

## TRUSTWORTHINESS, EXPERTISE AND LIKEABILITY TOWARDS HALAL PURCHASING BEHAVIOUR: DOES ATTITUDE MATTER?

<sup>1</sup>Vidiyanna Rizal Putri, <sup>2</sup>Hainnuraqma Rahim, <sup>2</sup>Mohamed Saladin Abdul Rasool,  
<sup>\*3</sup>Nor Balkish Zakaria & <sup>2</sup>Hamidah Muhd Irpan

<sup>1</sup> STIE Indonesia Banking School, Jakarta, 12550, Indonesia.

<sup>2</sup> Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Melaka, Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup> Accounting Research Institute, Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam, Malaysia.

\*Corresponding author: [norbalkish@uitm.edu.my](mailto:norbalkish@uitm.edu.my)

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### ABSTRACT

**Background and Purpose:** Consumers prefer to review products and services through social media platforms before purchasing them. Consequently, social media influencers have become essential for advertising and reviewing products and services. Credible sources of information using persuasive messages are deemed as influential in the purchasing behaviours of consumers concerning products and services, especially among Gen Z. This paper examines the factors of social media influencers in the purchasing behaviour towards halal food products among Muslim Gen Z in Malaysia.

**Methodology:** This study employs a quantitative research design using a non-probability sampling technique to select 226 Muslim Gen Z respondents in Malaysia. Data was collected through face-to-face and online questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS, incorporating descriptive analysis, reliability tests, regression, and mediation analysis. The Smart-PLS approach was applied to examine the mediating role of attitude in the relationship between influencer attributes and purchasing behavior.

**Findings:** Findings show that social media influencer trustworthiness, expertise and likeability could affect consumers' attitudes and behaviours towards halal food products. Attitude plays a vital role as a mediator in the relationship of social media influencers' trustworthiness, expertise, and likeability towards purchasing behaviour towards halal food products among Muslim Gen Z in Malaysia.

**Contribution:** This study's findings are expected to contribute to marketing theory and the concepts of consumer behaviours, especially among Gen Z, towards halal food products in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Social media influencer, purchasing behaviour, halal food products, Muslim, Gen z.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Third Industrial Master Plan (2016–2020) outlined Malaysia's ambition to become the world's leading halal hub. The halal industry is projected to contribute approximately 5.8% to Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As Malaysia positions itself at the forefront of the global halal market, other nations are also competing to establish themselves as key players in this rapidly expanding industry. The sector is experiencing an annual growth rate of 20%, with an estimated market value of US\$560 billion and a total projected worth of US\$2.3 trillion, excluding the Islamic finance sector, which is also undergoing significant growth (Elasrag, 2016). Consequently, the halal industry continues to expand its influence within the global economy.

In Malaysia, the youth demographic constitutes approximately 29% of the total population, translating to around 852,600 individuals. Millennials, in particular, prioritize quality assurance and healthy living and prefer a broad range of choices without restrictive limitations. Social media has become deeply integrated into the daily lives of specific age groups, especially Millennials and younger generations (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). This digital shift has introduced new advertising landscapes, where individuals are exposed to thousands of promotional messages daily, predominantly via social networking platforms.

According to Forbes (2016), a survey conducted by Linqia Research (2018) revealed that 86% of marketers and advertising agencies incorporate influencer marketing as part of their overall promotional strategies. Market analysts have forecasted that the influencer marketing industry will grow from \$8 billion in 2019 to \$15 billion by 2022. Notably, TikTok has emerged as a rapidly expanding influencer platform, boasting over 1 billion active users in 2019. Additionally, nano-influencers (those with fewer than 1,000 followers on Instagram) exhibited higher engagement rates (7.2%) compared to mass influencers with over 100,000 followers.

Hall (2015) conceptualized social media influencers (SMIs) as "micro-endorsers," distinguishing them from traditional celebrity endorsers. In advertising, influencers assume roles similar to message sources in persuasive communication. Social media influencers, akin to celebrity endorsers, play a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions on digital platforms (Aziz et al., 2019).

