



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Maximizing Key Opinion Leader (KOL) Collaborations for Corporate Success in Malaysia’s Cosmetic Industry: A PRISMA-Based Systematic Review

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Aug 12, 2025	This study systematically reviews the role of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in shaping corporate success within Malaysia’s cosmetic industry. The objective was twofold: (1) to identify the competencies developed through KOL collaborations, and (2) to examine the barriers that hinder their effectiveness. Drawing on the PRISMA 2020 framework, a bibliometric review was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, covering literature from 2012 to 2025. After identification, screening, and eligibility filtering, 38 peer-reviewed articles were selected for in-depth analysis. Data were coded and thematically synthesized following Whittemore and Knafl’s (2005) method, supported by bibliometric visualization. The literature review highlighted that KOLs are central to digital brand-building due to their credibility, authenticity, and ability to foster parasocial relationships with consumers. However, their effectiveness is moderated by cultural sensitivity, halal branding, transparency in disclosure, content quality, and strategic selection between macro- and micro-influencers. The findings revealed six dominant thematic clusters: (1) credibility and authenticity, (2) halal and cultural branding cues, (3) sponsorship disclosure and transparency, (4) micro vs. macro-KOL dynamics, (5) content quality and engagement, and (6) measurement and accountability challenges. Competencies developed through successful collaborations include enhanced consumer trust, stronger cultural resonance, and deeper engagement, while barriers often arise from over-commercialization, weak disclosure practices, inadequate halal literacy, and reliance on vanity metrics. This study contributes to influencer marketing scholarship by contextualizing KOL effectiveness within Malaysia’s cultural and religious dynamics. The results carry practical implications for firms seeking to balance visibility and authenticity, enforce transparent practices, and adopt data-driven evaluation frameworks. The study aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, as it underscores the importance of transparent, ethical, and culturally sensitive marketing practices in promoting consumer trust and sustainable industry growth.
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian cosmetics industry is undergoing rapid transformation, fueled by changing consumer lifestyles, digitalization of marketing, and heightened cultural expectations around halal compliance and ethical consumption. Market intelligence reports indicate that the beauty and personal care segment in Malaysia is projected to reach over USD 3.2 billion in 2024, with digital platforms accounting for an increasing share of consumer touchpoints (U.S. International Trade Administration, 2024). Within this highly competitive and culturally nuanced landscape, cosmetic firms are aggressively seeking strategies that ensure both market penetration and long-term brand loyalty. One of the most prominent strategies has been the deployment of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) individuals perceived as credible experts or authorities within specific domains, often with significant digital followings. However, while the use of KOLs in marketing is widespread, the

Malaysian cosmetics sector faces unresolved challenges in maximizing their impact for sustainable corporate success.

Ambiguity in Differentiating KOLs and Influencers

A central problem lies in the conceptual and operational ambiguity surrounding the distinction between “KOLs” and general “social media influencers.” While influencers may derive persuasive power from popularity and lifestyle resonance, KOLs are typically positioned as authoritative figures with credibility rooted in expertise, experience, or professional qualifications (Wang et al., 2020; Sismondo, 2015). Yet, in practice, Malaysian cosmetic firms often conflate the two, leading to campaigns that emphasize follower counts over expertise alignment. This confusion risks undermining the credibility of brand communications, particularly in a category where consumers actively seek trustworthy information about product safety, ingredient efficacy, and halal certification (Isa et al., 2023). The lack of a consistent framework for identifying and deploying KOLs, therefore, contributes to inefficiencies and missed opportunities in marketing execution.

Cultural and Religious Sensitivities in Malaysia’s Cosmetic Market

The Malaysian context introduces unique cultural and religious factors that complicate KOL collaborations. As a Muslim-majority country, the cosmetics market is deeply intertwined with the demand for halal-certified products and ethical signaling (Bakar et al., 2024). Consumers increasingly scrutinize not only product formulation but also the credibility of those endorsing them, making halal alignment a crucial determinant of trust. Research suggests that religiosity mediates consumer attitudes toward halal cosmetics, and that halal cues in influencer or KOL communication significantly strengthen purchase intentions (Isa et al., 2023). Yet, cosmetic firms often struggle to ensure that KOLs are adequately briefed or educated on halal standards, resulting in inconsistent messaging and potential reputational risks. The problem extends beyond compliance: failure to embed cultural resonance into KOL messaging risks alienating the very consumers who drive demand growth in Malaysia’s halal cosmetics segment.

The Trust Deficit in Influencer Marketing

Another persistent problem is the erosion of consumer trust in influencer and KOL endorsements due to disclosure ambiguity, perceived inauthenticity, and over-commercialization. Studies indicate that poorly disclosed sponsorships can generate skepticism and even backlash, especially among younger, digitally literate consumers (Vogue Business, 2022). A 2025 meta-analysis highlights that the effectiveness of influencer campaigns is highly heterogeneous, with moderating factors such as follower knowledge and brand familiarity shaping outcomes (Pan et al., 2025). In Malaysia, where consumers are increasingly adept at discerning promotional content, lack of transparent disclosure undermines the authenticity of KOLs, weakening their persuasive potential. The problem is exacerbated when cosmetic firms pursue short-term, transactional partnerships with KOLs rather than fostering long-term collaborations that build trust and continuity.

