMIs play a significant role as key opinion leaders who promote products or services on social media (Joshi et al., 2023; Zak & Hasprova, 2020), where many companies employ SMIs as a promotional strategy to engage with customers. SMIs promote product information and recent promotions to online audiences using a range of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Ao et al., 2023; Zaidi & Hayat, 2021). Thus, SMI is an influential and persuasive communicator who influences consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward the brand or product (Balaban et al., 2022; Mir & Salo, 2024).

The beauty sector has mushroomed in line with the effects of advertising and promotional communication (Tian, 2023). The beauty market's revenue generated approximately \$430 billion in 2022 and the sector is expected to increase to \$580 billion by the year 2027 (McKinsey, 2023). As highlighted by Schouten et al. (2020), beauty businesses would be more successful if they choose influencers over traditional celebrities, as influencers are more credible than celebrities due to their similarity with the consumers and influencers engage customers and build close bonds better than typical celebrities (Barta et al., 2023; Borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Crnjak-Karanović et al., 2023).

Beauty influencers are people who provide beauty-related information and share opinions, knowledge, and word-of-mouth on social media platforms (Wang & Lee, 2021). Companies employing SMIs to market their cosmetics products due to the emerging popularity of beauty gurus (Hassan et al., 2021). For instance, L'Oréal, MAC, Estée Lauder, NYX, Glossier, Lush, Becca, Milk Makeup, Kylie Cosmetics, and Melt Cosmetics are among the top beauty companies that frequently employ SMIs as part of their strategic marketing initiatives (Hassan et al., 2021).

Although there are plenty of studies that have been conducted on celebrities and SMIs, they are mostly on the influencer's characteristics and attributes (Lu & Chen, 2023; Chan et al., 2021; Sharipudin et al., 2023), however, the reputation of

the SMIs is still scarce. To the best knowledge of the researchers, only a few empirical studies focused on the reputation aspects of the SMIs (e.g. Ryu & Han, 2021; Taher et al., 2022) which urged more studies that focused on SMIs' reputation to be carried out. Based on this notion, this study attempts to examine the consumers' perception of SMIs' reputation dimension, namely Communication Skills, Influence, Authenticity, and Expertise, which further contribute to the scholarship of marketing and strategic communication (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Social Media Influencers' Reputation

SMIs vary from typical celebrities in that they are "regular people" who have built followers/networks in the virtual community (Mathew, 2018). SMIs create their content, whereas integrated brand-sponsored posts are created. The reputation of an SMI is defined as customers' recognition and assessment of the influencer's varied behaviors and pictures based on direct and indirect experiences with them. The SMIs' reputation dimensions consist of Communication skills, Influence, Authenticity, and Expertise (Ryu & Han, 2021).

### 2.2 Social Media Influencers' Reputation

Social media influencers (SMIs) are virtual individuals who have an enormous of followers on various social media platforms and have an impact on their followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). SMIs are those who are interested in a certain field and share information about it, as well as share their opinion of a product after using it and encourage people to buy it while actively managing their own social media accounts (Hermenda et al., 2019). Due to their knowledge in certain areas, SMIs are a reliable source of information for customers searching for information (Mabkhot et al., 2022).

Influencers are very active on social media sites and frequently share promotional information (Lee & Kim, 2020). On their accounts, users may find influencers promoting brands through sponsored content. Influencers, as opposed to public figures or celebrities who are well recognized through traditional media, are persons who become "online celebrities" through publishing material on social media and they are experts in specialized fields such as lifestyle, travel, fashion, and beauty (Haenlein et al., 2020).

The notion of the "Influencer" was extended to social media starting with online bloggers as the scope increased through a wider range of online platforms (Khamis et al., 2017). With social networking sites (SNS) fulfilling new relational tasks that conventional media cannot do, influencers can reach large numbers of consumers through conversation and creating connections (Chopra et al., 2021). Through the favorable attitude toward the brand, the SMIs who have knowledge and expertise on the product, he/she promotes will be more effective in persuading customers to purchase the products (Aw & Labrecque, 2020).

Meanwhile, Joshi et al (2023) and Hassan et al., (2021) stated that SMI's knowledge has a substantial effect on customer views regarding SMI-promoted brands as well as their purchasing interest. SMI can be classified as online opinion leaders who engage and promote their brands through their personal lives on social media platforms (Burke, 2017). Influencers frequently create tighter and more extensive relationships with their followers, who grow to consider them as friends (Belanche et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2022).

