

Credibility of TikTok Influencers and Political Interest among Young Malaysian Voters

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between the credibility of TikTok influencers and political interest among young Malaysian voters. Grounded in Source Credibility Theory, the study focuses on four credibility dimensions, namely competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness and dynamism, while political interest is treated separately as the dependent variable. A quantitative cross sectional survey was conducted among 384 registered young voters aged between 18 and 25 years from the six Malaysian states involved in the 2023 State Elections. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling based on their use of TikTok and exposure to political influencers. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression. The correlation results show that trustworthiness and attractiveness have weak but statistically significant positive relationships with political interest, whereas competence and dynamism are not significantly related to political interest. When the four dimensions were examined simultaneously, competence emerged as a significant positive predictor, while trustworthiness showed a significant negative coefficient. Attractiveness and dynamism were not significant predictors. The regression model was statistically significant but explained 4.8% of the variance in political interest. These findings demonstrate that the dimensions of influencer credibility do not operate uniformly and that their relationships with political interest differ when examined separately and simultaneously. The study provides a more specific application of Source Credibility Theory to TikTok political communication and contributes empirical evidence from young Malaysian voters in the post Undi18 electoral context.

Keywords: *TikTok, source credibility, political interest, young voters, political influencers.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media has reshaped the landscape of political communication, particularly among younger audiences whose exposure to politics is increasingly mediated through digital platforms. Among these platforms, TikTok has become especially significant due to its short form video format, algorithm driven content delivery, and highly personalised user experience. Unlike traditional political communication, where information is typically disseminated through formal institutions, news organisations, political parties, and campaign speeches, TikTok enables political content to circulate through informal, creator driven, and visually engaging formats. This shift reflects a broader transformation in political communication, where digital platforms increasingly influence how information is produced, distributed, and interpreted by audiences (Bennett, 2012).

In Malaysia, the growing relevance of TikTok in political communication is closely linked to the implementation of Undi18, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 and expanded youth participation in the electoral process. This reform has increased the visibility and importance of young voters in shaping electoral outcomes. As a result, understanding how young voters engage with political information has become more critical, particularly

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within digital environments where they are most active. Empirical research indicates that social media use is positively associated with political engagement among younger audiences (Boulianne, 2015), while also functioning as an informal environment for political learning (Lee & Xenos, 2022). This raises a further question about how young voters evaluate the people who communicate political information on these platforms.

Within this evolving environment, TikTok influencers who discuss or share political content have become part of the broader communication landscape. These influencers may not have formal political backgrounds, yet they play a role in communicating political issues to audiences in a more informal and accessible manner. Their visibility, however, does not necessarily mean that audiences regard them as credible sources of political information. In a platform environment where users are exposed to large volumes of content within a short period of time, credibility cues become important in determining whether a communicator and the information presented are taken seriously. This is consistent with arguments that trust, authenticity, and perceived sincerity are central to audience evaluation in social media communication (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018).

This study focuses on the credibility of TikTok influencers and its relationship with political interest among young Malaysian voters. The study is grounded in Source Credibility Theory, which explains how audiences evaluate communicators based on their perceived qualities (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Four dimensions of credibility are examined, namely competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and dynamism. The theoretical issue examined in this study is whether these credibility dimensions, developed and applied across different communication settings, remain equally relevant when political communication takes place through a short form and influencer driven platform such as TikTok. Political interest is treated as the dependent variable, reflecting audience engagement with political issues rather than a component of credibility. Attractiveness in this study refers specifically to the construct measured in the research instrument. It is not used interchangeably with relatability, which is not measured as a separate construct. This distinction is maintained throughout the study to ensure consistency between the conceptualisation, measurement, and interpretation of attractiveness.

