

# The Roles of Source Characteristics in Building an Effective Digital Marketing Communication

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**Abstract.** Studies have been conducted to analyze the role of source characteristics on purchase intention, yet results remain inconsistent. This present study was conducted to explore the intervening roles of some variables (attitude toward sources and attitude toward the brand) in mediating the relationship between source characteristics and purchase intention. Purposive sampling was administered to select respondents who had seen marketing communication in social media. SEM analysis was employed to determine the model of the relationship. The results showed that attitude toward sources and the brand intervened with the relationship between source characteristics and purchase intention. This study offers novel insights into the relationship model between source characteristics and purchase intention.

**Keywords:** Source Characteristics; Purchase Intention; Moderating Effect; Mediating Effect

## 1 Introduction

The rapid advancement of information technology brought conceptual and practical development in the marketing sector. There have been new conceptual marketing terms that reflects digitalization such as e-WOM, e-SERVQUAL, e-Value, e-Satisfaction and so on [1]–[3]. Online marketing or digital marketing has been a trend currently [4], [5]. This practice is accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, where the marketing communication strategy through digital media, or digital marketing, is considered the most appropriate method [6]. Digital marketing is a form of marketing communication that includes online marketing, mobile marketing, social media marketing, and e-WOM [7].

Conventional marketing communications through newspapers or magazines, brochures, printed catalogs are now considered less environmentally friendly [8]. In addition, digital marketing, also online purchase [6], [9] reduces air pollution from fuel consumption [6], [10]. As such, this study is expected to support green society by making digital marketing run effectively. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people share product information through social media marketing [11]. They are referred to as endorsers, influencers, celebrities, vloggers, bloggers, and so forth [11], [12]. Marketers are recommended to select the best strategy for conveying messages, allowing marketing communications through digital media to run effectively [12]. Sources should be attractive, have characters that match the product

being marketed, expertise related to the product, and honesty in conveying the message [12], [13] to generate a positive perception and positive consumer attitude towards the product or brand being promoted [14]. Furthermore, the positive attitude of consumers towards the product is expected to raise purchase intention [15].

Prior studies have identified an inconsistent relationship between source characteristics (source credibility) and consumer purchase intention. Gupta *et al.* (2015) succeeded in reviewing several studies on the influence of source credibility or characteristics on purchase intention from 1951 to 2013, indicating the effect of source characteristics on purchase intention. However, other researchers did not find any significant influence of source characteristics on purchase intention [17]–[20]. Studies from 2014 to 2020 mainly developed the dimensions of source credibility or characteristics and added other variables known to affect purchase intention ([21], [22], [23], [24], [25], and [26]). Almost all of the hypotheses tested in these studies showed direct effects of two related variables. Only a small part of these studies examined possible moderating variables in the relationship between source characteristics and purchase intention. Thus, there is still a gap regarding the role of mediating variables in the relationship model between source characteristics and purchase intention.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Source Characteristics**

Factors that affect the effectiveness of marketing communications include accuracy in selecting product sources [27], as validated by many researchers starting from 1951. Some researchers believed that reliable sources would affect consumer beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behavior towards a product or company [12], [18], [19], [28]. Audiences' degree of trust in product sources is determined by three dimensions: likeability, expertise, and trustworthiness [27]. Other researchers analyzed several dimensions of source characteristics, and findings confirmed that likeability is interchangeable with attractiveness [14]. Most studies used three main dimensions: attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness ([22][22], [23], [24], [25], and [26]). Some researchers used different names or terms of these three main dimensions [25] and added other dimensions [29].

### **2.2 Purchase Intention**

Purchase intention can be defined as the intention of consumers to buy a product [30]. Meanwhile, [31] stated that purchase intention was a tendency of a consumer to buy and take actions toward assessing an object. In addition, [31] also found purchase interest as the final stage of a complex purchase decision process. Similarly, [27] consider purchase intention as a response that arises after receiving a stimulus from the product that consumers see. This stimulus will then generate people's interest in trying out the product before growing the intention to buy the product.