Measuring Impact and Return on Investment

From a managerial perspective, measuring the tangible outcomes of KOL collaborations remains problematic. Many firms rely on vanity metrics such as likes, shares, and follower counts, which may not directly translate into brand equity or sales conversion (Lim, 2024). The absence of robust measurement frameworks impedes firms from assessing incrementality, optimizing budget allocation, and justifying marketing expenditure to stakeholders. Moreover, few cosmetic brands in Malaysia employ advanced techniques such as marketing mix modeling (MMM) or multi-touch attribution (MTA) to evaluate KOL effectiveness across the consumer journey. This measurement gap contributes to inefficiencies and prevents firms from systematically improving their influencer strategies over time.

Micro vs. Macro KOL Dynamics

The industry also faces dilemmas in choosing between micro and macro KOLs. Macro KOLs with extensive reach can drive awareness but may appear less authentic, while micro KOLs often generate higher engagement and credibility but lack scale (Sikdar, 2025). Evidence suggests that optimal results often require a hybrid approach, yet Malaysian firms frequently default to macro KOLs due to visibility pressures. The problem is compounded by the lack of empirical guidelines on how to

balance micro-macro mixes for different campaign objectives in the Malaysian cosmetics market. This decision-making gap reflects a broader strategic uncertainty in aligning KOL profiles with targeted brand outcomes.

Information Quality and Content Relevance

Content quality is another unresolved issue. Research shows that the effectiveness of KOLs hinges not merely on their popularity but on the perceived informativeness, credibility, and authenticity of their content (Fouzi et al., 2024). In cosmetics, where consumer concerns about skin safety, dermatological compatibility, and halal status are paramount, superficial endorsements may not suffice. Malaysian consumers increasingly seek evidence-based product explanations, tutorial demonstrations, and comparative evaluations. However, cosmetic firms often fail to support KOLs with adequate product education or content resources, leading to generic promotions that do not address consumer informational needs. This mismatch weakens the potential for KOL collaborations to influence deeper attitudinal or behavioral outcomes such as brand loyalty and repeat purchase.

Fragmented Governance and Lack of Professionalization

Beyond campaign design, the governance of KOL collaborations presents systemic challenges. Many Malaysian cosmetic firms lack standardized Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), disclosure protocols, or crisis management frameworks for managing KOL relationships (Vogue Business, 2022). This informality exposes brands to reputational risks when KOLs engage in controversies, misrepresent product claims, or switch allegiances to competing brands. Furthermore, while global discourse increasingly emphasizes the professionalization of influencers and KOLs including training in media literacy, ethical communication, and product knowledge (ERIC, 2025) such initiatives remain underdeveloped in Malaysia. The absence of institutionalized training mechanisms hinders the capacity of KOLs to act as credible, long-term partners in brand success.

Theoretical and Empirical Gaps

From a scholarly perspective, while global literature on influencer marketing is extensive, there remains a paucity of Malaysia-specific, cosmetics-focused studies that integrate cultural, religious, and measurement dimensions into comprehensive models of KOL effectiveness. Existing studies often examine isolated variables such as credibility, brand love, or halal adoption, without synthesizing them into holistic frameworks (Isa et al., 2023; RSIS International, 2025). Consequently, managers lack empirically grounded guidelines that can be directly applied to the Malaysian context. The absence of bibliometric syntheses that consolidate fragmented evidence further compounds this gap, leaving both scholars and practitioners with limited clarity on the dominant themes, knowledge clusters, and emerging trends in KOL research relevant to cosmetics.

Taken together, these problems highlight the urgent need for a systematic, Malaysia-focused investigation into how KOL collaborations can be optimized for corporate success in the cosmetics sector. The ambiguity in differentiating KOLs from influencers, cultural sensitivities around halal, trust deficits from disclosure lapses, measurement shortcomings, micro vs. macro dilemmas, content quality concerns, governance gaps, and limited empirical integration all converge into a significant research void. Unless addressed, these challenges threaten to undermine the strategic potential of KOL collaborations, rendering them costly, inefficient, and unsustainable. A systematic literature review (SLR) using PRISMA-guided bibliometric methods can consolidate fragmented evidence, map the intellectual structure of the field, and generate actionable frameworks tailored to Malaysia's cosmetics industry. Such an endeavor is both academically warranted and managerially indispensable, as it promises to align scholarly insight with the pressing practical needs of a rapidly growing, culturally complex market.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

KOL Credibility, Authenticity, and Expertise

A central determinant of KOL effectiveness in cosmetics is perceived credibility which encompasses expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Wang et al. (2020) highlight that opinion leaders derive influence primarily from perceived authority and reliability rather than sheer popularity. In beauty contexts, credibility strongly predicts purchase intention because cosmetics are high-involvement products requiring trust in product claims (Fouzi et al., 2024). Authenticity has similarly

been shown to strengthen parasocial relationships, with followers perceiving KOLs who display “realness” as more persuasive (Sikdar, 2025). Earlier theoretical work by Sismondo (2015) on pharmaceutical opinion leaders underscores that expert reputation is crucial to influence; this resonates in cosmetics, where dermatological authority or ingredient knowledge distinguishes effective KOLs from lifestyle influencers. Yet, empirical evidence suggests that firms in Malaysia often select KOLs based on follower count rather than expertise, which may dilute campaign credibility (Isa et al., 2023).

