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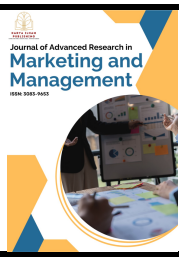

The Multidimensional Influence of Beauty Influencers: An Empirical Study on Brand Image Formation among Malaysian Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

In the rapidly evolving digital landscape of Malaysia, beauty influencers have emerged as pivotal figures in shaping consumer perceptions, particularly among the digitally native Generation Z. This study aims to investigate the mechanisms by which beauty influencers influence brand image formation among Malaysian Gen Z consumers. Utilizing a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, data was collected from 112 respondents and analyzed via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicate that an influencer's Appearance, Behavior, and Personality all significantly contribute to Brand Image, with Behavior emerging as the most decisive factor ($\beta = 0.283$, $p < 0.01$). These findings suggest that authentic behavior and transparency are more critical than physical aesthetics for brand positioning in the Southeast Asian market.

1. Introduction

The paradigm of brand communication has undergone a seismic shift with the advent of social media, giving rise to the influential power of digital content creators, commonly known as influencers. Within this ecosystem, beauty influencers have carved out a particularly potent niche, shaping trends, consumer preferences, and brand perceptions with unparalleled reach and authenticity [1]. Their impact is most pronounced among Generation Z (Gen Z), the first generation of true digital natives, who exhibit a marked distrust of traditional advertising and a strong preference for peer-driven, visually engaging, and authentic content [2].

In Malaysia's multicultural context, characterized by high internet penetration and active social media use, beauty influencers serve as critical cultural intermediaries. They navigate a diverse demographic landscape, making their role in shaping brand perceptions complex and significant [3]. While existing literature has established a link between influencer marketing and consumer outcomes such as purchase intention, there remains a need to examine the specific *attributes* of influencers that contribute to higher-order brand constructs, such as brand image [4]. Brand image,

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defined as the set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions a consumer holds about a brand [5] is a cornerstone of brand equity and long-term loyalty.

While previous research has established the general impact of influencer marketing on purchase intentions, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding which specific influencer attributes Appearance, Behavior, or Personality most effectively drive the formation of higher-order brand constructs like brand image within the multicultural Malaysian context. This study addresses this research gap by examining these three interrelated attributes through the lens of Source Credibility Theory. The primary objective was to provide a nuanced model of how digital content creators shape brand perceptions among Generation Z. The findings are significant as they offer brands actionable strategies for navigating the dynamic Southeast Asian market and contribute to the theoretical understanding of source credibility in interactive digital environments.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

This study is anchored in **Source Credibility Theory** [6], which posits that the effectiveness of a message is heavily dependent on the perceived credibility of its source. In the digital age, credibility is often disaggregated into dimensions such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise [7]. Furthermore, the concept of **parasocial interaction** [8] explains how followers develop one-sided, intimate relationships with media personas, a phenomenon amplified by the interactive nature of social media platforms. These theoretical lenses provide a framework for understanding why specific influencer attributes resonate with audiences.

2.2 Construct Definitions and Hypotheses

Appearance: This refers to the physical attractiveness, style, grooming, and visual aesthetic presented by the beauty influencer. In a domain heavily focused on cosmetics, fashion, and self-presentation, visual appeal is a fundamental source of aspirational value and perceived expertise [9]. An influencer's carefully curated appearance can generate favourable associations for the brands they endorse, thereby enhancing the brands' image as fashionable, high-quality, and desirable.

H1: An influencer's Appearance has a positive and significant influence on Brand Image.

Behavior: This construct encompasses the influencer's actions, communication style, engagement with followers, consistency in content creation, and perceived authenticity in endorsements. Gen Z values transparency and consistency; influencers who actively engage with their community, disclose sponsorships, and demonstrate genuine enthusiasm for products are perceived as more trustworthy [10]. This behavioral credibility directly enhances the brand's credibility and appeal.

H2: An influencer's Behavior has a positive and significant influence on Brand Image.

Personality: This refers to the relatable, human traits exhibited by the influencer, such as humor, humility, warmth, and values. Personality fosters parasocial connection, making the influencer seem like a "friend" or peer rather than a distant celebrity [11]. A likable and relatable personality can make brand endorsements feel more like personal recommendations, thereby fostering positive brand feelings and a relatable brand image.

H3: An influencer's Personality has a positive and significant influence on Brand Image.

Brand Image: The dependent variable is conceptualized as the overall perception of the brand as influenced by the influencer's endorsement. It encompasses perceptions of quality, value, and social appeal that Gen Z consumers form of the brand following exposure to influencer content.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sample

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed, utilizing a self-administered online survey. A purposive sampling technique was used to target individuals belonging to Generation Z (ages 18-30) in Malaysia who follow at least one beauty influencer on social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok.

