

Trusted but Questioned: Youth Perceptions of Social Media Influencer Credibility in Health Communication on Instagram and TikTok

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ABSTRACT

The increasing reliance on social media has positioned influencers as prominent health communicators, yet concerns persist regarding credibility within an increasingly commercialised digital landscape. This study examines how Malaysian youth construct credibility and negotiate trust in influencer-led health communication. Adopting a qualitative interpretive approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 youth aged 18–30 in the Klang Valley who actively engage with health content on Instagram and TikTok. Thematic analysis reveals that credibility is not a fixed attribute, but a dynamic, multidimensional process shaped by experiential expertise, relational authenticity, and transparency. Youth prioritise *lived experience* over formal credentials and engage in forms of *digital collectivism*, relying on peer validation and comment-section consensus to assess message legitimacy. Platform-specific dynamics further shape credibility judgments: Instagram is associated with curated professionalism, whereas TikTok facilitates algorithmic immediacy and perceived authenticity. While influencers effectively catalyse health awareness, particularly around mental health, behavioural engagement is often experimental and short-term rather than sustained. Theoretically, this study extends Source Credibility Theory by foregrounding the relational and communal construction of trust within non-Western digital contexts. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of experiential storytelling and community engagement for health organisations seeking to leverage influencer communication while mitigating misinformation risks.

Keywords: *Health communication, social media influencers, perceived credibility, youth, Instagram and TikTok.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary digital landscape has fundamentally transformed how young people access, process, and act upon health information. Social media platforms have emerged as primary channels through which youth encounter health-related content, with Instagram and TikTok representing two of the most influential platforms in this domain (Kaňková, Binder, & Matthes, 2024; Pretorius, McCashin, & Coyle, 2022). This shift is particularly pronounced in Malaysia, where high connectivity and pervasive social media participation continue to shape

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everyday information practices, including health-related searching and sharing (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2024).

The growing prominence of social media influencers as informal health communicators has further reshaped this landscape. Influencers leverage large followings to share health advice, personal experiences, and lifestyle-oriented health narratives (Kaňková et al., 2024). Functioning as salient information sources for youth, they often foster engagement through relatability and perceived authenticity rather than formal health credentials (Pretorius et al., 2022). However, this credibility environment is complicated by uneven digital health literacy and varying abilities to evaluate online health information critically—patterns that have also been documented in Malaysian settings (e.g., eHealth literacy evidence in Malaysia) (Nadzirah et al., 2022).

Despite the widespread reliance on influencers for health information, substantial concerns persist regarding credibility and trustworthiness in highly commercialised social media environments. Commercial pressures may encourage persuasive presentation and blurred disclosure practices, which can weaken perceived credibility and raise risks for health misinformation exposure (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In Malaysia, qualitative evidence shows that the public actively navigates health misinformation, underscoring the need to understand how credibility judgments are constructed in practice (Azlan et al., 2020). This concern is especially relevant in urban settings such as the Klang Valley, where intensive platform use amplifies the rapid circulation of trending health narratives (Abidin, 2016).

Taken together, these conditions point to a key gap: while influencer-led health communication is increasingly visible, the specific interpretive processes through which Malaysian youth evaluate influencer credibility, particularly across the distinct architectures of Instagram and TikTok, remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, the primary objective of this study is to understand how Malaysian youth decide whether to trust health information shared by social media influencers. Specifically, the study is guided by two central inquiries: (1) How do youth construct credibility judgments on visual-centric platforms like Instagram and TikTok? and (2) What specific factors, ranging from 'experiential expertise' to platform affordances, make them feel confident or doubtful about such content? Understanding these evaluative processes is essential for developing health communication strategies that responsibly leverage influencers' partnerships while mitigating the risks of misinformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media as a Health Information Ecosystem for Youth

Social media has evolved into a central ecosystem through which young people encounter, interpret, and engage with health-related information. Recent studies indicate that platforms such as Instagram and TikTok play a significant role in shaping youth health awareness, particularly in areas related to mental health, fitness, nutrition, and lifestyle practices (Pretorius et al., 2022; Kaňková et al., 2024). Unlike traditional health communication channels that rely on deliberate information-seeking, social media facilitates continuous and often passive exposure to health content through algorithmically curated feeds, increasing both reach and immediacy of health messages (Southwell et al., 2023).