This study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by offering fresh insights and expertise in this field. Various factors—including credibility, honesty, expertise, and likability—may influence Muslim Gen Z consumers' purchasing decisions regarding halal food products and services. It is anticipated that this research will enhance the understanding of key elements impacting consumer behavior, thereby providing valuable feedback to Malaysian halal product and service providers. Furthermore, the findings will underscore the importance of diversified marketing strategies beyond halal certification, emphasizing the need for a more comprehensive approach to market expansion and consumer engagement.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Word of Mouth (WOM) Theory**

Word of Mouth (WOM) communication refers to non-commercial, interpersonal dialogue regarding products or services, occurring through direct two-way communication between consumers and their social circles. Traditionally, WOM has served as a fundamental marketing communication method; however, with the advent of the internet, this practice has evolved into Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), expanding its reach and influence.

Martensen and Grønholdt (2016) examined the impact of WOM in the service industry, particularly its effect on consumer emotions and decision-making processes. Similarly, Rahim et al. (2016) reaffirmed that WOM remains a conventional communication tool in marketing, now digitally transformed into eWOM with the integration of online platforms. WOM is regarded as the oldest medium for sharing opinions about products and services and is among the most influential factors in shaping consumer behavior. Its effectiveness stems from the high level of trust and credibility associated with personal recommendations from family and friends.

Despite the recognized significance of WOM and eWOM, limited studies have explored the interaction between perceived risk and eWOM source credibility (Hussain et al., 2017). Given the increasing reliance on digital communication and online consumer reviews,

further research is needed to understand the complexities of eWOM credibility and its impact on consumer trust and decision-making.

## **2.2 Purchasing Behaviour Towards Halal Food**

Zeithaml (1988) defined purchasing behavior as the perception of quality, representing the overall superiority or excellence of a product, as evaluated by consumers. Perceived quality differs from objective assessments and higher-level product perceptions, as it is based on global appraisals and consumer opinions rather than intrinsic product attributes. Additionally, purchase intention—often referred to as buying intention—denotes a consumer's decision to purchase a product in the future.

The influence of social media plays a significant role in shaping purchase intention. Early purchasers often leave reviews and ratings, serving as reference points for potential buyers, thereby influencing their purchasing decisions. Within this context, perceived quality acts as a mediator for purchase intention, as consumers form overall judgments regarding a product's superiority and excellence before making a purchase decision. Consumers are more inclined to buy a product when its quality aligns with its price (Sulthana & Vasantha, 2021).

Marketers must recognize and adapt to the various factors influencing their target audiences' purchasing decisions, ensuring that marketing strategies align with consumer expectations (Khaniwale, 2015). Furthermore, an individual's buying interest reflects their intentional effort to acquire a product, signifying a key aspect of consumer behavior.

This study focuses on consumer behavior, emphasizing the critical role of perceived quality and purchase intention in influencing purchasing decisions.

### ***2.2.1 Factors Relating to Muslim Gen Z Purchasing Behaviour Towards Halal Food Products***

Four main factors relate to the Muslim Gen Z purchasing behaviour towards halal products: trustworthiness, expertise, likeability, and attitude.

#### ***a) Trustworthiness***

The trust paradigm in communication refers to the receiver's confidence in the credibility of a message conveyed by a social media influencer (SMI) (Abdul Majid & Wahid, 2012; Nejad et al., 2014; Ohania, 1990). Consumers are more inclined to consider purchasing a product recommended by an SMI if they perceive the influencer as trustworthy (Liu et al., 2015).

According to Li et al. (2010), consumer confidence in endorsers plays a crucial role when seeking detailed product information online. Compared to corporations or brands, SMIs are perceived as more reliable sources of consumer product knowledge (Forbes, 2016).