Unlike traditional media celebrities, SMIs are everyday people who build their reputations by creating content (Lou & Yuan, 2019). According to Al-Emadi and Ben Yahia (2020), content quality and realistic ideal image similarity are two features of SMIs on social media visual platforms that drive customers to connect with them on social media platforms. Companies and agencies also use SMIs to attract customers by establishing a reputation on social media through personal branding (Mabkhot et al., 2022).

### 2.3 Communication Skills

In a virtual environment, influencers' communication skills are essential when interacting with customers (Saldanha et al., 2023). As a result, influencers must have pleasant communication skills to interact with consumers. It indicates not just that they communicate well, but they should express their ideas and opinions to customers in a trustworthy manner, by providing truthful knowledge and information about the products or services (Choi & Jung, 2017). Open, engaging, and reciprocal communications may create emotions of familiarity with the SMI, their style, and their motives for recommendations, which can increase the follower's ability to relate to the SMI (Ao et al., 2023). Communication skills are used to create an impression of the importance of listening and communicating with followers (Yuan et al., 2022). Influencers with a high level of interaction will make their followers feel heard and as if they are communicating directly with them (Bailey et al., 2023).

### 2.4 Influence

Measuring an influencer's influence or impact solely on the number of followers or activities is challenging. Influencer

content, on the other hand, is distributed and shared to potentially millions of people in a short period through SNS. As a result, an influencer's explanations, recommendations, or criticisms of a particular product or brand have an impact on customer attitudes and behaviors (Ao et al., 2023; Hong & Joeon, 2016). Social media influencers may have an excessive amount of influence over their followers. This characteristic is usually not fulfilled by social media influencers who have a broad network of followers and so cannot engage in interpersonal relationships with each of the followers (de Veirman et al., 2017).

### *2.5 Authenticity*

Studies have demonstrated that authenticity is substantial in forming a celebrity reputation based on the content being created (Kapitan et al., 2022). Influencers promote direct consumer involvement by providing customers with the information they seek (Choi & Jung, 2017). The authenticity of an information source may be characterized as how honest, transparent, and true to oneself the source is communicated (Ilicic & Webster, 2016).

According to Audrezet et al. (2018), transparent authenticity has been demonstrated to be a factor that is widely utilized as a marketing strategy by SMIs. The term authenticity refers to an SMI marketing the product with facts and information. Furthermore, Audrezet et al. (2018) emphasize that SMIs who articulate what they enjoy, and what their preferences are, having partnerships and marketing products based on them, may be viewed as authentic elements. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) demonstrate the significance of a strong relationship between the audience and the influencer as a component that can promote authenticity regularly.

Woodroof et al. (2020) examine how consumers of SMIs are impacted by whether or not the SMI is truthful about having sponsored endorsements. They underline that when SMIs attempt to persuade without being honest, consumers become more critical and aware of those initiatives. As a result, when it comes to developing purchase intentions for customers, being authentic about the sponsored recommended product is an important aspect of SMI, which aligned with the findings of (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Ahsan & Senarath, 2023) on the authenticity aspects of the SMIs.

### *2.6 Expertise*

Expertise has already been demonstrated to have a major impact on forming a personal reputation (Ozuem et al., 2023). It has grown into an ecosystem in which users may obtain information quickly via SNS. Consumers who formerly relied entirely on mass media are increasingly seeking and exchanging knowledge on their own, allowing everyone to be an expert. As a result, uninformed influencers are not only unable to satisfy customers but are also likely to be ignored (Ryu & Han, 2021). The past studies demonstrate that individuals' demand for expertise can be fulfilled when they follow SMIs who are credible in their content (Chekima et al., 2020).

SMIs are typically regarded as content creators who have built a reputation for their expertise in a certain field (Nafees et al., 2021; Tian et al., 2023). When an SMI provides professional knowledge in fashion, beauty, or home décor on social media, followers are likely to regard such knowledge and experience not merely as the SMI's statements, but also as his/her expertise (Mcquarrie & Phillips, 2014). According to Hussain et al. (2020), an experienced SMI means that he or she is capable of delivering on the promises made to customers. As a result, if customers are convinced that the communicator is highly expert, they are more likely to view the message positively, which has a favorable impact on the consumers' attitudes and actions (Chan et al., 2021; Sharipudin et al., 2023).