The final sample consisted of **N = 112** respondents. The demographic profile (Table 1) indicates that the respondents were predominantly aged between 18-24 (96.43%) and that females constituted a higher proportion (58.93%). Ethnically, the sample was diverse, with the majority being Sabah Natives (69.64%), reflecting the study's regional focus. A significant majority were degree holders (88.39%) and most reported a monthly income of RM 1,000 or less (90.18%), which is representative of the student and young adult segment of Gen Z.

Table 1
Demographic and socio-economic profile

Category	Sub-Category	Count	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	46	41.07%
	Female	66	58.93%
Age Group	18 – 24	108	96.43%
	25 – 30	6	5.36%
	31 – 35	1	0.89%
Ethnicity	Sabah Natives	78	69.64%
	Malay	21	18.75%
	Sarawak Natives	9	8.04%
	Chinese	12	10.71%
	Indian	8	7.14%
	Bugis	2	1.79%
Religion	Islam	69	61.61%
	Christian	38	33.93%
	Hindu	8	7.14%
	Buddha	13	11.61%
Education Level	Degree	99	88.39%
	STPM/A-Level/Diploma	13	11.61%
	Master	1	0.89%
Income (Monthly)	≤ RM 1,000	101	90.18%
	RM 1,001 – RM 2,000	11	9.82%
	≥ RM 2,001	3	2.68%
Origin (Region)	Sabah	73	65.18%
	Sarawak	16	14.29%

Peninsular Malaysia	22	19.64%
Labuan	4	3.57%
Not Specified / Others	1	0.89%

3.2 Measurement and Data Collection

All constructs were measured using reflective indicators on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). "The scales for Appearance, Behavior, and Personality were adapted from Ohanian [7], while the items for Brand Image were adapted from Keller [5]." Each construct was measured using five items (e.g., "This influencer is physically attractive" for Appearance; "This influencer is honest in their recommendations" for Behavior).

Data collection was conducted over four weeks, with survey links distributed through university networks and social media groups targeting Malaysian youth.

3.3 Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4 software. PLS-SEM was considered suitable for this study due to its ability to manage complex models with a relatively small sample size, its focus on prediction, and its less restrictive assumptions regarding data distribution [12]. The analysis followed a two-step approach: (1) assessment of the measurement (outer) model for reliability and validity, and (2) assessment of the structural (inner) model to test the hypothesized relationships.

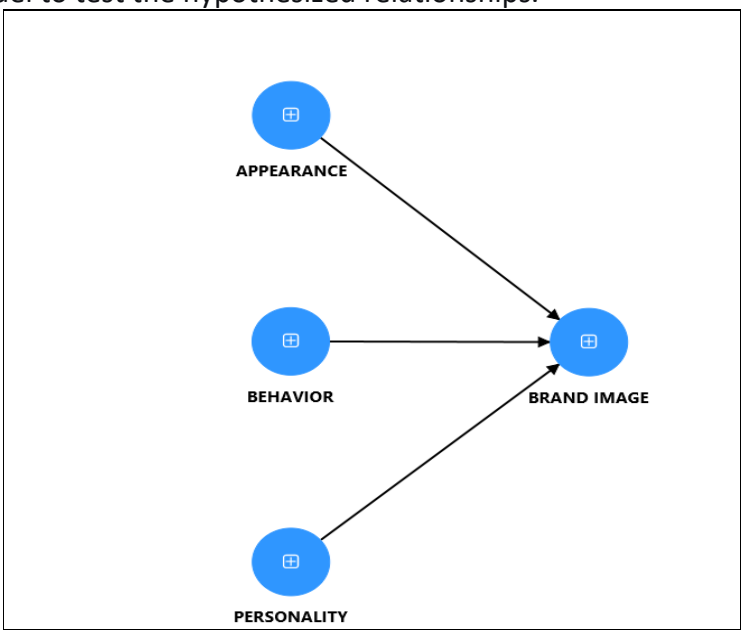

Fig. 1. Framework

4. Results

4.1 Measurement Model Assessment

The assessment of the reflective measurement model (Table 2) confirmed its robustness. Indicator Reliability: All outer loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.708 [12], with a range of 0.619 to 0.873, confirming that each item adequately represents its construct. Internal

Consistency Reliability: Both Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) for all constructs exceeded 0.70 (CA: 0.835–0.869; CR: 0.885–0.905), indicating excellent internal consistency.
Convergent Validity: The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct was above 0.50 (Range: 0.609–0.670), demonstrating that the constructs explain more than half of the variance of their respective indicators.