Rebelo (2017) highlighted that the trustworthiness of an influencer enhances their persuasive impact. Specifically, Instagram users tend to perceive influencers as credible when they are viewed as dependable, truthful, consistent, genuine, and trustworthy. Similarly, Zakaria et al. (2017) found that consumers' interest in halal products is significantly influenced by their level of trust in the endorser, which also affects their willingness to spend on such products.

SMIs have the potential to craft trustworthy and engaging messages that align with brand narratives, effectively capturing consumer interest. The purchasing intention of target audiences is notably higher when SMIs demonstrate greater reliability and authenticity (Silvera & Austad, 2004). This is because consumers associate experience, credibility, and attractiveness with trusted influencers, making their endorsements more persuasive (Nik Hashim et al., 2019; Mohamad et al., 2020; Omar et al., 2020).

Hypothesis (H1): The trustworthiness of SMI positively relates to Malaysian Muslim Gen Z purchasing behaviour towards halal food products.

#### *b) Expertise*

Tafesse (2016) emphasized that social media marketing is fundamentally built on interactions between brands and peer consumers, where genuine reviews and real user experiences play a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions. Given this, it is strategically important to consider how each online persona presents these interactions in a way that appears authentic and relatable.

Research suggests that social presence significantly influences consumers' online trust and their intentions to engage in online shopping (Beldad et al., 2010). Similarly, Shen (2012) observed that consumers are more likely to feel comfortable transacting with an online source when they perceive a human element behind the interaction, reinforcing the importance of personal connection in digital commerce.

Abidin (2016) provided multiple examples of fashion bloggers who rose to celebrity status via Instagram, illustrating how their cultural values and lifestyle choices were deeply embedded in their social media presence. These influencers carefully curated their online

personas, sharing posts that showcased elegance, public appearances, travel destinations, and lifestyle choices, ultimately reinforcing their influence and authenticity within digital communities.

Hypothesis (H2): SMI expertise positively relates to Malaysian Muslim Gen Z purchasing behaviour towards halal food products.

#### *c) Likeability*

Likeability refers to the information receiver's affinity toward an information source, influenced by factors such as physical appearance and personal characteristics (McGuire, 1985; Kiecker & Cowles, 2001; Teng et al., 2014). In the context of social media influencers (SMIs), consumer perceptions of an influencer's likeability serve as a key determinant of their overall attitude toward the SMI (Li et al., 2014). Consequently, an SMI with a strong public presence is often perceived as more likeable, which directly influences consumer product preferences and purchase decisions (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014; Abidin, 2016; Forbes, 2016).

Consumers frequently view SMIs as role models, further amplifying their impact on purchasing behavior (Forbes, 2016). According to Wang et al. (2017) and Xiao et al. (2018), the likeability of an endorser enhances product credibility and plays a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes and purchase intentions.

Additionally, a self-brand connection emerges when consumers develop deep familiarity and experiences with a brand, fostering a sense of personal association. As a result, consumers actively engage in brand advocacy, promoting products within their networks. In the context of halal food products, this process manifests when consumers try a brand, develop trust in its offerings, and subsequently recommend it to others—further reinforcing the brand's credibility and market influence.

Hypothesis (H3): Likeability to SMI positively relates to Malaysian Muslim Gen Z purchasing behaviour towards halal food products.

#### *d) Attitude*

Ajzen (1991) defined attitude as an individual's degree of favorable or unfavorable evaluation of a behavior. Attitude can be understood as a comprehensive assessment of a concept, where

an individual's attitude toward a specific activity reflects their level of enjoyment or aversion toward engaging in it (Vizano et al., 2021). In the context of Muslim consumers, attitude represents their overall assessment of personal preferences in adhering to Islamic principles (Rochmanto & Widiyanto, 2014). Consumers who hold a positive attitude toward halal products are significantly more likely to purchase halal food items, making attitude a critical determinant of halal food product purchase intentions (Elseidi, 2018).