Although previous studies have established a relationship between social media use and political engagement, less is known about how specific dimensions of influencer credibility are related to political interest. This is particularly relevant to TikTok, where political information appears alongside entertainment and other everyday content in a short, visual, and highly personalised format. Existing studies provide useful evidence on the role of social media in youth political engagement, but offer less explanation of whether competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and dynamism are related to political interest in the same way. In Malaysia, this issue remains underexplored, particularly among young voters following the implementation of Undi18.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between the credibility dimensions of TikTok influencers and political interest among young Malaysian voters. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: How are the competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and dynamism of TikTok influencers associated with political interest among young Malaysian voters, both independently and when considered simultaneously? By examining these dimensions separately, the study provides a more specific understanding of influencer credibility in TikTok political communication and contributes evidence from the Malaysian post Undi18 context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory provides the theoretical foundation for this study. Hovland and Weiss (1951) established that the way audiences respond to a message is related to how they evaluate its source, particularly in terms of expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise refers to the perceived knowledge and competence of the communicator, while trustworthiness concerns whether the communicator is regarded as honest and reliable. Ohanian (1990) later included attractiveness alongside expertise and trustworthiness, extending the evaluation of source credibility beyond knowledge and reliability.

Source credibility, however, has not always been explained using the same dimensions. Berlo et al. (1969) extended earlier work on source credibility and identified safety, qualification, and dynamism as three dimensions used by receivers to evaluate message sources. Their work provides the theoretical basis for the inclusion of dynamism in this study. Dynamism refers to the expressive and energetic qualities of a communicator and is different from competence and trustworthiness. This dimension is relevant to TikTok because the presentation of political information on the platform depends not only on the content of the message but also on the way the communicator presents it through short, visual, and expressive content.

The relevance of Source Credibility Theory in social media influencer research is supported by Han and Balabanis (2024). Their meta-analysis of 53 studies involving 250 effect sizes identified Source Credibility Theory as a strong framework for explaining influencer related outcomes. The analysis also showed that these outcomes vary according to platform, geographical context, methodology, and influencer type. This is important for the present study because it indicates that credibility cannot be assumed to operate in the same way across different communication settings.

A broader meta-analysis published by Pan et al. (2025) offers further support for this argument. Drawing on 251 papers and 1,531 effect sizes, the study found that source credibility was related to audience attitudes and behavioural engagement, while its effects also differed according to social media and product contexts. Although this evidence comes from influencer marketing research, it is useful in showing that the role of credibility depends partly on the setting in which communication takes place. This provides a reason to examine the credibility dimensions separately rather than assume that each dimension carries the same relevance in TikTok political communication.

For the present study, competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and dynamism are therefore examined separately because each represents a different aspect of how audiences evaluate a source. Competence represents perceived knowledge and ability, trustworthiness refers to perceived honesty and reliability, attractiveness is retained as the specific construct measured in the research instrument, while dynamism represents the expressive quality of the communicator. The study does not assume that these four dimensions have identical relationships with political interest. Instead, it examines how each dimension is associated with political interest within TikTok political communication. Attractiveness is also distinguished from relatability because relatability is not measured as a separate construct in this study.

b. Credibility in Social Media Environments

Credibility in social media environments differs from credibility in traditional communication settings because audiences evaluate sources within a more personal and interactive communication space. Social media users are exposed not only to the information shared by influencers but also to their communication style, personal presentation, interaction with followers, and consistency across content. As a result, credibility is formed through a combination of informational and personal cues rather than through formal expertise alone.

This difference becomes important when credibility is considered in relation to social media influencers. Unlike institutional or professional sources, influencers often build their presence through repeated interaction and continued visibility among followers. Amin (2024), for example, found that expertise played an important role in establishing influencer trustworthiness, whereas attractiveness had a more limited role. This indicates that different characteristics of an influencer may contribute differently to how credibility is evaluated.

The importance of these characteristics also varies across studies. Han and Balabanis (2024) found positive relationships between influencer trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness and several audience outcomes, although the strength of these relationships differed according to platform and other contextual factors. Pan et al. (2025) similarly found that influencer credibility and attractiveness were related to audience responses, with these relationships varying according to characteristics of the influencer, message, platform and followers. Both studies support the relevance of source credibility in social media communication, but they also show that individual credibility dimensions may not operate in the same way across different settings.

The Malaysian context offers a useful comparison. Sitorus et al. (2024) examined TikTok influencers among female users aged 18 to 34 in Greater Kota Kinabalu and found that trustworthiness and attractiveness were significantly related to purchase intention, while expertise was not. This contrasts with Amin (2024), where expertise was important in establishing trustworthiness and attractiveness played a more limited role. Although both studies focus on consumer behaviour, the difference in their findings shows that the importance of individual credibility dimensions can vary even within social media environments.