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1 Research Design*

The fundamental purpose of a quantitative method is the analysis and measurement of data (Babbie, 2020). According to Bougie and Sekaran (2020), surveys are the most common method of quantitative data collection.

### *3.2 Sampling Procedure*

Purposive sampling was used in this study, the researchers determined the respondents who knew the SMIs who endorse X beauty products as a pre-requirement to filter the respondents. A minimum of 150 sample sizes are sufficient for quantitative analysis (Saunders et al., 2019). The respondents of the study were customers of X beauty company and were followers of X beauty company SMIs.

### *3.3 Measurement*

Section A is a demographic section, which is comprised of six items namely, gender, age, race, level of education, and a screening question on whether the respondent follows influencers on social media. Section B contained 34 questions in total on generating information on SMI's reputation utilized in this study. The items measured on the four dimensions of SMIs' reputation (e.g. communication skills, influence, authenticity, and expertise) were adapted from Ryu and Han (2021). A five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) strongly and (5) strongly agree, was implemented to measure each variable.

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to the customers/ users via various social media platforms such as email and WhatsApp. As this study focuses on the SMI's reputation, the respondents were given the survey questionnaire after asking them if they know or follow any social media influencers. They were conveniently approached and asked for voluntary participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed for respondents. The online survey questionnaire was conducted in Malaysia between October 6th to November 8th, 2021.

## 4. Findings

The data was analyzed using SPSS version 26. The majority of the respondents 73.2% (n=139) were females, while 26.8% (n=51) were males. There were 13.7% of respondents aged >21 and 63.2% of respondents aged between 21-25 (n=120) and 20.5% of respondents aged between 26-30 (n=39), while only 1.6% were aged 31-35 (n=3) and 1.0% were >35 (n=2). This forecasts Gen Z being more familiar with the concept of social media influencers and searching for beauty-related information on social media. For the type of customers, more than half (57.9%) of the respondents were international (n=110), while 42.1% were locals (n=80).

For the level of education, it shows that the majority of the respondents are educated with 159 respondents 83.7% whereas only (n=8) STPM/ foundation/ diploma 4.2% and 12.1 % Master degree holders (n=23) which shows that the majority of the customers of X beauty company are educated. In terms of income, more than half (54.7%) of the respondents had an average income between RM2001 and RM3000, indicating most of the respondents were secured with jobs and had purchasing power.

### 4.1 Communication Skills Dimension of SMI's Reputation

To determine the consumer perception of the dimension of communication skills, a one-sample t-test for each item of the communication skills under the SMIs' reputation is conducted. The results below indicated that the overall score for the communication skills dimension is significant. Specifically, as displayed in Table 1, the overall mean of the communication skills dimension ( $M = 3.679$ ,  $SD = 0.575$ ,  $t = 16.280$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) is significant with all the items under the communication skills dimension. The highest mean for the individual item is that 'X beauty company influences well explain the relationship between content, product, and brand ( $M = 3.780$ ,  $SD = 0.654$ ,  $t = 16.430$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The lowest mean score is for the item 'X beauty company influencers actively communicate with consumers ( $M = 3.620$ ,  $SD = 0.745$ ,  $t = 11.391$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). This further concludes that consumers view the interaction/ communication skills of the influencers differently, and there is an inclination towards agreement of the communication skills dimension as one significant attribute in forming the SMI's reputation.

Table 1. One Sample T-Test for Communication Skills Dimension of SMI's Reputation

Items	* <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	** <i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
X beauty company influencers well explain the relationship between content, product, and brand.	3.780	0.654	16.430	189	0.000
X beauty company influencers actively communicate with consumers.	3.620	0.745	11.391	189	0.000
X beauty company influencers clearly communicate information about a product or brand.	3.640	0.776	11.306	189	0.000
X beauty company influencers know and understand a product or brand well.	3.690	0.743	12.891	189	0.000
X beauty company influencers can easily understand information about a product or brand.	3.670	0.735	12.535	189	0.000
<b>Overall mean of Communication Skills</b>	<b>3.679</b>	<b>0.575</b>	<b>16.280</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>0.000</b>

\*On a 5-point Likert-type like scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree

\*\*Test value= 3

### 4.2 Influence Dimension of SMI's Reputation

Table 2 displays the results of the one-sample t-test for the dimension of influence of SMIs' reputation. The overall mean for the Influence dimension of SMIs' reputation ( $M = 3.728$ ,  $SD = 0.505$ ,  $t = 19.890$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) was significant with the items of Influence. Overall, the highest item under the dimensions of Influence presents as 'X beauty company influencers have many followers or subscribers' ( $M = 4.200$ ,  $SD = 0.610$ ,  $t = 27.102$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and the lowest item was

concluded as ‘X beauty company influencers are persuasive in the public eye’ ( $M = 3.570$ ,  $SD = 0.743$ ,  $t = 10.636$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). This concludes that the Influence dimension of SMIs’ reputation was overall positively perceived by the customers.

