

Factors of Virtual Influencer Marketing Influencing Generation Y Consumers' Purchase Intention in Malaysia

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Since its inception in 2016, virtual influencer marketing has taken the fashion industry by storm, and the trend has continued to penetrate into other industries worldwide. Instead of relying on endorsements from celebrities and key opinion leaders, the brand owners and marketers can now create their own virtual influencer to promote products and services in the way they desire with lower risks on social media platforms, particularly Instagram. In Malaysia, though virtual influencer marketing is still in its infancy, it is observed that some brands have started to ride on the trend. Recent examples of Miss AVA by AirAsia Malaysia and Maya by PUMA Southeast Asia show the potential of virtual influencer marketing in establishing brand awareness, and it is foreseen to have more Malaysian brands to embrace such marketing approach in near future (Tan, 2020a; Tan, 2020b). Although virtual influencer marketing is put in spotlight due to its disruptiveness, yet there is not much research done in this field. In fact, due to the absence of consensus in recent findings, the uncertainty pertaining to the key factors of virtual influencer marketing that affect consumers' purchase intention has become the main research problem. Therefore, this study aims to identify the key factors that influence the purchase intention of Generation Y consumers who are aged between 25 to 40 years old in Malaysia, a country with the most active Instagram users in Asia-Pacific. To have a greater clarity about the problem, both TEARS model (Shimp, 2003) and Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) are used as the theoretical foundations of this study. Due to the ongoing national movement control order, and to ensure individual safety against the COVID-19 infection, quantitative method via online survey utilising Google Form was shared to the target respondents across social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and LinkedIn. From the data analysis based on 255 respondents, it is confirmed that the identified factors (Parasocial Interaction, Attractiveness and Trustworthiness) have highly significant effects in influencing Generation Y consumers' purchase intention in Malaysia. However, this is not the case for Perceived Realism, as it is found to be insignificant in this study. Interestingly, this study makes a unique contribution to the existing influencer marketing literature, where results reveal that Attitude towards virtual influencer strongly mediates the relationship between Parasocial Interaction, Attractiveness and Trustworthiness and purchase intention. Hence, the findings from this study offer purposeful and relevant insights for both scholars and marketing practitioners as to the factors of virtual influencer marketing influencing Generation Y consumers' purchase intention, specifically in Malaysia. As most of the recent literature are mostly based on the Westerners' point of view, it is concluded that more studies shall be carried out to gather evidence from various perspectives through the academia and industry practitioners across Asia to compare, verify and support the findings from both sides of the world in future research.

Keywords: *Attitude, Attractiveness, Parasocial Interaction, Perceived Realism, Purchase Intention, Trustworthiness, Virtual Influencer Marketing*