Much of the available evidence, however, remains concentrated in marketing and consumer research. Outcomes such as purchase intention, attitudes towards brands and consumer engagement are conceptually different from political interest. Political communication involves information concerning public issues rather than products or services, and the basis on which audiences evaluate the communicator may therefore differ. Findings from influencer marketing are useful in explaining how source credibility operates in social media, but they cannot be applied directly to political communication. This leaves an important question about whether competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness and dynamism are associated with political interest among young voters in the same way.

c. TikTok and Political Communication

TikTok has expanded beyond entertainment and has become an important space for political communication among younger audiences. Its short video format allows political content to be presented through humour, personal experience, visual elements, and popular cultural references. These forms of communication differ from conventional political communication, which is more commonly associated with formal news, political institutions, and structured political messages.

Literat and Kligler Vilenchik (2023) argue that TikTok is a significant space for youth political expression because it allows young people to communicate political views in creative and highly personal ways. Drawing on six years of research that began with musical.ly and later moved to TikTok, they show how political expression on the platform challenges conventional expectations of political communication. Their argument is useful to the present study because it highlights that political expression on TikTok often takes forms that are closely tied to the communication practices of the platform itself.

Moffett and Rice (2024) provide a different perspective by examining whether political expression on TikTok is related to civic activity beyond the platform. Using survey data from Americans aged 18 to 25, they found that posting political videos on TikTok was associated with higher levels of offline civic engagement. Their study therefore links political activity on TikTok with civic engagement, but its focus is on users who express political views rather than on how audiences evaluate the credibility of those communicating political information. The role of source credibility consequently remains less clear.

The Malaysian context adds another dimension to this discussion. Nor Azyani et al. (2025) examined TikTok usage among Malaysian youths aged 18 to 29 using a quantitative survey and descriptive analysis. Their study focused on political activism, social participation, and engagement with political and social content. The findings indicate that respondents generally showed moderately high agreement regarding TikTok's role in increasing political awareness. This supports the relevance of TikTok as a political information environment for Malaysian youth, although the study did not examine how the credibility of individual communicators is evaluated.

Jalli (2025) provides a broader Southeast Asian perspective by examining youth activism on TikTok in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Using a mixed methods approach, the study found that activists adapt political and social messages to TikTok's communication environment through practices such as trend jacking and meme creation. At the same time, the study also identifies challenges associated with misinformation, harassment, and algorithmic visibility. This shows that wider access to political and social content does not remove questions about the reliability of information or the credibility of those communicating it.

Across these studies, TikTok is consistently presented as a space for political expression, awareness, activism, and civic engagement among younger audiences. However, these studies focus mainly on what young people do with political content, how they participate, or how political messages circulate on the platform. Less attention is given to how young audiences evaluate the credibility of influencers who communicate political information and whether different credibility dimensions are related to political interest. This distinction is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where the political significance of younger voters has increased following Undi18.

d. Digital Engagement and Algorithmic Exposure

In addition to its role as a content platform, TikTok operates through an algorithm driven system that shapes how users encounter information. Unlike traditional media, where audiences actively select content, TikTok introduces political information through recommendation mechanisms based on user behaviour. This creates a form of incidental exposure, where users may encounter political content as part of their everyday digital experience rather than through intentional search (Cervi et al., 2023).

Such exposure has implications for how political interest develops. While increased exposure may enhance awareness, it does not necessarily lead to deeper engagement. Boulianne (2015) argues that the relationship between social media use and political participation is not automatic, as patterns of engagement vary across different forms of social media use and participation. In the TikTok environment, exposure to political content therefore provides an opportunity for political information to reach young audiences, but exposure alone does not establish whether such information is associated with greater political interest.

Parasocial interaction provides an additional perspective for understanding how audiences engage with media figures. Horton and Wohl (1956) describe parasocial interaction as a form of one sided relationship in which audiences develop a sense of familiarity with media personalities. In digital environments, the continuous visibility of influencers and their integration into users' everyday media consumption may strengthen this perceived familiarity (Abidin, 2021). However, these interpersonal processes are conceptually distinct from the credibility dimensions examined in the present study. The present study specifically operationalises influencer credibility through competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness and dynamism, while political interest is examined separately as the dependent variable.

e. Youth Political Interest in Digital Contexts

Political engagement among young people increasingly takes place across both online and offline settings. Social media provides opportunities to access political information, discuss public issues, express opinions, and participate in civic activities without relying solely on conventional political channels. However, access to political information does not necessarily lead to the same level or form of political engagement among all young people.