Social media influencers (SMIs) play a significant role in shaping consumer attitudes through their appealing appearances and attributes, which directly impact buying intentions (Lim et al., 2017). However, consumers tend to reject and disregard products or endorsements from SMIs they find unfavorable, preferring instead to purchase products recommended by influencers they admire and trust (Li et al., 2014; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). Moreover, the physical attributes of SMIs attract consumer attention to endorsed products, increasing purchase likelihood (Erdogan et al., 2017). This is because consumers often perceive SMIs as role models, further reinforcing their influence in purchasing decisions (Forbes, 2016).

In the context of halal food consumption, consumer attitude is closely linked to moral assessments in purchasing behaviors, reflecting an individual's ethical considerations and religious values (Mainchum et al., 2017). In this study, attitude is defined as respondents' preference for halal food products, shaping their purchasing decisions and consumption behavior.

Hypothesis (H4): The attitude of Malaysian Muslim Gen Z positively relates to the purchasing behaviour towards halal food products.

#### *e) Attitude Mediating Effect of Purchasing Behaviour Towards Halal Food Products*

In this study, attitude functions as a mediating factor between expertise, likeability, and trustworthiness. Research by Ajeng et al. (2018) identified attitude as a mediator in the context of Muslim consumers' knowledge of halal products, demonstrating that attitudes positively influence Muslim consumers' intentions to purchase halal products. Similarly, Setiawati et al. (2019) investigated factors affecting consumer behavior towards halal food and found that attitude plays a critical mediating role. Their findings indicate that attitude as a mediator particularly impacts millennial Muslim consumers, influencing their efforts to seek out and purchase halal food.

Furthermore, Adiba (2019) identified attitude as a key factor in consumer research. The study examined consumer behavior in purchasing halal products, positioning attitude as a mediating variable. The findings confirmed that attitude plays a mediating role in shaping consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions regarding halal products. Similarly, Vita and Nurwanti (2017) explored the factors influencing Muslim consumers' purchasing behavior toward halal products. Their research emphasized attitude as a mediator, highlighting its importance in halal product consumption. Using the Smart-PLS approach, the study concluded that attitude factors are crucial in analyzing consumer intentions towards halal products. Additionally, the research established a relationship between attitude as a mediating variable and its influence on key determinants of purchasing behavior.

Despite these findings, insufficient research exists on attitude as a mediator between trustworthiness, expertise, and likeability. Consequently, this study aims to address this research gap. Based on the discussion above, the researchers propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis (H5): The attitude of SMI mediates the association between trustworthiness and Gen Z purchasing behaviour towards halal food products.

Hypothesis (H6): The attitude of SMI mediates the association between expertise and Gen Z purchasing behaviour towards halal food products.

Hypothesis (H7): The attitude of SMI mediates the association between likeability and Gen Z purchasing behaviour towards halal food products.

### **3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Framework**

To address the research hypothesis, this study proposes a framework incorporating the key variables of Trustworthiness, Expertise, Likeability, Attitude, and Purchasing Behavior. The theoretical framework is visually represented in Figure 1.