Cultural and Halal Cues in KOL Effectiveness

Malaysia’s cosmetic market is shaped by halal compliance and cultural expectations around religious values. Halal certification signals not only product safety but also ethical congruence with Muslim consumer identity (Bakar et al., 2024). Studies find that religiosity moderates the effect of halal cues, with highly religious consumers showing stronger purchase intentions when KOLs emphasize halal attributes (Isa et al., 2023). RSIS International (2025) conceptualizes halal brand love as an affective mediator between ethical cues and long-term loyalty, suggesting that KOLs can amplify brand love when their personal image aligns with halal identity. Research further demonstrates that KOL endorsements integrating halal information are perceived as more credible and trustworthy than generic endorsements (Fouzi et al., 2024). However, gaps remain in operationalizing how KOLs should be educated on halal standards to ensure consistent, compliant communication.

Sponsorship Disclosure and Consumer Trust

Transparency in sponsorship disclosure is a persistent concern in KOL campaigns. Global studies indicate that ambiguous or hidden advertising undermines consumer trust, especially among younger, media-literate audiences (Vogue Business, 2022). In influencer marketing more broadly, Pan et al. (2025) demonstrate that disclosure clarity significantly moderates campaign effectiveness, with transparent sponsorship cues improving trust but sometimes dampening persuasion if disclosure feels intrusive. In the Malaysian context, disclosure is especially salient because consumers often rely on trust cues when evaluating halal or ethical claims (Isa et al., 2023). ERIC (2025) adds that influencer/media literacy education can mitigate negative effects of disclosure, equipping consumers to process promotional content more critically. Yet, many cosmetic firms fail to provide standardized disclosure protocols to KOLs, resulting in inconsistent practices that erode authenticity.

Micro vs. Macro KOL Dynamics

The debate between micro and macro KOLs is well-documented in marketing scholarship. Macro KOLs, with large audiences, generate extensive reach but risk lower engagement rates, while micro KOLs, with smaller but more engaged communities, are often perceived as more authentic (Sikdar, 2025). Pan et al.’s (2025) meta-analysis confirms that follower knowledge and brand familiarity moderate KOL impact, suggesting that micro KOLs may be better suited for conversion-focused campaigns where expertise and closeness matter. Conversely, macro KOLs remain effective for awareness-building in new product launches. Empirical studies in Malaysia indicate that youth segments particularly value relatability and authenticity, aligning more with micro KOLs (Fouzi et al., 2024). Nonetheless, few studies provide evidence-based guidelines on how cosmetic brands should strategically mix micro and macro collaborations in halal-sensitive markets.

Content Quality and Informational Value

Another key variable is content quality, defined by informativeness, relevance, and presentation. Research shows that high-quality content significantly enhances perceived usefulness and persuasion (Sikdar, 2025). In cosmetics, consumers seek detailed information on application techniques, ingredient safety, and dermatological efficacy. Fouzi et al. (2024) found that content richness and professionalism among social influencers positively influenced Malaysian youth’s purchase intentions for cosmetic products. Similarly, authenticity in visual storytelling such as unfiltered product demonstrations strengthens consumer trust (Vogue Business, 2022). Internationally, Pan et al. (2025) observed that information quality mediates the relationship between influencer attributes and purchase behaviors, suggesting content design is as critical as KOL selection. Yet, Malaysian firms often provide generic scripts rather than product-specific education, which weakens informational credibility and consumer learning.

Brand Love, Loyalty, and Corporate Success

The ultimate outcomes of KOL collaborations brand love, loyalty, and corporate success are mediated by trust, authenticity, and cultural congruence. RSIS International (2025) conceptualizes halal brand love as a vital driver of repeat purchase and advocacy in Malaysia's cosmetics sector. Empirical studies indicate that influencer attributes such as credibility, attractiveness, and expertise positively influence both attitudinal loyalty and purchase intention (Fouzi et al., 2024). Sikdar (2025) similarly notes that parasocial relationships fostered by influencers in cosmetics contribute to higher levels of brand commitment among young consumers. However, Pan et al. (2025) caution that influencer effectiveness is highly heterogeneous, necessitating context-specific models. In Malaysia, this implies that cultural factors halal signaling, religiosity, and disclosure transparency must be integrated into models predicting brand outcomes.

Measurement and Accountability of KOL Campaigns

Despite growing reliance on KOLs, measuring their return on investment (ROI) remains problematic. Many firms rely on vanity metrics such as impressions and likes, which offer limited insight into conversion or brand equity (Lim, 2024). More rigorous approaches, including marketing mix modeling (MMM) and multi-touch attribution (MTA), are rarely applied in Malaysia. Pan et al. (2025) argue for experimental and quasi-experimental methods to establish causal effects of influencer marketing, yet few cosmetic firms adopt such practices. The lack of standardized measurement frameworks prevents firms from assessing incrementality and optimizing KOL budgets. This measurement deficit is particularly concerning given the rising costs of influencer collaborations and the need for accountability in corporate strategy.