Table 2. One Sample T-Test for Influence Dimension of SMI’s Reputation

Items	* <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	** <i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>
X beauty company influencers has many followers or subscribers.	4.200	0.610	27.102	189	0.000
X beauty company influencers have a ripple effect on public opinion.	3.630	0.757	11.505	189	0.000
X beauty company influencers themselves have a marketing effect.	3.620	0.758	11.287	189	0.000
X beauty company influencers have a great effect on the public.	3.650	0.694	12.959	189	0.000
X beauty company influencers are persuasive in the public eye.	3.570	0.743	10.636	189	0.000
X beauty company influencers lead the fashion trend.	3.690	0.825	11.518	189	0.000
<b>Overall Mean of Influence</b>	<b>3.728</b>	<b>0.505</b>	<b>19.890</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>0.000</b>

\*On a 5-point Likert-type like scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree

\*\*Test value= 3

#### 4.3 Authenticity Dimension of SMI’s Reputation

Table 3 presents the one-sample t-test conducted for the dimensions of Authenticity of the SMIs’ reputation. The overall score for Authenticity ( $M = 3.637$ ,  $SD = 0.493$ ,  $t = 17.805$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). For the Authenticity dimension, the item with the highest mean would be ‘X company influencer have consistent tone and manners such as words, writing, and actions’ ( $M = 3.920$ ,  $SD = 0.563$ ,  $t = 22.568$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and the item presented with the lowest mean is ‘X company influencers broadcast with sincerity’ ( $M = 3.300$ ,  $SD = 0.769$ ,  $t = 5.374$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The overall data tabulated presents a positive perception of customers on the Authenticity dimension of SMIs’ reputation.

Table 3. One Sample T-Test of Authenticity Dimension of SMI’s Reputation

Items	* <i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	** <i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>
X company influencers communicate true information about a product or brand.	3.730	0.727	13.780	189	0.000
X company influencers are honest.	3.270	0.697	5.414	189	0.000
X company influencers broadcast with sincerity.	3.300	0.769	5.374	189	0.000
X company influencers have clear beliefs and own philosophy.	3.710	0.694	14.108	189	0.000
X company influencers speak and act politely when communicating with consumers.	3.890	0.637	19.249	189	0.000
X company influencers have consistent tone and manners such as words, writing, and actions.	3.920	0.563	22.568	189	0.000
<b>Overall Mean of Authenticity</b>	<b>3.637</b>	<b>0.493</b>	<b>17.805</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>0.000</b>

\*On a 5-point Likert-type like scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree

\*\*Test value= 3

#### 4.4 Expert Dimension of SMI’s Reputation

Furthermore, Table 4 also presents the one-sample t-test for the dimension of expert of SMIs’ reputation. The overall score for expert dimension ( $M = 3.864$ ,  $SD = 0.498$ ,  $t = 23.903$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The item with the highest mean was perceived to be ‘X company influencers have their own special content’ ( $M = 3.920$ ,  $SD = 0.603$ ,  $t = 20.945$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ).

The lowest item was perceived to be ‘X company influencers have expertise in their field’ ( $M = 3.830$ ,  $SD = 0.623$ ,  $t = 18.293$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The overall results of the one-sample t-test of the dimension of expert SMIs’ reputation indicate that consumers have a positive outlook towards the expert of the influencers of company X.