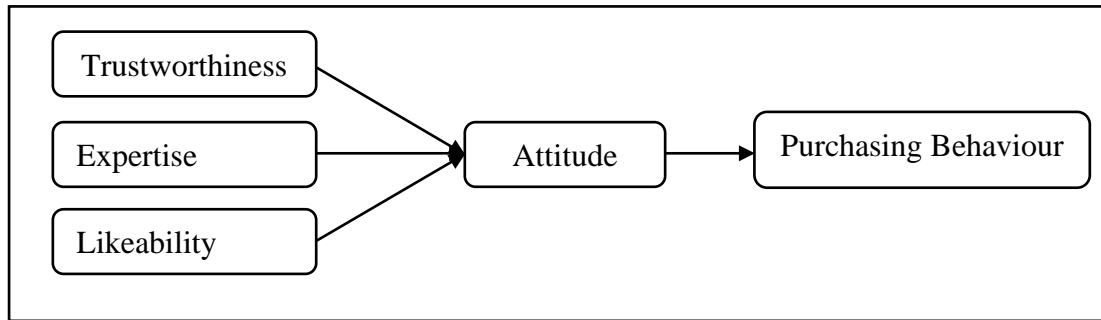


Figure 1: Research framework

### 3.2 Method

This study examines the purchasing behavior of halal food products among Muslim Gen Z consumers in Malaysia. Due to the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame for Muslim Gen Z, a non-probability sampling technique was employed to select 226 respondents for this research. Data collection was conducted through both face-to-face and online questionnaires. The variables utilized in this study were derived from established sources, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Survey instrument

Variables	No. of Items	Sources
Trustworthiness	2	Zakaria et al. (2017)
Expertise	5	Liu et al. (2015)
Likeability	5	Lim et al. (2017)
Attitude	6	Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) Elseidi (2018)
Purchasing behaviour towards halal food	8	Vizano et al. (2021) Sulthana & Vasantha (2021).

Data collected were analysed using SPSS. The statistical methods used in this study are descriptive analysis, reliability tests, simple linear regression, and mediation analysis.

## 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Table 2 presents the demographic distribution of the 226 Gen Z respondents who participated in this study. The majority of respondents were female (77%). In terms of age, 44% of

respondents fell within the 23 to 25-year-old age group, while 27% were between 20 to 22 years old. The remaining 28% were below 20 years old.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics

Demographic profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	52	23%
	Female	174	77%
Age group	Below 20	64	28%
	20 - 22	62	27%
	23 -25	100	44%
Total		226	100%

#### 4.2 Reliability Test

All variables are reliable, as shown by Cronbach's alpha values, which are more than 0.7 (Table 3). The lowest value of Cronbach's alpha is 0.784 for likeability.

On average, respondents have a strong attitude (Mean=4.833) and purchasing behaviour towards halal food products (Mean=4.799). They also agree that the SMIs are trustworthy (Mean=4.093), expert on the products promoted (Mean=4.12) and likeable (Mean=4.059).

Table 3: Variable descriptive statistics and reliability test

Variable	No. of Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Behaviour	8	4.799	0.255	0.858
Attitude	6	4.833	0.284	0.925
Trustworthiness	2	4.093	0.831	0.934
Expertise	5	4.120	0.756	0.851
Likeability	5	4.059	0.783	0.784

#### 4.3 Path Analysis

Path analysis results toward halal food purchasing behaviour are shown in Table 4. Trustworthiness of SMI is positively related to Muslim Gen Z purchasing behaviour towards halal food products ( $r=0.277$ ,  $\beta=0.085$ ), thus hypothesis 1 is supported.

SMI expertise is positively related to Muslim Gen Z purchasing behaviour towards halal food products ( $r=0.376$ ,  $\beta=0.110$ ), thus hypothesis 2 is supported. This finding is consistent with the study by Wang et al. (2017), which found that information presented by a

credible source, for example, SMIs, could affect consumers' beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviours. Likeability to SMI is positively related to Muslim Gen Z purchasing behaviour towards halal food products ( $r=0.304$ ,  $\beta=0.087$ ), thus hypothesis 3 is supported.

The attitude of Muslim Gen Z is positively related to the purchasing behaviour towards halal food products ( $r=0.617$ ,  $\beta=0.553$ ), thus hypothesis 4 is supported. This result is consistent with the study by Bastam et al. (2017), which found that consumer attitude positively affects their behaviour during online shopping.