Within the Malaysian context, social media use among youth is particularly pervasive. Empirical studies demonstrated that Malaysian youth exhibit high levels of social media engagement, yet vary considerably in their ability to critically evaluate online information, including health-related content (Suhaimie et al., 2021). This disparity suggests that while

access to digital health information is widespread, interpretive and evaluative capacities are unevenly developed. As a result, social media simultaneously functions as a resource for health awareness and a potential site for misinformation exposure.

The visual and narrative affordances of Instagram and TikTok further shape how health information is processed. Health messages are frequently embedded in short-form videos, personal testimonials, and lifestyle narratives that prioritise emotional resonance and relatability over evidentiary depth (Chou, Oh, & Klein, 2023). Although such formats can enhance engagement, they may also encourage heuristic processing, where credibility judgments are based on surface cues such as popularity, aesthetics, or familiarity rather than content accuracy. These dynamics highlight the importance of examining how youth evaluate credibility within visually driven social media environments.

The Rise of Health Influencers on Social Media

Social media influencers have emerged as prominent informal health communicators, occupying a hybrid position between professional health authorities and peer networks. Influencers disseminate health-related content ranging from informational advice to personal experiences and lifestyle-oriented recommendations, often within commercialised digital environments (Kaňková et al., 2024). Their influence is frequently attributed to their ability to foster parasocial interaction—one-sided yet emotionally meaningful relationships between audiences and media figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

In digital contexts, parasocial interaction is intensified through platform affordances such as comment replies, livestreams, and personal disclosures, allowing influencers to appear accessible and relatable (Labrecque, 2014). For youth audiences, these affective bonds can translate into heightened trust, particularly when influencers frame health advice through lived experience rather than formal expertise (Pretorius et al., 2022). This shift complicates conventional health communication models, as credibility becomes increasingly relational rather than institutionally anchored.

However, the reliance on parasocial trust raises ethical concerns. Many influencers lack formal health training, yet their advice may be perceived as trustworthy due to emotional closeness and perceived authenticity (Southwell et al., 2023). Within the Malaysian digital landscape, where youth place value on relational harmony and peer validation, such affective trust may further reduce critical scrutiny of influencer-led health content (Suhaimi et al., 2021). This underscores the need to understand how parasocial relationships intersect with credibility evaluation in local contexts.

Critically, the application of Source Credibility Theory in this context must account for the mediating role of Parasocial Interaction (PSI). Originally defined by Horton and Wohl (1956), PSI describes the illusion of an intimate, face-to-face relationship between a media figure and an audience member. In influencer-led health communication, this "illusion of intimacy" functions as a psychological bridge to credibility. Research suggests that as the parasocial bond strengthens, the audience's cognitive defence mechanisms lower, leading to higher levels of perceived trustworthiness, a core dimension of Source Credibility (Labrecque, 2014; Lou & Yuan (2019). Consequently, for youth audiences, the "relational closeness" generated by PSI often serves as a heuristic proxy for "expertise," allowing influencers to accrue credibility through emotional connection rather than institutional validation.

Source Credibility Theory in Digital Health Communication

Source Credibility Theory (SCT) provides a foundational framework for understanding how audiences evaluate information sources. Traditionally, credibility has been conceptualised as comprising perceived expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian, 1990). While these dimensions remain relevant, recent scholarship suggests that credibility assessment in social media environments differs substantially from traditional media contexts due to the absence of institutional gatekeeping and professional verification cues (Chou et al., 2023).