Oden and Porter (2023) examined social media use among teenagers across Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. They found that social media use across these platforms was positively correlated with political interest as well as online and offline civic engagement. Their findings establish an important connection between social media use and different forms of youth political engagement. However, the study considered social media use across several platforms and did not examine how the credibility of individual communicators was related to political interest.

Political interest also needs to be distinguished from political participation. Stattin et al. (2023), in a longitudinal study that followed approximately 400 adolescents from age 16 into young adulthood, found political interest during adolescence to be an important predictor of later political activity. The study shows that political interest can develop before it is expressed through more visible forms of participation. This distinction is important because interest in politics should not be treated as equivalent to voting, activism, political expression, or other forms of political behaviour.

In Malaysia, Kasmani (2023) provides a useful account of how first time young voters engage with politics through social media. Based on online interviews with 44 first time Malay voters aged 18 to 20, the study found generally low levels of online political participation. Although respondents recognised the importance of political expression, many were reluctant to express their political views online because they felt they lacked sufficient knowledge to discuss and debate political issues. Facebook and Twitter were also preferred over Instagram and TikTok for political news because respondents perceived the information on these platforms as more credible. The findings show that familiarity with social media does not necessarily translate into active political participation and, importantly for the present

study, that credibility already formed part of how these young voters evaluated sources of political information.

The situation following Undi18 further illustrates the difference between political interest and participation. Saidin and Azrun (2025), through interviews with 20 first time voters in Johor and Selangor and two key stakeholders, found that Undi18 had generated interest among young voters, but several barriers to meaningful political participation remained. These included insufficient political education, limited access to reliable information, and gaps in democratic citizenship skills. Their findings indicate that increasing young people's formal access to the electoral process does not by itself ensure informed or sustained political participation.

These studies show that digital media use, political interest, and political participation are connected but remain distinct. Oden and Porter (2023) establish a relationship between social media use and political interest, while Stattin et al. (2023) demonstrate the longer term relevance of political interest to subsequent political activity. In Malaysia, Kasmani (2023) and Saidin and Azrun (2025) show that young voters may have access to digital political information and greater electoral opportunities while remaining cautious or limited in their political participation. What remains less clear is whether the credibility of those communicating political information is associated with political interest itself. This provides a more specific basis for examining the credibility of TikTok influencers among young Malaysian voters.

f. Influencer Credibility and Political Interest

Political interest refers to an individual's attentiveness to political issues and affairs. It is distinct from political participation because an individual may be interested in politics without necessarily voting, campaigning, expressing political views, or participating in civic activities. In social media environments, this distinction becomes important because users may encounter political information as part of their everyday media use, even when they are not actively seeking political content.

A more direct connection between political influencers and political interest is provided by Wasike (2023). Based on a survey of 813 social media users, the study examined political social media influencers in relation to political interest, political trust, political efficacy and political participation. Following political social media influencers was positively associated with political interest and political trust, with a stronger relationship reported for political interest. Political interest was also positively related to internal and external online political efficacy, while neither form of online political efficacy was related to political participation. These findings are important because they distinguish political interest from participation and show that political influencers can be relevant to political interest. However, Wasike (2023) examined the act of following political influencers rather than the specific credibility characteristics through which followers evaluate them.

In Malaysia, Wan Ismail and Adnan (2024) reviewed ten journal articles published between 2019 and 2023 on political interest, media dependency and social media use among youth. Their review found that Malaysian youth use social media to obtain political information and that interest in such information becomes particularly evident during election periods. At the same time, the authors draw attention to young people's exposure to misinformation and false information within the same media environment. Their review places political interest within the Malaysian social media context, but it does not examine

the credibility dimensions of individual influencers or how these dimensions relate to political interest.