Table 4: Path coefficients toward purchasing behaviour

Hypotheses	Relationship between variables	r	$\beta$	SD	t-value	Result
H1	Trustworthiness > Behaviour	0.277***	0.085***	0.020	4.321	Accepted
H2	Expertise > Behaviour	0.376***	0.110***	0.021	5.157	Accepted
H3	Likeability > Behaviour	0.304***	0.087***	0.021	4.134	Accepted
H4	Attitude > Behaviour	0.617***	0.553***	0.047	11.726	Accepted

\*\*\* Significant at 1%

\* Significant at 10%

#### 4.4 Mediation Analysis

Significant relationships of trustworthiness, expertise and likeability towards attitude are confirmed before testing the mediation effect of attitude in the study (Table 5). There is a significant positive relationship between trustworthiness ( $r=0.350$ ,  $\beta=0.120$ ), expertise ( $r=0.376$ ,  $\beta=0.141$ ), and likeability ( $r=0.304$ ,  $\beta=0.110$ ) towards attitude.

Table 5: Path coefficient towards attitude

Relationship between variables	r	$\beta$	SD	t-value
Trustworthiness > Attitude	0.350*	0.120***	0.021	5.585
Expertise > Attitude	0.376*	0.141***	0.023	6.071
Likeability > Attitude	0.304*	0.110***	0.023	4.772

\* Significant at 1%

\*\*\* Significant at 10%

The results of the mediation analysis are shown in Table 6. Complete mediation occurs when the indirect effect is significant. Still, the direct effect is insignificant, while partial mediation occurs when both direct and indirect effects are significant, with a lower direct effect than the total effect. Hypothesis 5 proposes the relationship between trustworthiness and behaviour mediated by attitude. The result shows that attitude fully mediates the relationship between trustworthiness and behaviour ( $\beta=0.063$ ,  $t=4.500$ ), thus supporting hypothesis 5.

Hypothesis 6 proposes the relationship between expertise and behaviour mediated by attitude. The result shows that attitude partially mediates the relationship between expertise and behaviour ( $\beta=0.073$ ,  $t=4.867$ ), thus supporting hypothesis 6.

Hypothesis 7 proposes the relationship between likeability and behaviour mediated by attitude. The result shows that attitude fully mediates the relationship between likeability and behaviour ( $\beta=0.058$ ,  $t=4.833$ ), thus supporting hypothesis 7.

Table 6: Mediator effects of attitude

Hypotheses	Relationship between variables	Effect	$\beta$ value	Std. Dev.	t-value	Result
H5	Trustworthiness > Attitude	Direct	0.022	0.017	1.256	Accepted
	Behaviour	Indirect	0.063***	0.014	4.500	(Full mediation)
H6	Expertise > Attitude	Direct	0.037*	0.019	1.940	Accepted
	Behaviour	Indirect	0.073***	0.015	4.867	(Partial mediation)
H7	Likeability > Attitude	Direct	0.028	0.018	1.580	Accepted
	Behaviour	Indirect	0.058***	0.012	4.833	(Full mediation)

\* Significant at 1%

\*\*\* Significant at 10%

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

This paper aims to improve the marketing strategy for halal products and services, focusing on the SMI factors, attitudes and purchasing behavior of halal food products. The finding shows that the purchasing behavior is significantly influenced by the SMI's trustworthiness, expertise, likeability and attitude towards halal products and services. Somehow, attitude towards halal products and services is the dominant factor in predicting the purchasing behavior among Muslim Gen Z.

The attitude towards halal products is a significant mediator and the causal relationship between the SMI trustworthiness, expertise and likeability towards halal product purchasing behavior. Furthermore, the attitude fully mediates the relationship between trustworthiness and likeability towards purchasing behavior while partially mediating the relationship between expertise and purchasing behavior. This finding suggests that marketing strategy using SMI should prioritise the expertise factor followed by the trustworthiness and likeability factors because Muslim Gen Z has a strong attitude toward halal products and services, and their purchasing behavior will not be easily influenced solely by the testimony and popularity of the SMI. Nevertheless, further studies are encouraged to examine other aspects of marketing strategy on halal products and services mediating roles such as consumers' willingness, awareness, and risk tolerance.

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