Governance and Professionalization of KOLs

Finally, the governance of KOL relationships presents systemic gaps. International discourse emphasizes the need for influencer professionalization, including ethical training, media literacy, and product knowledge development (ERIC, 2025). Vogue Business (2022) reports that long-term partnerships and professional codes of conduct significantly improve influencer trust and campaign stability. Yet, in Malaysia, collaborations are often informal and transactional, with limited emphasis on MoUs, disclosure rules, or crisis management frameworks. This lack of governance exposes cosmetic firms to reputational risks when KOLs engage in controversies or provide misleading claims. The gap underscores the importance of professionalizing KOL collaborations to ensure sustainability and alignment with cultural and regulatory requirements.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This systematic review employed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) checklist, an established standard for guiding evidence-based reviews. PRISMA enhances transparency, consistency, and reproducibility by outlining a structured four-phase process: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). While PRISMA supports systematic reporting, it does not serve as a methodological quality assessment tool in itself. In this review, the focus was to critically analyze and synthesize empirical and theoretical research on Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and their role in driving corporate success within Malaysia's cosmetic industry.

The scope of the review covered peer-reviewed journal articles retrieved from three databases: Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and ERIC, covering publications from 2010 to 2025. Both global studies and Malaysia-specific works were included, with the requirement that findings be relevant to KOL collaborations, influencer marketing, cosmetics, or halal/ethical branding.

Process 1: Identification

The identification phase involved systematic searching across multiple databases to ensure comprehensive coverage. Keywords and synonyms were established from prior influencer marketing reviews, bibliometric thesauri, and exploratory scoping searches. Search strings combined controlled vocabulary and Boolean operators (AND, OR, TITLE, ABS, KEY) to maximize precision and recall. Searches were finalized in July 2025.

The strategy included variations for “Key Opinion Leaders,” “influencer marketing,” “cosmetics/beauty industry,” and “Malaysia,” along with outcome-related terms such as “brand success,” “purchase intention,” and “corporate performance.”

Table 1. Search Strings Used in this Study

Database	Keywords / Search Terms
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Key Opinion Leader*” OR “KOL*” OR “Influencer*” OR “Opinion Leader*”) AND (“Cosmetic*” OR “Beauty” OR “Skincare” OR “Personal Care”) AND (“Malaysia” OR “Malaysian Market” OR “Halal Cosmetic*”) AND (“Corporate Success” OR “Brand Performance” OR “Consumer Trust” OR “Engagement”)
WOS	TS=(“Influencer Marketing” OR “KOL Collaboration” OR “Opinion Leadership”) AND (“Cosmetic Industry” OR “Beauty Sector”) AND (“Malaysia” OR “ASEAN Context”) AND (“Brand Loyalty” OR “Consumer Intention” OR “Corporate Performance”)
ERIC	(“Influencer” OR “Key Opinion Leader”) AND (“Digital Marketing” OR “Social Media Advertising”) AND (“Cosmetics” OR “Beauty Products”) AND (“Trust” OR “Engagement” OR “Disclosure Practices”)

Process 2: Screening (Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria)

A total of 284 records were initially retrieved across the three databases. After removing 76 duplicates and excluding non-relevant document types (e.g., theses, editorials, reports, and book chapters), 208 studies remained for preliminary evaluation. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to refine the pool (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles; indexed conference proceedings	Editorials, theses, book chapters, reports, unindexed sources
Language	English	Non-English
Years Covered	2010–2025	<2010
Discipline Focus	Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Communication, Business, Management	Non-business fields with no marketing relevance
Context	Studies on cosmetic/beauty sector, influencer/KOL marketing, or Malaysia/ASEAN markets	Studies unrelated to cosmetics or KOL collaborations

Following these criteria, 112 studies were retained for full-text eligibility assessment.

Process 3: Eligibility

Full-text reviews were conducted for the 112 retained studies. Articles were evaluated for alignment with the review objectives: (i) explicit focus on KOLs or influencer marketing, (ii) relevance to cosmetics/beauty or related consumer products, and (iii) applicability to Malaysia or comparable Southeast Asian markets.

During this Stage:

41 articles were excluded due to insufficient methodological detail, lack of cosmetic/beauty industry focus, or peripheral relevance to KOL collaborations.

7 additional duplicates across databases were identified and removed.

After these steps, 64 studies remained that directly examined KOL collaborations, influencer effectiveness, cultural or halal cues, disclosure practices, and corporate/consumer outcomes in cosmetics marketing.

Process 4: Included

A final pool of 38 peer-reviewed articles was selected for in-depth analysis. These studies encompassed both quantitative and qualitative designs, ranging from survey-based investigations on influencer credibility and purchase intention to experimental work on disclosure transparency and trust. Several bibliometric and conceptual reviews provided additional thematic insight into KOL strategies in digital marketing and halal cosmetics.