The existing literature therefore establishes several important connections, but it does not yet provide a complete explanation of the relationship between influencer credibility and political interest. Oden and Porter (2023) establish the relationship between social media use and political interest, while Wasike (2023) provides more direct evidence that following political social media influencers is associated with political interest. Wan Ismail and Adnan (2024) further demonstrate the relevance of social media to political information among Malaysian youth. However, these studies do not establish whether specific dimensions of influencer credibility are related to political interest in the same way. In particular, limited evidence is available on whether competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness and dynamism have different relationships with political interest among young voters on TikTok. This provides the specific empirical basis for examining the four credibility dimensions separately in the present study.

g. Malaysian Context and Source Credibility Research

Research in Malaysia provides an important basis for understanding how credibility operates within local communication settings. Mohd Razif (2021) examined dynamism as a dimension of source credibility in the Doktor Muda health promotion programme. Based on a quantitative survey involving 422 students from five schools in Malaysia, the study identified six characteristics of dynamism and found a significant relationship between dynamism and source credibility. Although the study was conducted in a structured health communication setting, its findings provide local empirical support for dynamism as a distinct dimension of source credibility. This is relevant to the present study, where dynamism is examined alongside competence, trustworthiness and attractiveness.

Evidence from Malaysian political communication further shows that credibility matters in the way younger audiences engage with political information. Ronald Alfred and Wong (2022) examined 400 Generation Z respondents aged 15 to 25 in the Klang Valley and found a significant relationship between perceived social media credibility and political engagement on social media. Their findings extend the relevance of credibility to political information encountered through social media. However, credibility was examined at the level of social media information rather than through the specific characteristics of individual political communicators.

The growing importance of TikTok adds another dimension to this discussion. Veerappan et al. (2023) examined 100 active TikTok users following Malaysia's 15th General Election and found that first time and Undi18 voters regarded TikTok as an important and reliable source of election related information. In comparison, Kasmani (2023), in his study of 44 first time Malay voters aged 18 to 20, found that Facebook and Twitter were preferred for political news because respondents perceived information on these platforms as more credible, while Instagram and TikTok were less preferred. The difference between these findings suggests that perceptions of TikTok as a source of political information are not uniform and may vary according to the sample and communication context. More importantly, both studies focus primarily on the credibility of political information or platforms rather than the credibility characteristics of individual influencers.

More recent Malaysian evidence strengthens the importance of this distinction. Sanawi and Marzuki (2025) surveyed 221 young adults aged 19 to 30 in the post Undi18 context and found that respondents perceived social media as moderately credible as a

source of political information. Higher perceived credibility was associated with higher political efficacy and lower political cynicism. While this establishes a relationship between credibility and political attitudes among young Malaysian adults, political efficacy and political cynicism are conceptually different from political interest. The study also evaluates social media as an information source rather than the credibility dimensions of individual influencers.

Malaysian research therefore shows that credibility is relevant across different communication settings, but important questions remain in the context of TikTok political communication. Mohd Razif (2021) provide local support for dynamism as a credibility dimension, while Ronald Alfred and Wong (2022), Veerappan et al. (2023), Kasmani (2023), and Sanawi and Marzuki (2025) demonstrate the relevance of credibility to social media and political communication among Malaysian youth. However, existing studies do not establish whether the competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness and dynamism of TikTok influencers are differently related to political interest among young Malaysian voters. The present study addresses this gap by examining the four credibility dimensions separately within the Malaysian TikTok political communication context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative cross sectional survey design to examine the relationship between the credibility of TikTok influencers and political interest among young Malaysian voters. The survey formed the quantitative component of the broader research and was designed to assess the relationships between four dimensions of influencer credibility, namely competence, trustworthiness, attractiveness and dynamism, and political interest. The target population consisted of registered young Malaysian voters aged between 18 and 25 years. The study focused on voters from the six states involved in the 2023 State Elections, namely Kedah, Pulau Pinang, Kelantan, Terengganu, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. These states provided the electoral context for the study, as all six held state elections during the same election cycle.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit respondents who met the specific criteria of the study. Eligible respondents were required to be registered voters aged between 18 and 25 years, have a TikTok account and follow at least one political influencer in Malaysia. The sample size was determined with reference to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), with 384 respondents used for the study. A total of 384 usable questionnaires were obtained and included in the analysis.

Data were collected through face to face distribution of guided self-administered questionnaires across the six states. Respondents were approached at selected settings where eligible young voters could be accessed, including higher education institutions, retail establishments and through youth organisations. Potential respondents were screened according to the inclusion criteria before completing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential.