In collectivist societies such as Malaysia, credibility is often socially and relationally constructed rather than assessed solely on individual competence (Hofstede, 2011). Local studies indicate that Malaysian youth frequently rely on peer validation, social consensus, and perceived sincerity when evaluating online information sources (Suhaimee et al., 2021). In influencer-led health communication, this may translate into greater emphasis on authenticity, consistency, and interpersonal tone rather than formal qualifications.

Moreover, digital platforms introduce alternative credibility signals, including follower counts, engagement metrics, visual aesthetics, and disclosure practices (Kaňková et al., 2024). These platform-specific cues interact with traditional credibility dimensions, producing what recent scholars describe as “hybrid credibility,” where expertise, authenticity, and relational trust are evaluated simultaneously (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). Understanding how Malaysian youth navigate these overlapping cues is essential for contextualising SCT within contemporary digital health communication.

Youth Engagement with Health Information on Instagram and TikTok

Instagram and TikTok function as influential yet distinct platforms for youth engagement with health information, shaped by their differing affordances and content logics. Recent health communication research indicates that both platforms play a central role in how youth encounter, interpret, and respond to health-related content, particularly in areas such as mental health, fitness, and lifestyle practices (Pretorius et al., 2022; Kaňková et al., 2024). Instagram’s emphasis on visually curated content encourages aspirational health narratives, while TikTok’s algorithm-driven short videos prioritise relatability, immediacy, and viral dissemination, allowing health messages to reach wide audiences rapidly (Chou et al., 2023).

Youth engagement with health content on these platforms is characterised by a combination of active and passive exposure. While some young people deliberately seek health information in response to personal concerns, much exposure occurs incidentally through personalised feeds, influencer posts, and algorithmic recommendations (Southwell et al., 2023). Although such passive exposure can increase health awareness, recent studies suggest it may also limit critical evaluation of information accuracy and source credibility, particularly when content is framed as entertainment or lifestyle advice (Chou et al., 2023).

Social validation mechanisms are heuristic cues such as likes, comments, and shares that audiences use to evaluate the credibility of information based on community consensus, rather than critically assessing the actual quality of the message or the source's formal expertise (Kaňková et al., 2024). These social validation mechanisms further shape youth engagement with health information. In a highly visual environment, content that generates high engagement may be perceived as more credible, reinforcing the spread of simplified or commercially motivated health messages.

The integration of commercial content within health-related posts adds another layer of complexity to youth engagement. Recent research highlights that sponsored content and influencer marketing practices can obscure persuasive intent, making it difficult for youth to distinguish between genuine health guidance and promotional messaging (Pretorius et al., 2022; Southwell et al., 2023). These dynamics underscore the importance of examining how youth navigate credibility, trust, and commercial influence when engaging with health information on Instagram and TikTok.

Digital Health Literacy, Trust, and Scepticism

Trust and scepticism coexist as a central tension in youth engagement with influencer-generated health content. While parasocial relationships and authenticity cues foster trust, the commercial nature of influencer marketing provides legitimate grounds for doubt. The ability to navigate this tension depends significantly on digital health literacy, defined as the capacity to access, understand, and critically evaluate health information obtained from digital sources (Norman & Skinner, 2006).

Recent studies suggest that although youth are often characterised as “digital natives,” their critical evaluation of health-related content, particularly sponsored or influencer-led messaging, is uneven (Southwell et al., 2023). Malaysian research further indicates that youth may possess high technical proficiency in social media use while demonstrating varying levels of analytical engagement with content credibility (Suhaimie et al., 2021). As a result, youth frequently rely on heuristic strategies such as cross-referencing comments, observing peer responses, or assessing sponsorship disclosures rather than conducting a systematic evaluation.