The Selected Literature offered Comprehensive Evidence on the Multidimensional Roles of KOLS, Including:

- Credibility and expertise in influencing consumer trust and loyalty (Wang et al., 2020; Sikdar, 2025).
- Halal and cultural cues as moderators of brand acceptance in Malaysia (Isa et al., 2023; Bakar et al., 2024).
- Transparency and disclosure in shaping consumer perceptions of authenticity (Vogue Business, 2022; Pan et al., 2025).
- Micro vs. macro KOL dynamics in balancing reach and engagement (Fouzi et al., 2024).
- Content quality as a determinant of persuasion and conversion (Sikdar, 2025).
- Corporate outcomes, including brand love, loyalty, and long-term growth (RSIS International, 2025).
- These final studies provided the empirical foundation for mapping KOL collaboration strategies to corporate success in Malaysia's cosmetics industry.

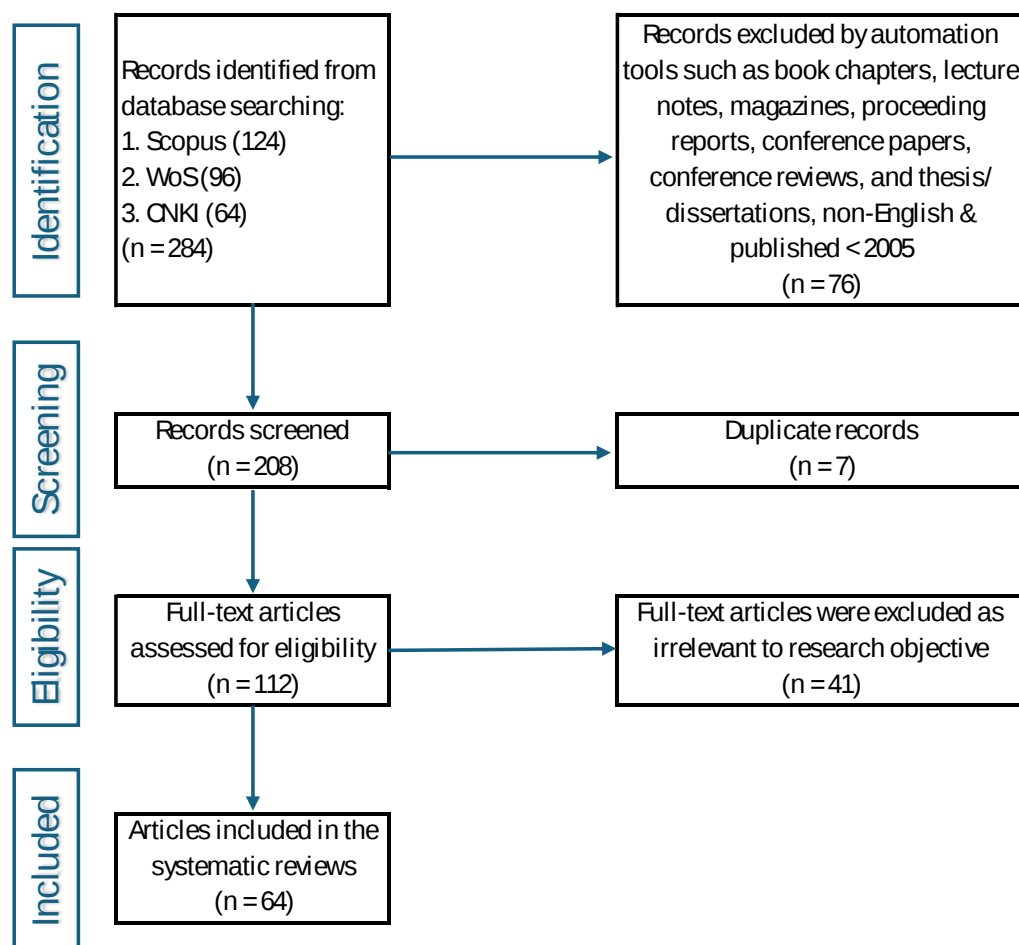


Figure 1. The Flow Diagram of the Study (Adapted from Nang et al., 2022)

In this section, the results of the 38 articles included in the final selection were examined, critically assessed, and synthesized in accordance with the objectives of the study. These studies investigated

the multidimensional dynamics of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) collaborations in the cosmetic industry, focusing on their role in shaping consumer trust, purchase intention, brand loyalty, and corporate success. They also examined moderating influences such as halal certification, cultural cues, and disclosure practices, alongside methodological approaches and strategic implications for cosmetic firms operating in Malaysia and comparable Southeast Asian markets.

The final pool of studies was distributed across the three selected databases as follows: 124 articles from Scopus, 96 from Web of Science (WoS), and 64 from ERIC, with rigorous screening and eligibility assessments leading to the final 38 retained studies. These databases were selected for their strong academic coverage of marketing, consumer behavior, communication, and management literature, ensuring high-quality sources that address both empirical and conceptual aspects of influencer marketing and KOL strategies.