The structured questionnaire comprised sections on respondents' demographic characteristics, political interest and the four dimensions of TikTok influencer credibility. The measurement of the credibility dimensions was informed by established source credibility literature, particularly Hovland and Weiss (1951), Berlo et al. (1969), Whitehead (1968), and

Ohanian (1990), and was adapted to the context of the present study. The instrument used a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Political interest was measured using 15 items covering respondents' interest in political parties, the system of government, political influencers and voting. Competence assessed characteristics associated with knowledge, confidence, efficiency, skills and the ability to communicate political information. Trustworthiness measured characteristics related to personal qualities, political knowledge and the credibility of the influencer in communicating political information. Dynamism captured characteristics associated with dedication, courage, energy and friendliness. Attractiveness was operationalised through characteristics including leadership, creativity, personal presentation, concern for followers and academic achievement. The four credibility dimensions were treated as independent variables, while political interest was treated as the dependent variable.

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to describe respondents' perceptions of the four credibility dimensions and political interest. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the strength and direction of the bivariate relationship between each credibility dimension and political interest. Multiple linear regression was subsequently conducted to examine the four credibility dimensions simultaneously and determine their respective contributions to political interest when the other dimensions were statistically controlled.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis began by examining respondents' perceptions of the four dimensions of TikTok influencer credibility and their level of political interest. The four credibility dimensions examined were competence, trustworthiness, dynamism and attractiveness, while political interest was treated separately as the dependent variable and not as a dimension of credibility. Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an overview of the mean scores and variation across the study variables. Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation for each variable.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of study variables

Study Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Competence	4.42	0.303
Trustworthiness	4.38	0.361
Dynamism	4.43	0.230
Attractiveness	4.39	0.334
Political Interest	4.42	0.244

As shown in Table 1, respondents reported consistently high evaluations across all four credibility dimensions. Dynamism recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.230$), followed by competence ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.303$), attractiveness ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.334$) and trustworthiness ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.361$). Political interest recorded a mean of 4.42 ($SD = 0.244$), indicating a high level of political interest among the respondents. Although all four credibility dimensions recorded high mean scores, the differences between them were relatively small. The descriptive findings therefore indicate generally favourable perceptions of TikTok political influencers across the dimensions examined. However, a high mean score does not indicate that a particular credibility dimension is necessarily related to political interest. This distinction is particularly important in interpreting dynamism, which recorded the highest

mean score but requires inferential analysis before any relationship with political interest can be established.

Pearson correlation analysis was subsequently conducted to examine the bivariate relationship between each credibility dimension and political interest. This analysis was used to determine whether competence, trustworthiness, dynamism and attractiveness were significantly associated with political interest when each dimension was considered separately. Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients between the four credibility dimensions and political interest.

Table 2: Pearson correlation between credibility dimensions and political interest

Credibility Dimension	Political Interest
Competence	.084
Trustworthiness	.139**
Dynamism	-.005
Attractiveness	.161**

Note: * $p < .01$.

The results show that trustworthiness ($r = .139$, $p < .01$) and attractiveness ($r = .161$, $p < .01$) were positively and significantly associated with political interest. The relationship was strongest for attractiveness, although the magnitude remained weak. Competence ($r = .084$, $p > .05$) was not significantly associated with political interest, while dynamism ($r = -.005$, $p > .05$) showed virtually no relationship with political interest.

The findings indicate that the four dimensions of credibility do not relate to political interest in the same way. This is particularly evident when the descriptive and correlation results are considered together. Dynamism received the highest evaluation from respondents but showed almost no relationship with political interest. Competence was also rated highly but was not significantly associated with political interest. In contrast, trustworthiness and attractiveness recorded slightly lower descriptive means but were significantly associated with political interest. The findings therefore distinguish between how positively an influencer is evaluated and whether a particular credibility characteristic is related to political interest.

The significant relationship between trustworthiness and political interest is consistent with the importance assigned to source trustworthiness within Source Credibility Theory. In political communication, trustworthiness is particularly relevant because audiences are evaluating information concerning public affairs, political actors and electoral issues. The present finding indicates that respondents who evaluated TikTok political influencers more positively in terms of trustworthiness also tended to report greater political interest. Nevertheless, the weak magnitude of the relationship suggests that trustworthiness should be understood as one factor associated with political interest rather than as a dominant explanation of it.