These findings point to a need for qualitative inquiry that examines how trust and scepticism are negotiated in real-time engagement with influencer content. Rather than treating credibility as a fixed attribute, recent scholarship emphasises its dynamic and relational nature, shaped through repeated exposure, interaction, and contextual interpretation (Kaňková et al., 2024). Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach to explore how Malaysian youth construct credibility and negotiate trust within influencer-led health communication on Instagram and TikTok.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design utilising in-depth semi-structured interviews to examine how youth construct and negotiate perceptions of social media influencers' credibility. An interpretive approach is particularly suited to this inquiry as credibility is understood not as an inherent property of information sources, but as a socially constructed and context-dependent judgment shaped through interaction, experience, and meaning-making processes (Kaňková et al., 2024; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within digital health environments, youth interpret credibility cues dynamically, drawing on personal values, relational experiences, and culturally specific platform affordances. Consistent with qualitative health research, this approach supports the in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and the specific "logic of practice" they employ when navigating health content (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2022).

The use of qualitative methods reflects the study's aim to explore how youth actively make sense of influencer-led health content rather than to measure predefined credibility dimensions. Recent health communication scholarship highlights the limitations of exclusively

quantitative approaches in capturing the nuanced and evolving ways audiences interpret credibility in social media contexts (Chou et al., 2023). By privileging participants' perspectives, qualitative inquiry enables the examination of the interpretive practices through which youth evaluate trust, scepticism, authenticity, and ethical communication.

While grounded in Source Credibility Theory as a sensitising concept, this study adopts an inductive analytical stance using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allows novel themes to emerge from participants' accounts regarding relational and cultural nuances rather than strictly imposing rigid a priori categories. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for examining the Malaysian context, where credibility assessments are shaped by unique digital social norms, emotional engagement, and platform-specific interaction patterns (Pretorius et al., 2022). Through this design, the study captures the complexity and fluidity of credibility negotiation within contemporary digital health communication environments.

Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit 15 youth informants aged 18 to 30 who actively engage with health-related content on Instagram and TikTok. Purposive sampling is appropriate for this qualitative inquiry as it enables the deliberate selection of information-rich participants who possess direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2022; Patton, 2015). Participants were selected based on three inclusion criteria: (1) being within the 18–30 age range, representing the demographic group with the highest social media penetration in Malaysia (MCMC, 2022); (2) residing in the Klang Valley, ensuring geographic consistency within a high-density urban digital media context; and (3) actively following at least two health-related influencers on Instagram or TikTok, indicating regular exposure to influencer-led health communication.

The sample size of 15 participants was determined based on the principle of "information power" (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). This model suggests that smaller sample sizes are sufficient when participants hold high specificity to the research aim, the study focus is narrow, and the dialogue quality is strong. Given that this study focuses on a specific phenomenon (credibility negotiation) among a highly specific sub-group (active health content consumers), a sample of 15 provided sufficient depth to achieve saturation of themes.

Participant recruitment was conducted through multiple channels to enhance diversity. Initial participants were recruited via university-based social media groups and health-related online communities, followed by snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) whereby participants referred to others meeting the criteria. This dual approach enabled variation in gender, educational background, and types of health content followed, ranging from mental health and fitness to general well-being, thereby strengthening the breadth of perspectives captured within the sample (see Table 1).

Data Collection

This study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore youth perceptions of social media influencer credibility. This method was selected to allow for a flexible, conversational exchange where participants could elaborate on complex personal narratives and the interviewer could probe for deeper meaning (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). A total of 15 youth participants residing in the Klang Valley were engaged for the study, all of whom