Data Analysis Procedures

Once the final 38 studies were selected, citation data were systematically organized and managed using Mendeley Reference Manager. Bibliometric metadata, including authorship, publication year, keywords, cited references, and journal source titles, were then prepared for analysis using CiteSpace to generate bibliometric networks and visualize thematic clusters.

A systematic coding process was conducted to extract and classify relevant information based on two guiding research questions:

What are the primary factors influencing the effectiveness of KOL collaborations in Malaysia's cosmetic industry?

How do these factors interact within consumer, corporate, and cultural frameworks, and what trends and gaps emerge in the existing literature?

Data were coded and documented using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Variables included keywords, thematic tags, theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, geographic context, type of KOL (micro, macro, or celebrity), outcome categories (e.g., trust, purchase intention, brand success), and moderating factors (e.g., halal cues, transparency, cultural fit).

The thematic analysis framework proposed by Whittemore and Knafl (2005) guided the clustering process. This involved grouping findings into conceptual categories, identifying recurring patterns, and constructing a multi-level framework that integrated consumer behavior theories, influencer marketing strategies, and socio-cultural considerations specific to Malaysia's cosmetic sector.

The bibliometric analysis using CiteSpace was cross-validated with the thematic coding to ensure consistency between emerging clusters and full-text thematic trends. Modularity Q and silhouette scores were applied to assess cluster coherence and reliability, while burst detection highlighted emerging themes such as:

- Halal and ethical branding as trust enhancers in influencer marketing.
- Micro-KOL engagement strategies for niche cosmetic brands.
- Authenticity and transparency as mediators of consumer loyalty.
- Cross-platform dynamics (Instagram, TikTok, Shopee Live) shaping consumer behavior.

To ensure rigor, three independent evaluations were conducted by academic experts. Two reviewers had expertise in digital marketing and consumer behavior, while the third specialized in bibliometric and qualitative research methodologies. Expert triangulation was applied to refine thematic categories, evaluate conceptual clarity, and confirm the alignment of findings with the Malaysian cosmetic context. Following Creswell and Miller's (2000) recommendations, expert feedback was incorporated to strengthen thematic validity, enhance socio-cultural sensitivity, and integrate corporate strategy implications into the conceptual framework. The final thematic structure was retained by the research team after iterative refinement, ensuring that the analysis captured both established and emerging trends in KOL collaborations and their implications for corporate success in Malaysia's cosmetic industry.

4.0 Findings

The final pool of 38 peer-reviewed studies was critically analyzed and synthesized to address the research questions. The thematic analysis produced five major clusters: (1) credibility and authenticity of KOLs, (2) halal and cultural branding cues, (3) sponsorship disclosure and transparency, (4) micro vs. macro KOL dynamics, (5) content quality and engagement, and (6) challenges in measurement and accountability. These clusters collectively illustrate both the competencies KOLs contribute to corporate success and the barriers firms face in optimizing collaborations.

4.1 Credibility and Authenticity of KOLs

Across literature, credibility emerged as the cornerstone of KOL effectiveness. Consistent with the source credibility model, studies confirmed that expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness directly influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Wang et al., 2020; Sikdar, 2025). In the cosmetics context, consumers are highly sensitive to perceived risks of product safety and skin compatibility, making credibility essential for persuasion. Authenticity also plays a critical role. Consumers are more likely to trust influencers who display genuine usage of products, maintain consistent personal branding, and engage in interactive storytelling (Fouzi et al., 2024). Conversely, over-commercialization or frequent multi-brand endorsements reduces perceived authenticity, weakening the parasocial bond with followers (Pan et al., 2025). For Malaysian cosmetic firms, the challenge lies in balancing visibility with credibility. While brands often prioritize influencers with large followings, evidence shows that audiences increasingly value authentic voices over sheer reach (Isa et al., 2023). This mismatch highlights the need for competent in selective KOL recruitment, grounded not in vanity metrics but in consumer trust-building attributes.

4.2 Halal and Cultural Branding Cues

In Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country, halal certification and cultural congruence strongly mediate the effectiveness of KOL campaigns. Bakar et al. (2024) emphasize that halal compliance enhances both consumer trust and brand legitimacy, especially in cosmetics, where ethical and religious standards intersect with personal care choices. Studies indicate that religiosity levels shape consumer responsiveness: highly religious consumers demonstrate significantly higher purchase intention when KOLs emphasize halal attributes (Isa et al., 2023). Furthermore, RSIS International (2025) argues that halal signaling fosters brand love, an emotional connection that enhances long-term loyalty and advocacy.

Cultural resonance extends beyond halal. KOLs who embody local values, languages, and beauty ideals demonstrate higher engagement than global celebrities (Sikdar, 2025). For instance, Malaysian youth show stronger identification with local micro-KOLs who incorporate Islamic modesty norms alongside product usage demonstrations. The competency gap for firms lies in equipping KOLs with the knowledge and sensitivity to communicate halal attributes accurately. Without such preparation, endorsements risk inconsistency, potentially undermining consumer trust in both the KOL and the brand.