Attractiveness also showed a significant positive relationship with political interest. This finding is interpreted according to the operationalisation of attractiveness in the present study and should not be treated as equivalent to relatability. The instrument assessed attractiveness through characteristics that included leadership, creativity, personal presentation, concern for followers and academic achievement. The finding therefore indicates that more favourable evaluations of these characteristics were associated with higher political interest. As with trustworthiness, however, the relationship was weak and does not establish a causal effect.

The non-significant result for competence is noteworthy because respondents nevertheless evaluated influencers highly on this dimension. Perceiving an influencer as knowledgeable, confident, efficient and capable of communicating political information was not significantly associated with political interest when competence was examined independently. This finding indicates that perceived ability or expertise alone may not correspond with greater political interest among young voters in the TikTok environment.

A similar distinction is evident for dynamism. Mohd Razif (2021) identified dynamism as a relevant dimension of source credibility within a Malaysian communication setting. In the present study, however, dynamism recorded the highest mean but was not significantly related to political interest. The difference suggests that the relevance of a credibility dimension may vary according to the communication context and the outcome being examined. Characteristics such as dedication, courage, energy and friendliness may contribute to favourable evaluations of a communicator without necessarily corresponding with greater interest in political issues.

The correlation findings also extend previous work on political social media influencers. Wasike (2023) found that following political social media influencers was positively associated with political interest. The present study provides a more differentiated account by examining the characteristics through which influencers are evaluated rather than treating exposure to or following political influencers as a single condition. The findings show that only trustworthiness and attractiveness were significantly associated with political interest at the bivariate level, whereas competence and dynamism were not.

To examine whether these relationships remained when the credibility dimensions were considered together, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted with political interest as the dependent variable. Competence, trustworthiness, dynamism and attractiveness were entered simultaneously as predictor variables. This analysis provides a different test from the Pearson correlations because it estimates the statistical contribution of each credibility dimension while accounting for the other dimensions in the model. Table 3 presents the regression results.

Table 3: Multiple linear regression predicting political interest

Predictor	Standardised β	t	p
Competence	.419	2.890	.004
Trustworthiness	-.335	-2.223	.027
Dynamism	-.039	-0.728	.467
Attractiveness	.109	1.429	.154

Note: $R = .219$, $R^2 = .048$, Adjusted $R^2 = .038$, $F(4, 379) = 4.762$, $p < .001$.

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 379) = 4.762$, $p < .001$, but accounted for only 4.8% of the variance in political interest ($R^2 = .048$; adjusted $R^2 = .038$). This relatively small proportion of explained variance indicates that the four credibility dimensions have limited explanatory power when considered together and that political interest is likely to be associated with factors beyond influencer credibility.

The regression results also reveal a more complex pattern than the bivariate correlations. Competence emerged as a significant positive predictor of political interest ($\beta = .419$, $p = .004$), despite its non-significant Pearson correlation. Trustworthiness was also statistically significant but its coefficient became negative ($\beta = -.335$, $p = .027$), even though its bivariate correlation with political interest was positive. Dynamism ($\beta = -.039$, $p = .467$)

and attractiveness ($\beta = .109$, $p = .154$) were not significant predictors once the four credibility dimensions were considered simultaneously.

The change in the pattern of results between the correlation and regression analyses requires careful interpretation. Pearson correlation examines each credibility dimension separately, whereas multiple regression estimates the unique statistical contribution of each dimension after accounting for shared variance with the other predictors. The findings therefore should not be interpreted as a simple reversal of the correlation results. Instead, they indicate that the credibility dimensions overlap in the way they relate to political interest and that their apparent bivariate relationships change when they are considered within the same model.

This is particularly evident for competence. Although competence was not significantly correlated with political interest at the bivariate level, it became the strongest positive predictor in the regression model. This suggests that the unique component of competence, after accounting for the other credibility dimensions, is positively associated with political interest. The result provides a more nuanced interpretation than would be obtained from the correlation analysis alone and demonstrates the value of examining credibility as a multidimensional construct rather than assuming that its dimensions operate independently.