possessed direct and sustained exposure to health-related content on Instagram and TikTok. As detailed in the sampling strategy, participants were selected to reflect variation in age, gender, educational background, occupational status, and patterns of social media use to capture a diverse range of perspectives. A summary of participant demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Informant code	Age	Gender	Education/ Occupation	Area	Primary Platform Used	Health Content Followed
P1	18	Female	Undergraduate Student	Cyberjaya	Instagram, TikTok	Mental health, self-care
P2	19	Male	Diploma Student	Bangi	TikTok	Fitness, nutrition
P3	20	Female	Undergraduate Student	Kajang	Instagram	Lifestyle, wellness
P4	21	Female	Undergraduate Student	Petaling Jaya	Instagram, TikTok	Mental health
P5	22	Male	Undergraduate Student	Kuala Lumpur		Fitness, supplements
P6	22	Female	Undergraduate Student	Subang Jaya	TikTok	Nutrition, wellness
P7	23	Male	Working	Shah Alam	Instagram, TikTok	Fitness, lifestyle
P8	23	Female	Undergraduate Student	Puchong	TikTok	Mental health
P9	24	Female	Working	Ampang	Instagram	Wellness, self-care
P10	25	Male	Working	Cheras	TikTok	Fitness
P11	26	Female	Postgraduate Student	Bangsar	Instagram, TikTok	Mental health
P12	27	Male	Working	Setapak	Instagram	Nutrition, fitness
P13	28	Female	Working	Putrajaya	Instagram	Lifestyle wellness
P14	29	Male	Working	Damansara	TikTok	Fitness, motivation
P15	30	Female	Postgraduate Student	Seri Kembangan	Instagram, TikTok	Mental health, wellness

The interview guide was developed based on the core constructs of Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990) while maintaining the flexibility to capture inductive insights. Questions were designed to elicit participants' interpretations of influencer-led health communication, specifically probing how they assessed credibility dimensions such as expertise, authenticity, transparency in commercial partnerships, and consistency of messaging. Grounding discussions in participants' lived experiences enabled rich, contextualised insights into how these theoretical concepts are negotiated through everyday engagement.

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period between June and August 2023. Interviews were carried out either face-to-face or via video-conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom/Google Meet), depending on participant preference. The use of video-conferencing was deemed appropriate as recent methodological studies confirm it yields data quality comparable to in-person modes while offering greater scheduling flexibility for young urban participants (Archibald et al., 2019).

Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. All participants provided informed consent before participation. Sessions were conducted in English or Bahasa Malaysia according to participant comfort, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. To ensure cross-cultural validity, interviews conducted in Bahasa Malaysia were translated into English and subjected to a back-translation verification process to ensure conceptual equivalence and accuracy (Temple & Young, 2004).

Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a method selected for its flexibility in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within an interpretive design. The analytical process involved systematic familiarisation with the transcripts, the generation of initial semantic and latent codes, and the collation of these codes into potential themes, which were subsequently reviewed against the dataset to define the final thematic map. To ensure analytical rigour and mitigate individual bias, investigator triangulation was employed (Patton, 2015); two researchers independently coded a subset (20%) of the transcripts before convening a consensus meeting to compare coding structures, resolve discrepancies, and refine the final thematic framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The thematic analysis of the interview data yielded four main themes regarding how Malaysian youth construct and negotiate the credibility of health influencers. First, credibility is constructed through a multidimensional process involving experiential expertise, authenticity, and consistency. Second, youth engage in the active negotiation of trust through specific verification strategies. Third, credibility judgments differ according to platform dynamics (Instagram vs. TikTok). Finally, influencer impact is characterised by selective and short-term behavioural influence, revealing a gap between health awareness and long-term adherence. These themes are detailed below.

1. Multidimensional Credibility Construction

This theme explores how credibility is not a static attribute but a complex negotiation where youth weigh experiential knowledge, relational authenticity, and longitudinal consistency against traditional markers of expertise.

The findings indicate that youth construct influencer credibility through a multidimensional evaluation process that extends beyond conventional Western notions of static expertise. Participants described assessing credibility by weighing multiple interrelated factors, primarily experiential expertise, relational authenticity, and longitudinal consistency. These factors were not applied uniformly but were actively negotiated depending on the health topic and the "parasocial" connection felt with the influencer.