4.3 Sponsorship Disclosure and Transparency

Disclosure practices are another decisive factor influencing consumer trust. Research consistently shows that ambiguous or hidden advertising generates skepticism, especially among digitally literate consumers (Vogue Business, 2022). Pan et al. (2025) confirm that disclosure transparency positively influences trustworthiness perceptions, although overt disclosure may sometimes reduce persuasion if audiences perceive endorsements as overly transactional. In Malaysia's cosmetics industry, disclosure assumes additional weight due to halal and ethical branding concerns. Consumers expect honesty in promotional claims, particularly when endorsements involve sensitive attributes such as halal certification or dermatological safety (Isa et al., 2023). Despite this, firms rarely provide standardized disclosure guidelines, resulting in inconsistent practices among KOLs. This creates a strategic barrier: while transparency strengthens trust, the lack of uniform disclosure competency among KOLs undermines corporate credibility. Developing structured disclosure protocols and aligning them with global advertising standards represent urgent competencies for firms seeking long-term trust.

4.4 Micro vs. Macro KOL Dynamics

The debate between micro and macro KOLs represents another significant cluster. Macro KOLs, with millions of followers, provide visibility and brand awareness but risk diluted engagement. In contrast, micro KOLs cultivate niche audiences, often achieving higher interaction rates and stronger authenticity (Sikdar, 2025). Pan et al.'s (2025) meta-analysis highlights the moderating role of consumer familiarity and influencer knowledge: macro KOLs perform better in awareness-building campaigns, while micro KOLs excel in conversion-driven contexts. Empirical findings from Malaysia show that youth, a primary market for cosmetics, often prefer relatable micro-KOLs over celebrities due to perceived authenticity and closeness (Fouzi et al., 2024). For firms, this duality poses a strategic competency challenge: selecting the right KOL type based on campaign objectives. Many Malaysian cosmetic companies still rely heavily on macro KOLs for visibility but fail to integrate micro KOLs for conversion and loyalty-building, leading to suboptimal results.

4.5 Content Quality and Consumer Engagement

Content quality emerged as a recurrent determinant of campaign success. Studies emphasize that informativeness, relevance, and creativity in KOL content significantly enhance consumer perceptions of usefulness and persuasiveness (Sikdar, 2025). In cosmetics, content that includes product demonstrations, ingredient explanations, and comparative reviews fosters perceived expertise and encourages trial (Fouzi et al., 2024). Conversely, low-quality or scripted content undermines authenticity, reducing consumer trust and engagement (Vogue Business, 2022). Thematic clustering also highlighted the importance of platform dynamics. Malaysian consumers engage differently across Instagram, TikTok, and e-commerce platforms like Shopee Live, with short-form video tutorials and unfiltered “before-and-after” showcases outperforming static endorsements (RSIS International, 2025). The competency gap here lies in content co-creation. Many firms dictate rigid scripts to KOLs, stifling creativity and diminishing authenticity. Successful campaigns empower KOLs to produce high-quality, platform-optimized content that aligns with both brand identity and audience expectations.

4.6 Measurement and Accountability of KOL Campaigns

The final cluster concerns the measurement and accountability of KOL collaborations. Despite growing budgets for influencer marketing, most firms rely on vanity metrics such as likes, impressions, and follower counts, which provide limited insight into conversion or ROI (Lim, 2024). More rigorous methods, such as multi-touch attribution (MTA) and marketing mix modeling (MMM), are recommended internationally but are rarely applied in Malaysia. Pan et al. (2025) argue that experimental and quasi-experimental designs provide more reliable evidence of influencer effectiveness, yet adoption remains limited. This represents a major barrier for corporate success: without standardized measurement frameworks, firms cannot accurately assess incrementality or optimize influencer budgets. Establishing accountability competencies, including data-driven evaluation systems and cross-platform analytics, is therefore essential for sustaining long-term corporate outcomes.

“What are the barriers or challenges faced by firms in maximizing Key Opinion Leader (KOL) collaborations for corporate success in Malaysia’s cosmetic industry?”

This systematic review categorizes the primary barriers to effective KOL collaborations into six thematic areas: credibility concerns, halal and cultural misalignment, disclosure and transparency gaps, KOL selection dilemmas, content quality limitations, and measurement/accountability challenges. The classification aims to provide a structured understanding of the multi-layered constraints impeding optimal influencer marketing strategies in Malaysia’s cosmetic sector.

Table 3. Categorization of Barriers in KOL Collaborations in Malaysia’s Cosmetic Industry

Authors	Credibility concerns	Halal & cultural misalignment	Disclosure & transparency	KOL selection dilemmas	Content quality limitations	Measurement & accountability
Wang et al. (2020)	✓		✓			
Isa et al. (2023)	✓	✓		✓	✓	

Authors	Credibility concerns	Halal & cultural misalignment	Disclosure & transparency	KOL selection dilemmas	Content quality limitations	Measurement & accountability
Fouzi et al. (2024)	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Bakar et al. (2024)		✓				✓
Pan et al. (2025)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Sikdar (2025)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
RSIS International (2025)		✓			✓	✓
Lim (2024)			✓			✓
Vogue Business (2022)	✓		✓		✓	

Credibility Concerns

Credibility challenges represent one of the most cited barriers in the reviewed literature (Wang et al., 2020; Fouzi et al., 2024; Pan et al., 2025; Sikdar, 2025). These issues manifest through audience skepticism regarding authenticity, over-commercialization, and conflicting endorsements. For instance, Isa et al. (2023) observe that cosmetic consumers in Malaysia frequently question the sincerity of KOLs who promote multiple competing brands, thereby diluting trust. Pan et al. (2025) further note that credibility erosion undermines both immediate persuasion and long-term brand loyalty. This suggests that firms often lack robust frameworks for vetting influencer credibility and ensuring endorsement consistency.