Table 2
Measurement model assessment

Construct	Item	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
APPEARANCE	APPEARANCE1	0.790	0.869	0.905	0.657
	APPEARANCE2	0.832			
	APPEARANCE3	0.777			
	APPEARANCE4	0.873			
	APPEARANCE5	0.776			
BEHAVIOR	BEHAVIOR1	0.845	0.841	0.888	0.616
	BEHAVIOR2	0.812			
	BEHAVIOR3	0.836			
	BEHAVIOR4	0.619			
	BEHAVIOR5	0.790			
BRAND IMAGE	BRAND IMAGE1	0.621	0.836	0.885	0.609
	BRAND IMAGE2	0.832			
	BRAND IMAGE3	0.842			
	BRAND IMAGE4	0.814			
	BRAND IMAGE5	0.771			
PERSONALITY	PERSONALITY1	0.832	0.835	0.890	0.670
	PERSONALITY2	0.789			
	PERSONALITY3	0.870			
	PERSONALITY4	0.779			

No item was deleted as loading Composite Reliability < .708 [13]
CA-Cronbach Aplha, CR-Composite Reliability, AVE-Average Variance Extracted

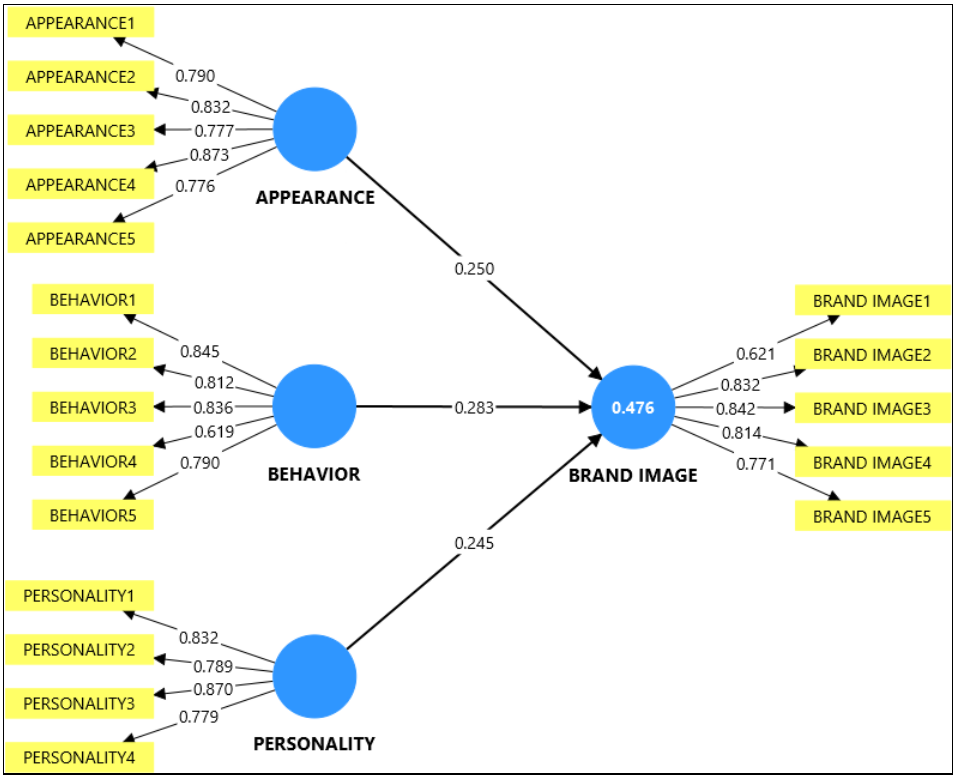

Fig. 2. Measurement model

Table 3
HTMT criterion

	APPEARANCE	BEHAVIOR	BRAND IMAGE	PERSONALITY
APPEARANCE				
BEHAVIOR	0.703			
BRAND IMAGE	0.678	0.727		
PERSONALITY	0.798	0.876	0.742	

Criteria: Discriminant validity is established at HTMT0.90 [13]

Discriminant Validity: The Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations (Table 3) was used. All HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.90 [13], with the highest being 0.876 (between Personality and Behavior), confirming that each construct was distinct from the others.