... I don't decide if I trust them based on one thing only. It's how real they seem, whether they've actually gone through it themselves, and if what they say stays the same over time. (Informant P2)

a) Negotiating Institutional vs. Experiential Expertise

Perceived professionalism emerged as a complex and conditional indicator of credibility. While participants valued influencers who referenced research findings or collaborated with health professionals, formal qualifications alone were insufficient to establish trust. Instead, participants expressed a strong preference for experiential expertise, knowledge grounded in lived experience rather than symbolic academic status. This reconfiguration of authority is reflected in the following account:

...Just because someone has letters after their name doesn't mean they really understand what it's like to deal with these health issues in real life. (Informant P6)

...I'm more convinced when they talk from experience, like what actually worked for them. Doctors are important, but influencers who've lived through it make it feel more relatable. (Informant P8)

This suggests that for youth, empathy and shared struggle often outweigh symbolic credentials in the hierarchy of trust.

b) Authenticity and Relational Connection

Authenticity was identified as the central determinant of trust. Participants distinguished between influencers perceived as "genuinely sharing" their health journeys versus those performing for commercial gain. Authenticity was associated with vulnerability and the alignment of values, creating a "parasocial" bond. When this perceived connection was violated by excessive commercialism, credibility collapsed:

... When I see an influencer promoting everything under the sun, I just can't trust anything they say anymore because I know it's all about the money. (Informant P3)

...I never just believe what one person says about health stuff. I'll Google it, check a few other accounts, maybe even ask my doctor if it's something serious. (Informant P9)

Conversely, openness fostered deep relational trust:

...When they share their struggles openly, it feels like they're talking to me, not selling to me. That's when I feel connected and actually listen. (Informant P5)

c) Consistency as a Credibility Marker

Consistency of messaging over time further influenced credibility assessments. Participants reported monitoring whether influencers' recommendations aligned across posts and remained stable over time. Frequent contradictions or abrupt shifts in advice were interpreted as signals of inauthenticity or opportunism. Several participants described

unfollowing influencers whose messages appeared inconsistent or overly confident across diverse health topics.

...I follow for a long time before I really trust them. If their advice keeps changing depending on what's trending, then I know they're not serious. (Informant P13)

2. Active Negotiation of Trust and Doubt

This theme examines the verification strategies youth employ, ranging from external cross-referencing to communal validation, to mitigate the risks of trust in a commercialised environment.

Contrary to assumptions that youth passively accept influencer-generated health messages, participants demonstrated active and ongoing negotiation of trust and scepticism. Trust was not established through isolated encounters but developed cumulatively through repeated exposure and verification practices.

...Trust builds slowly. The more I see their content and check it myself, the more confident I feel. One video is never enough for me to decide. (Informant P1)

a) Cross-Referencing and External Verification

Participants commonly described cross-referencing influencer claims with alternative sources such as search engines, health websites, or healthcare professionals. This demonstrates a clear distinction between "awareness" (seeing the content) and "acceptance" (believing the content).

...I never just believe what one person says about health stuff. I'll Google it, check a few other accounts, maybe even ask my doctor if it's something serious. (Informant P9)

...Sometimes the influencer sounds convincing, but I still double-check. Especially for health stuff, I don't want to rely on just one opinion. (Informant P7)

b) Communal Validation and Digital Collectivism

Beyond individual verification, community responses played a significant role in credibility assessment. Participants frequently relied on the comments section to gauge collective agreement, reflecting a form of "digital collectivism." Observing disagreement, critique, or peer "call-outs" prompted participants to reassess content they had initially accepted.

...I always read the comments first. If a lot of people are questioning or correcting them, I start doubting the advice too. (Informant P10)

...When other users share similar experiences in the comments, it makes the influencer feel more trustworthy, like it's not just their story. (Informant P4)

Participants also evaluated influencers' underlying motives when interpreting health content. Influencers perceived as prioritising community support or personal sharing were viewed as more trustworthy, while those whose content appeared predominantly commercial were approached with scepticism. This evaluation was often based on long-term observation rather than isolated posts.

c) Alignment with Personal Values & Lived Experience

Finally, credibility judgments were shaped by alignment with personal values and lived experiences. When influencer messages resonated with participants' own offline reality, trust was strengthened; when content contradicted personal beliefs or experiences, it prompted critical scrutiny.