### **2.3 Previous Studies**

Studies on the effects of source characteristics on purchase intention show inconsistency in findings. One study found that attractiveness influenced purchase intention, while expertise did not affect Purchase Intention [32]. Other studies found that source credibility positively

affected purchase behavior [33]. Others stated that attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness affected purchase intention [34]. Gupta et al. (2015) revealed that attractiveness and trustworthiness affected purchase intention, yet expertise did not. Of the four source characteristics (attractiveness, product relevancy, trustworthiness, and expertise), only attractiveness was not found to affect purchase intention [21]. [14] and [29] explained that attractiveness did not affect purchase intentions. This inconsistency becomes evident as [35] found trustworthiness did not affect purchase intentions, and [21] found only one dimension of trustworthiness (credibility) affected purchase intention. Inconsistent results show that the direct relationship model of source characteristics and purchase intention could not describe the actual condition. Therefore, the current model needs to be developed by involving other variables that might share mediating and moderating roles in the relationship between source characteristics and consumers' purchase intention.

## 2.4 Model Development

Based on the literature review, some variables might be mediating the relationship between source characteristics and purchase intention, including attitude toward sources and the brand. The model of the relationship examined in this study is illustrated as follows.

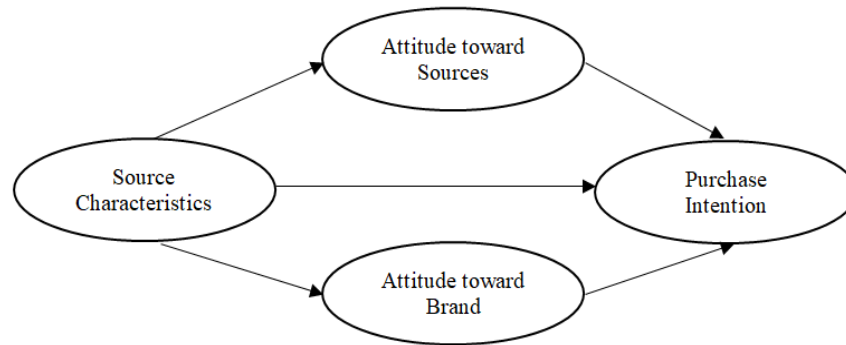


Fig. 1. The Consequences of Source Characteristics

## 2.5 Hypotheses Formulation

[25] showed that source characteristics did not directly affect purchase intention. However, source characteristics affected consumers' attitude to the brand and attitude to advertising, through which purchase intention could be affected. [25] did not examine the indirect effect of source characteristics on purchase intention through the attitude to the brand and advertising variables. Likewise, [14] only confirmed the direct influence of product source characteristics on attitude to the brand and the direct influence of attitude to the brand on purchase intention. Hence, it is assumed in this present study that attitude to source and attitude to the brand can be the mediating variables in the relationship between source characteristics and purchase intention.

*H1: The influence of source characteristics on purchase intention is mediated by attitude toward sources*

*H2: The influence of source characteristics on purchase intention is mediated by attitude toward the brand*

### 3 Methodology

This study tested the relationship between source characteristics and consumers' purchase intention through attitude toward sources and brands. Respondents or units of analysis were individuals or consumers who often saw marketing communications conveyed by celebrities or non-celebrities on social media and those who followed specific social media influencers in the last six months. Filter questions were put in the questionnaire to allow only those who met the criteria to complete the questionnaires or ensure that the respondents meet these criteria. This study used 18 indicators.

The variables in this study were measured by modifying the instruments of previous researchers [13], [16], [21]–[24], [26], [29]. The instrument was tried out to 50 students (pilot study) to test the clarity of the indicators used in this study to ensure that readers understood the meaning of each statement. The accuracy of each indicator in measuring the variables was statistically measured using the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Furthermore, internal consistency between indicators in measuring a variable was tested using the Cronbach Alpha correlation. The results of those tests showed that each variable in this study was valid and reliable.