Table 4. One Sample T-Test for Expert Dimension of SMI’s Reputation

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>
X company influencers have excellent skills in their field.	3.840	0.572	20.149	189	0.00
X company influencers have a passion for their work.	3.900	0.639	19.423	189	0.00
X company influencers have their own special content.	3.920	0.603	20.945	189	0.00
X company influencers have expertise in their field.	3.830	0.623	18.293	189	0.00
X company influencers have fun and interest in their work.	3.880	0.635	19.079	189	0.00
X company influencers know their field well and have accurate knowledge.	3.840	0.650	17.736	189	0.00
X company influencers take responsibility for their own content, words, and actions.	3.850	0.608	19.329	189	0.00
<b>Overall Mean of Expert</b>	<b>3.864</b>	<b>0.498</b>	<b>23.903</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>0.00</b>

\*On a 5-point Likert-type like scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat agree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree

\*\*Test value= 3

## 5. Discussion

Based on the above findings, the dimension of SMIs’ reputation that is perceived prominently by the consumers is Expert, followed by Influence, Communication Skills, and Authenticity.

The findings were congruent with various studies (Chekima et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2021; Sharipudin et al., 2023), where the highly expert SMIs can provide more accurate product knowledge and this can help to shape the confidence of the consumers on the beauty products. Besides, the Influence of the SMIs also crucial (Ao et al., 2023), as the SMIs can have a bigger influence on the consumer’s mind, which somehow will help to strengthen the parasocial relationship and cause the consumers to purchase products unintentionally (Taher et al., 2022).

Furthermore, open and interactive communications may generate emotions of familiarity with the influencer, their style, and motives for advertisements, which may enable the follower to relate to the influencer. These findings are in line with the research conducted by (Ao et al., 2023; Bailey et al., 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023) which found that communication and attempts at interaction can facilitate the creation of the reputation of SMIs.

For the authenticity dimension, although all the items were perceived positively, it is the least as compared to the other 3 dimensions. The results are aligned with (Agnihotri et al., 2023; Ahsan & Senarath, 2023; Woodroof et al., 2020) on the authenticity aspects of the SMIs. However, the consumers do perceive that the SMIs do not broadcast with their sincerity which caused the item to have a low mean score. The possible explanation is that the influencers are usually paid by the beauty company to do the endorsement or have some benefits with the company thus, they might not be sincere in highlighting the negative ingredients or the shortcomings of the products of the beauty company, thus, sincerity is questionable.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that all 4 dimensions of SMIs’ reputation (Communication skills, Influence, Authenticity, and Expert) were positively perceived by the consumers and the Expert dimension is the one that is highly perceived by the consumers.

### 6.1 Implications of the Study

Since SMIs are portraying brand images, beauty brand managers should gather relevant information and discover the qualities of the SMIs before picking the influencer to give a clear promotional message to their followers.

In addition, marketers can enhance SMIs’ authenticity by utilizing raw video tutorials where the SMIs demonstrate using the beauty products and show the results. This will make the followers/ customers feel that the SMIs are honest and reliable.

Besides, interaction between SMIs and their followers via content-sharing communities may convey brand-related messages and urge followers to buy products and services (Wang, 2021). As a result of this research, marketing and strategic communication professionals should consider using SMIs in their advertising initiatives to ensure effective strategic communication (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

### *6.2 Limitations and Future Research*

SMI marketing in Malaysia is relatively new, it is important to conduct similar research in another setting (e.g. Halal cosmetics context) (Osman et al, 2022). Comparative research across different nations might yield intriguing results since the SMIs' reputation may differ in the countries studied and also on the particular SMI. This, in turn, will assist research to better understand the phenomena through various cultural contexts.

In this study, four dimensions of SMI reputation were selected based on the empirical study by Ryu and Han (2021) to examine the perception of consumers on the SMIs' reputation, namely, Communication skills, Influence, Authenticity, and Expertise. For future studies, a qualitative study (e.g. interviews or focus groups) can be conducted to explore further the new emerging dimensions that may have a greater contribution to expanding the multi-faceted construct of the SMI reputation.

This study only examined the perception of consumers, future studies can include other variables, such as parasocial relationships (Taher et al., 2022), consumer identity, social media factors (Maity & Sadhu, 2021), repurchase intention, cultural factors, company's decision to hire SMIs, and testing the moderator of generation cohorts, frequency of purchasing the beauty products via the multigroup analysis to further contribute to the strategic marketing communication literature.

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### **Authors contributions**

Dr. TJC was responsible for study design and revising. SST was responsible for data collection. Dr. TJC & SST drafted the manuscript and Dr. MLN & Dr. AHHF revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. In this paragraph, also explain any special agreements concerning authorship, such as if authors contributed equally to the study.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### **Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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