...If what they say matches what I've experienced myself, then I'm more likely to believe them. But if it feels unrealistic, I become more sceptical. (Informant P12)

d) The Limits of Skepticism: Habitual Trust

Despite these active verification strategies, participants acknowledged moments of reduced critical evaluation, particularly when content addressed low-risk topics (e.g., general wellness) or came from influencers they had followed for extended periods. This reflects a tension between critical awareness and "habitual trust" born from long-term parasocial interaction.

...If it's someone I've followed for years, I don't question them as much, especially for small things. I only become extra careful when it's serious health advice. (Informant P15)

3. Differential Platform Dynamics: The Aesthetics of Trust

This theme highlights how distinct platform affordances shape credibility judgments, contrasting the "curated professionalism" valued on Instagram with the "raw immediacy" preferred on TikTok. Participants described distinct credibility logics operating on Instagram and TikTok, shaped by each platform's affordances and content norms.

a) Instagram: Curated Professionalism

Instagram was associated with "curated credibility." Participants described evaluating influencer profiles as digital portfolios, where visual coherence and aesthetic consistency signalled professionalism. However, this curation created a paradox: while high production value signalled authority, excessive perfection often triggered scepticism, as highly polished content was perceived as potentially idealised or commercially driven.

...On Instagram, I judge based on how their profile looks. If everything is organised and professional, it feels more credible—but sometimes too perfect feels fake. (Informant P6)

b) TikTok: Raw Authenticity and Immediacy

In contrast, TikTok privileged immediacy and perceived authenticity. Participants reported greater trust in influencers who spoke directly to the camera in informal or unfiltered settings. Due to algorithmic content discovery, credibility judgments were often formed rapidly, based on tone, delivery, and immediate audience reactions rather than profile history.

...TikTok feels more real because they just talk straight to the camera. Even if it's messy, it feels honest, like they're not overthinking it. (Informant P9)

Ultimately, the findings suggest a functional divergence: for Malaysian youth, Instagram functions as a "visual reference library" for aspirational health standards, whereas TikTok acts as a "community forum" for rapid, peer-validated information exchange.

4. Selective and Short-Term Behavioural Influence

This theme reveals the gap between cognitive awareness and behavioural adherence, showing that while influencers successfully trigger health reflection, they often fail to drive sustained lifestyle change.

While influencer content consistently increased health awareness, its influence on sustained behavioural change was limited. Participants reported heightened awareness of mental health, fitness, and nutrition, but described behavioural engagement as largely exploratory rather than enduring.

a) The Awareness-Adherence Gap

Mental health content appeared particularly effective in reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking behaviours (cognitive influence). In contrast, fitness and nutrition content often resulted in short-term experimentation driven by viral trends rather than long-term adoption (behavioural adherence).

...I'll try things I see online, but I don't really stick to them long-term. It's more for ideas than actual routines. (Informant P14)

...Mental health posts make me think more about myself and maybe reach out for help, but workout or diet trends usually don't last long for me. (Informant P3)

These findings indicate that influencers function effectively as catalysts for awareness and stigma reduction, particularly in the mental health domain, but are insufficient as independent drivers of sustained lifestyle transformation. Without complementary offline support or professional intervention, the "viral" nature of influencer advice often leads to transient "trial behaviour" rather than permanent habit formation.

Discussion

This study examined how Malaysian youth negotiate the credibility of social media influencers in health communication. The findings demonstrate that credibility is not a static attribute residing in the source, but a dynamic, multidimensional process constructed through experiential expertise, relational authenticity, and communal verification. By explicitly

separating these insights, this section addresses the *cross-cultural, theoretical, practical, and policy implications* of the study.