**Table 1.** Results of Validity and Reliability Tests

Variable/Dimension/Indicator	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Conclusion
<b>Source Characteristics</b>		0.874	Reliable
<b>Attractiveness</b>			
Source has strong attractiveness	0.690		Valid
Source has a charming look	0.608		Valid
Source has a strong charisma	0.705		Valid
<b>Trustworthiness</b>			
Source is honest	0.782		Valid
Source is sincere	0.769		Valid
Source is trustworthy	0.694		Valid
<b>Expertise</b>			
Source has the skills/expertise in the brand being promoted	0.637		Valid
Source has experienced using the brand being promoted	0.732		Valid
Source has broad knowledge regarding the brand being promoted	0.732		Valid
<b>Attitudes to Source</b>		0.819	Reliable
Liking the source	0.867		Valid
Interested in the source	0.907		Valid
Trusting the source	0.816		Valid
<b>Attitudes toward Brand</b>		0.860	Reliable
Liking the brand being promoted	0.890		Valid
Interested in the brand being promoted	0.889		Valid
Trusting the brand being promoted	0.877		Valid
<b>Purchase Intention</b>		0.854	Reliable
Having the intention to buy the brand being promoted	0.891		Valid
Interested in buying the brand being promoted	0.920		Valid
When planning to buy similar products, the brand being promoted is put into consideration	0.829		Valid

Structured Equation Model (SEM) using Amos was employed in data analysis. Before hypothesis testing, the model suitability test (Goodness of Fit / GOF) was first carried out. GOF test results showed that the proposed model was quite fit, as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Model Testing

Measurement	Value	GOF Limit	Conclusion
Chi Square	p value = 0.000	P value > 0.05	Poor GOF
CMIN/DF	4.436		Marginal GOF
RMR	0.066	Small, close to 0	GOF
AIC	Default Model: 1042.001 Saturated Model: 550.000	Default model value close to the saturated model value	GOF
ECVI	Independence Model: 3319.963 Default Model: 5.236 Saturated Model: 2.764 Independence Model: 16.683	Default model value close to the saturated model value	GOF

As seen in Table 2, the small RMR value is close to 0; AIC and ECVI show that the model default value is close to the saturated model value. These values have met the requirements for the feasibility of a model. Thus, hypothesis testing could proceed [36].

#### 4 Results and Discussions

The first hypothesis states that attitude to source variable mediated the relationship between endorsers' characteristics and purchase intention was tested. The model was divided into two to be compared. The first model only shows the direct effect of source characteristics on purchase intention. In the second model, attitude to sources is the mediating variable between source characteristics and purchase intention. The results of the first hypothesis testing are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Results of the First Hypothesis Testing

Model	Estimate	p-value	Conclusion
Model 1:			
Source characteristics influence the purchase intention	0.703	0.000	Positive influence
Model 2:			
Source characteristics influence the attitude to sources	0.775	0.000	Significant
Attitude to sources influence purchase intention	0.364	0.02	Significant
Source characteristics influence purchase intention	0.432	0.000	Significant yet weak

The first hypothesis was tested using two models, as shown in Table 3. As presented in the table, source characteristics influence purchase intention in model one (p-value = 0.000) and remain significant in model two (p-value = 0.000, with a slight decrease in the influence strength from 0.703 to 0.432). Source characteristics also affect the attitude to sources (p-value = 0.000), and the attitude to endorsers also affects purchase intention (p-value = 0.02). Thus, hypothesis one that source characteristics influence purchase intention through attitude to sources was accepted. In model two, attitude to sources was partially mediated, indicating that source characteristics could directly affect purchase intention and indirectly influence sources through attitude.