The negative regression coefficient for trustworthiness should likewise be interpreted cautiously. Its positive bivariate correlation indicates that higher trustworthiness is associated with higher political interest when examined independently. The negative coefficient appears only after competence, dynamism and attractiveness are entered into the regression model. Given the change in direction and the shared conceptual space among the credibility dimensions, the coefficient should not be interpreted as evidence that trustworthiness reduces political interest. Rather, it reflects the unique statistical relationship of trustworthiness with political interest after variance shared with the other credibility dimensions has been taken into account.

Attractiveness presents a comparable distinction. It recorded the strongest bivariate relationship with political interest but did not remain statistically significant in the regression model. This indicates that the association observed at the correlation level is not independent of the other credibility dimensions. Dynamism, meanwhile, remained non-significant in both analyses, providing the most consistent evidence that this dimension was not independently associated with political interest in the present sample.

Taken together, the findings provide a more qualified understanding of Source Credibility Theory within TikTok political communication. The descriptive results show that young voters generally evaluated political influencers positively across all four credibility dimensions, but the inferential analyses demonstrate that these dimensions do not operate uniformly. Trustworthiness and attractiveness were significant at the bivariate level, while competence emerged as a positive predictor when the dimensions were considered simultaneously. Dynamism was not significant in either analysis. These differences indicate that credibility is better understood as a multidimensional evaluation whose individual components may operate differently depending on whether they are examined separately or in combination.

The low explanatory power of the regression model is equally important. With the four credibility dimensions accounting for 4.8% of the variance in political interest, the findings do not support an interpretation in which influencer credibility alone explains young voters' interest in politics. Political interest is likely to involve a wider set of individual, social

and media related factors. Within the scope of the present study, influencer credibility represents one part of this broader process rather than a complete explanation of political interest.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between four dimensions of TikTok influencer credibility, namely competence, trustworthiness, dynamism and attractiveness, and political interest among young Malaysian voters. The findings demonstrate that the credibility dimensions were not uniformly related to political interest. At the bivariate level, trustworthiness and attractiveness showed significant positive relationships with political interest, whereas competence and dynamism were not significantly related to it. When the four dimensions were examined simultaneously, competence emerged as a significant positive predictor, while trustworthiness showed a significant negative coefficient. Attractiveness and dynamism were not significant predictors in the regression model.

These findings provide a more nuanced understanding of Source Credibility Theory in the context of TikTok political communication. Rather than suggesting that credibility operates as a single or consistent quality, the results show that its dimensions may function differently when examined separately and when considered together. The contrast between the correlation and regression findings is particularly important, as it demonstrates that the relationship between influencer credibility and political interest depends partly on the shared variance among the credibility dimensions.

The relatively low explanatory power of the regression model further indicates that influencer credibility represents only one part of the broader factors associated with political interest among young voters. Although the overall regression model was statistically significant, the four credibility dimensions explained 4.8% of the variance in political interest. Political interest in digital environments should therefore not be understood solely through evaluations of influencer credibility, as other individual, social, political and media related factors are also likely to be relevant.

From a practical perspective, the findings caution against assuming that highly visible, energetic or favourably evaluated political influencers will necessarily correspond with greater political interest among young audiences. For political communicators, the results point instead to the need to consider how different aspects of credibility operate within the communication environment of TikTok. The findings are particularly relevant in the Malaysian post Undi18 context, where young voters constitute an increasingly important electoral group and encounter political information alongside other forms of everyday digital content.

The study is limited by its cross sectional design and purposive sample of young voters from the six Malaysian states involved in the 2023 State Elections. The findings therefore establish statistical relationships rather than causal effects and should be interpreted within the context of the population and electoral setting examined. Future research could extend the present study through longitudinal or comparative designs and examine additional factors such as algorithmic exposure, political knowledge, content characteristics, media use patterns and para social relationships. Further investigation of these factors may provide a more comprehensive explanation of political interest and clarify how influencer credibility operates alongside other features of digital political communication.

Overall, this study shows that the relevance of TikTok influencer credibility to political interest lies not simply in whether an influencer is perceived as credible, but in which dimension of credibility is being considered and how that dimension operates alongside the

others. This distinction contributes to a more specific understanding of source credibility within TikTok political communication and provides empirical evidence from young Malaysian voters in the post Undi18 electoral environment.

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