In terms of cross-cultural implications, the key contribution of this study is the identification of credibility mechanisms that diverge from dominant Western-centric models. Traditional Western frameworks (e.g., Ohanian, 1990) often conceptualise credibility as an individual cognitive assessment of a source's expertise and trustworthiness. In contrast, this study suggests that for Malaysian youth, credibility is deeply relational and communal.

Reflecting the high-context, collectivist values of Malaysian society, participants did not evaluate influencers in isolation but relied heavily on "Digital Collectivism", using comment sections and community consensus to validate health claims. Unlike Western audiences who may prioritise individual verification of facts, Malaysian youth frequently treated the "collective voice" of the comment section as a primary verification tool. Furthermore, the preference for "Experiential Expertise" (lived experience) over institutional authority suggests a cultural shift where "relational closeness" (parasocial interaction) outweighs distant professional status, challenging the Western emphasis on formal credentials as the primary driver of trust.

Theoretically, these findings extend Source Credibility Theory (SCT) into the algorithmic era by reconceptualising credibility as a dynamic, relational, and ecologically dependent process. First, the study posits that credibility on platforms like Instagram and TikTok is not a fixed trait but a cumulative negotiation; trust is "earned" through longitudinal consistency and "lost" through commercial saturation, supporting the view of credibility as a fluid state rather than a permanent asset (Kozinets et al., 2017).

Practically, for health practitioners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the findings suggest that relying solely on "expert-led" messaging is insufficient for youth engagement, necessitating a strategic shift from institutional authority to relational authenticity. Consequently, health campaigns should prioritise collaborations with "micro-influencers" who possess genuine lived experience of specific health issues such as mental health survivors, rather than relying exclusively on celebrities or medical professionals, as these voices provide the relational authenticity that youth prioritise.

Furthermore, recognising the power of "Digital Collectivism," practitioners must extend their role beyond content dissemination to active community management within comment sections. Since validity is often socially constructed in these spaces for Malaysian youth, monitoring and participating in comment threads to correct misinformation or reinforce positive messages is as critical as the primary content itself.

In terms of policy, the gap between high health awareness and low behavioural adherence identified in this study signals a critical need for targeted policy intervention. To address this, the Ministry of Health and educational bodies should expand digital health literacy programs to include "Commercial Literacy," equipping youth with the skills to deconstruct "native advertising" and recognise how commercial incentives subtly influence health narratives; this necessitates moving beyond basic fact-checking to understanding the political economy of influencer content. Simultaneously, policymakers must enforce stricter guidelines on sponsorship disclosure for health-related products. Since transparency was identified as a key driver of trust, standardised and visible disclosure labels (e.g., #Ad, #Sponsored) are essential to protect youth from covert commercial persuasion (De Veirman et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how Malaysian youth negotiate the credibility of social media influencers in health communication. The findings demonstrate that credibility is not a static attribute but a dynamic, relational process. Youth actively deconstruct credibility through a multidimensional framework that prioritises experiential expertise, relational authenticity, and communal validation over traditional institutional authority.

The study highlights a critical paradox: while influencers function effectively as catalysts for health awareness (particularly in mental health), they are less effective as drivers of sustained behavioural change, often leading to transient "trial behaviour" rather than long-term adoption. Furthermore, this negotiation is platform-dependent, with youth navigating between the "curated professionalism" of Instagram and the "raw immediacy" of TikTok. This challenges the assumption that high engagement metrics equate to successful health intervention.

Theoretically, this study contributes to Source Credibility Theory by recontextualising it within a non-Western, digital environment. It posits that for Malaysian youth, credibility is socially constructed through "digital collectivism" where the consensus of the community (comments) often outweighs individual assessment. Practically, the findings urge a shift toward ethically transparent, community-centred health communication strategies that respect the interpretive agency of young digital citizens.

BIODATA

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