As explained, attitude towards sources can mediate the influence of source characteristics on purchase intention. Therefore, managers can directly develop consumers' purchase intentions by selecting attractive, trustworthy sources with relevant expertise to the product being promoted. In addition to increasing consumers' purchase intentions directly, this strategy will also generate positive attitudes among consumers towards sources themselves,

increasing consumers' purchase intentions. This study found the explanation on findings by Singh *et al.* (2018) that there was no direct influence of source characteristics on purchase intention. Likewise, [13] also found that source characteristics did not always share a direct influence on purchase intention.

Hypothesis two states that attitude to the brand mediates the relationship between source characteristics and purchase intention. It was tested by dividing the model into two for comparison. The first model only shows the direct influence of source characteristics on purchase intention. The second model includes attitude to the brand as a variable that mediates the influence of source characteristics on purchase intention. Table 4 shows the results of the second hypothesis testing as follows.

**Table 4.** Results of the Second Hypothesis Testing

Model	Estimate	p-value	Conclusion
Model 1:			
Source characteristics influence purchase intention	0.703	0.000	Positive influence
Model 2:			
Source characteristics influence attitude to the brand	0.681	0.000	Significant
Attitude to the brand influences purchase intention	0.549	0.000	Significant
Source characteristics influence purchase intention	0.337	0.000	Significant yet weak

Table 4 illustrates that source characteristics affect purchase intention in model one (p-value = 0.000), and the influence remains significant in model two (p-value = 0.000, with weaker regression strength from 0.703 to 0.337). There is an influence of source characteristics on attitude to the brand (p-value = 0.000), and attitude to the brand also influences purchase intention (p-value = 0.000). Thus, the second hypothesis was accepted. In this case, attitude to the brand has a partial mediating role, meaning that source characteristics can directly influence purchase intention and indirectly influence it through attitude to the brand.

It can be understood that the more attractive, the more trustworthy, and the more expert the sources, the more positive consumers' attitudes towards the brand will be. This condition, in turn, increases consumers' willingness to purchase the product from the brand. In this study, attitude towards the promoted brand shows a partial mediating role. It means that the source characteristics can either directly or indirectly influence consumers' intention to buy a product through consumer attitudes towards the brand of the product being promoted. Therefore, managers can improve consumers' purchase intentions by carefully selecting sources who are attractive, trustworthy, and have relevant expertise related to the product being promoted.

This study explained why Singh *et al.* (2018) did not find any direct influence of source characteristics on purchase intention. The findings complement [14] that confirmed only the influence of source characteristics on attitude to the brand and the attitude to the brand on purchase intention (without testing the indirect effect).

## 5 Conclusions

The data analysis confirmed that the two hypotheses proposed were accepted. Source characteristics influenced purchase intention through attitude towards sources and consumers' attitude towards the brand. The more attractive, trustworthy, and expert the sources, the more positive the consumers' attitude towards sources will be. Consumers' more positive attitudes towards sources will lead to a higher intention to buy the product or brand.

This study proposes several managerial implications. First, managers can increase purchase intention by selecting more attractive, trustworthy product sources with a stronger expertise in promoting the product or brand. Product sources are considered more attractive when they have strong charisma and charming look—this will bring consumers' positive attitude towards sources. Second, managers should choose sources with a good track record (honest, trustworthy, and never involved in criminal or other crimes). Messages should be designed in such a way as to ensure that sources are sincere. The honesty and sincerity of sources will also increase the consumers' positive attitude towards the brand being promoted. Third, managers can also employ sources with sound expertise, knowledge, and experience related to the product or brand being promoted. Hence, consumers will grow positive attitudes to both the brand and sources.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Researchers

This study only focuses on attitude (attitude to sources and brand) as mediating variables in the relationship between source characteristics and purchase intention. Other variables might also act as mediating variables. Future researchers are encouraged to overcome this limitation. Other variables such as e-WOM (Kudeshia and Kumar, 2017), created spokesperson (Sertoglu *Et al.*, 2014), brand credibility, or consumer involvement (Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018) are also assumed to add up to the understanding of sources' role in influencing consumers' purchase interest and purchase decisions.

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