4.2 Structural Model Assessment

Table 4
Path coefficients

Direct Effect	Beta	S.E.	t-value	p-value	LLCI	ULCI	Decision
H1: APPEARANCE -> BRAND IMAGE	0.250	0.083	3.015	0.001	0.091	0.368	Supported
H2: BEHAVIOR -> BRAND IMAGE	0.283	0.119	2.381	0.009	0.055	0.453	Supported
H3: PERSONALITY -> BRAND IMAGE	0.245	0.139	1.768	0.039	0.009	0.460	Supported

*Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, Bias Corrected, LL=Lower Limit, UL=Upper Limit*
p-value of 0.01, 0.05 [12]

Table 5
Model quality assessment

Direct Effect	f^2	R^2	VIF
H1: APPEARANCE -> BRAND IMAGE	0.061	0.476	1.966
H2: BEHAVIOR -> BRAND IMAGE	0.066		2.319
H3: PERSONALITY -> BRAND IMAGE	0.041		2.802

$f^2 \geq 0.35$ consider Substantial [15]
$R^2 \geq 0.26$ consider Substantial [15]
VIF ≤ 3.3 or ≤ 5.0 [14]

After establishing a valid measurement model, the structural model was evaluated (Table 4). Collinearity: The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all predictor constructs were well below the common threshold of 5.0 [14], ranging from 1.966 to 2.802, indicating no critical collinearity issues.

Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing: The bootstrapping procedure (5000 subsamples) was used to assess the significance of the path coefficients. H1, H2 and H3 were all supported: Appearance positively influences Brand Image (β = 0.250, t = 3.015, p = 0.001); Behavior has the most substantial positive influence on Brand Image (β = 0.283, t = 2.381, p = 0.009); and Personality positively influences Brand Image (β = 0.245, t = 1.768, p = 0.039).

Coefficient of Determination (R^2): The model, wich has substantial explanatory power according to Cohen's [15] guidelines explains 47.6% of the variance in Brand Image (R^2 = 0.476). .

Effect Size (f^2): The effect sizes of the independent constructs on Brand Image were small (Appearance: 0.061; Personality: 0.041) to moderate (Behavior: 0.066) [16], indicating that each construct aligns with the model.

4.2 Predictive Relevance Assessment (PLS-Predict)

To evaluate the model's out-of-sample predictive power, the PLSpredict procedure was utilised [17]. As shown in Table 6, the PLS-SEM model's root mean square error (RMSE) and mean absolute error (MAE) for all five indicators of Brand Image were lower than those obtained with a naive linear regression (LM) benchmark. Since the PLS model yielded lower prediction errors for all indicators, it demonstrates high predictive power. The Q^2_predict values were all positive, further confirming the model's predictive relevance.

Table 6
Result of PLSpredict

Construct	Items	PLS-RMSE	MAE	LM-RMSE	MAE	PLS-LM RMSE	MAE	Q^2_predict	Predict Power
BRAND IMAGE	BRAND IMAGE1	0.831	0.555	0.902	0.618	-0.071	-0.063	0.116	High
	BRAND IMAGE2	0.691	0.498	0.727	0.526	-0.036	-0.028	0.279	
	BRAND IMAGE3	0.751	0.511	0.821	0.563	-0.070	-0.052	0.293	

BRAND IMAGE4	0.732	0.485	0.809	0.554	-0.077	-0.069	0.278
BRAND IMAGE5	0.710	0.507	0.780	0.566	-0.070	-0.059	0.206

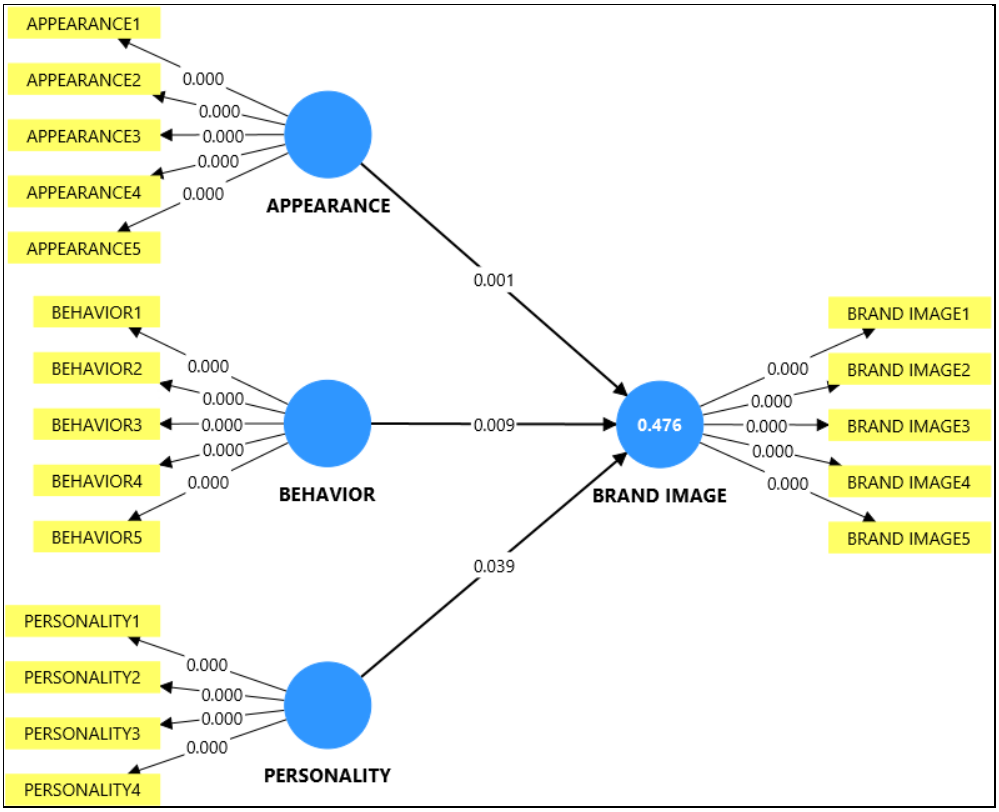

Fig. 3. Structural model

5. Discussion

5.1 Key Findings Interpretation

This study confirms that beauty influencers act as powerful agents in shaping brand image for Gen Z consumers in Malaysia: their influence is multidimensional. Support for H1 aligns with the foundational role of physical attractiveness in the beauty domain [9], where an influencer's appearance serves as evidence of a product's efficacy, thereby fostering an aspirational brand image.

The strongest support for **H2** (Behavior → Brand Image) is a critical finding. It suggests that for the skeptical and socially conscious Gen Z, *what an influencer does* matters more than *how they look*. Authentic engagement, transparent sponsorship disclosures, and consistent content creation build trust. This trust is then transferred to the endorsed brand, enhancing its image as honest and consumer-centric [10]. This underscores a shift from aesthetic-based to behavior-based credibility in digital influence.

The support for **H3** highlights the importance of emotional connection. A relatable and likable personality fosters parasocial relationships [11], making brand promotions feel like peer advice rather than corporate advertising. This can imbue a brand with human-like traits, making its image warmer and more accessible.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This research extends Source Credibility Theory by operationalizing and validating its dimensions (attractiveness, trustworthiness/behavior, likability/personality) in the novel context of social media influencers. It demonstrates that in interactive digital environments, behavioral and personality-based credibility can outweigh traditional attractiveness in impacting higher-order brand constructs. The study also contributes to the literature on marketing in multicultural Southeast Asian contexts, showing the universal applicability of these influencer attributes within a specific demographic (Gen Z).

5.3 Managerial Implications

Brand managers should adopt a holistic approach when selecting beauty influencer partners. Specifically, they should:

1. Prioritize Authentic Behavior: Vet influencers for consistent engagement, genuine audience interaction, and a history of transparent partnerships. Micro-influencers with highly engaged communities may be more effective than macro-influencers, whose behavior is less authentic.
2. Look Beyond Aesthetics: While appearance is important, it should not be the sole selection criterion. Partner with influencers whose personality aligns with the brand's values to foster deeper connections.
3. Foster Long-term Partnerships: Encourage long-term collaborations over one-off sponsorships. This allows influencers to develop more authentic, in-depth content, strengthening the behavioral and personality links to the brand.
4. Tailor to the Gen Z Mindset: Campaigns should empower influencers to create content in their own authentic voice, focusing on storytelling and value (e.g., tutorials, ethical choices) rather than hard-sell tactics.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations that provide avenues for future research. First, the sample, while informative, is geographically concentrated and has a high proportion of low-income respondents, limiting generalizability. Future studies should aim for larger, nationally representative samples. Second, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time; longitudinal studies could examine how these relationships evolve. Third, incorporating moderating variables (e.g., platform type, product category, or follower count) or mediating variables (e.g., parasocial interaction, trust) could enrich the model. Finally, qualitative insights could deepen the understanding of *why* these attributes are so impactful for Gen Z consumers.

6. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that the power of beauty influencers in shaping brand image among Malaysia's Generation Z stems from a confluence of their Appearance, Behavior, and Personality. Notably, Behavior emerged as the most potent driver, indicating that the market values authenticity and transparency above all else. In an increasingly saturated digital landscape, brands that strategically partner with influencers who exemplify these multidimensional traits are better positioned to build a positive, credible, and lasting image among the critical Gen Z consumer

segment. As influencer marketing matures, a nuanced understanding of these attribute-based dynamics will be indispensable for effective brand communication.

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