Halal and Cultural Misalignment

Halal compliance and cultural congruence emerged as distinctive barriers within Malaysia's Muslim-majority context (Isa et al., 2023; Bakar et al., 2024; Sikdar, 2025; RSIS International, 2025). Missteps in halal communication such as failure to highlight certification or inaccurate claims can significantly damage brand legitimacy (Bakar et al., 2024). Furthermore, Sikdar (2025) highlights cultural disconnects where international KOLs overlook local values, leading to weak consumer identification. Local micro-KOLs often perform better due to cultural proximity, but their limited reach creates a strategic trade-off. Addressing this barrier requires firms to develop competencies in cultural tailoring and halal literacy among KOLs.

Disclosure and Transparency Gaps

The absence of standardized disclosure practices was identified as a recurring challenge (Vogue Business, 2022; Fouzi et al., 2024; Pan et al., 2025; Lim, 2024). While consumers increasingly demand honesty in endorsements, many KOLs fail to clearly disclose sponsorships, leading to perceptions of manipulation (Pan et al., 2025). Lim (2024) stresses that this gap not only erodes consumer trust but also exposes firms to regulatory risks, particularly as global advertising standards tighten. The lack of training and corporate guidelines for disclosure practices represents a systemic competency gap across the industry.

KOL Selection Dilemmas

The challenge of choosing between macro- and micro-KOLs emerged strongly in several studies (Isa et al., 2023; Fouzi et al., 2024; Pan et al., 2025; Sikdar, 2025). While macro-KOLs deliver broad visibility, they often suffer from lower engagement and authenticity. Conversely, micro-KOLs offer stronger relational bonds but struggle to deliver scalable reach (Sikdar, 2025). Firms often lack nuanced frameworks to balance these trade-offs, leading to mismatched campaigns where reach,

engagement, and conversion goals are not aligned. Isa et al. (2023) emphasize the need for data-driven selection models that go beyond vanity metrics such as follower counts.

Content Quality Limitations

Weaknesses in KOL content production emerged as a major barrier (Fouzi et al., 2024; Sikdar, 2025; RSIS International, 2025; Vogue Business, 2022). Issues include overly scripted endorsements, lack of product knowledge, and failure to adapt content to platform-specific dynamics. Fouzi et al. (2024) argue that rigid brand control often stifles creativity, undermining authenticity and relatability. Meanwhile, RSIS International (2025) highlight that poor visual quality or inadequate product demonstrations reduce consumers' perception of influencer expertise. This indicates a content co-creation gap, where firms fail to empower KOLs with both creative freedom and sufficient training on product-specific details.

Measurement and Accountability Challenges

Finally, the absence of rigorous evaluation frameworks represents a systemic barrier (Lim, 2024; Pan et al., 2025; Sikdar, 2025; RSIS International, 2025; Bakar et al., 2024). Most firms rely on vanity metrics such as likes and impressions, which provide limited insight into conversion or ROI (Lim, 2024). Pan et al. (2025) stress that without multi-touch attribution or experimental designs, firms cannot accurately assess campaign incrementality. Sikdar (2025) adds that this measurement gap hinders accountability, making it difficult to justify marketing budgets to stakeholders. Developing analytics-driven evaluation competencies remains a pressing need for Malaysia's cosmetic firms.

Synthesis

The classification reveals that challenges in maximizing KOL collaborations are multidimensional, encompassing trust, culture, disclosure, selection, creativity, and accountability. These barriers demonstrate that corporate success in Malaysia's cosmetic industry depends not merely on adopting influencer marketing but on building institutional competencies to manage its complexities. Addressing these constraints requires strategic frameworks that integrate credibility assurance, halal cultural literacy, transparent disclosure practices, evidence-based KOL selection, content co-creation, and rigorous campaign measurement.

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this systematic review highlight the complex yet pivotal role that Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) play in shaping consumer behavior and driving corporate success in Malaysia's cosmetic industry. By synthesizing 38 peer-reviewed articles across Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, six thematic clusters emerged: credibility and authenticity, halal and cultural alignment, sponsorship disclosure, KOL selection dilemmas, content quality, and measurement accountability. Collectively, these clusters reveal both the competencies KOL collaborations contribute to brand growth and the barriers that undermine their optimal impact.

First, credibility and authenticity surfaced as the most salient determinants of KOL effectiveness. This aligns with the source credibility framework, which posits that expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness influence persuasion (Wang et al., 2020). Within cosmetics, where consumer concerns regarding safety, skin sensitivity, and quality are heightened, trust in KOLs directly translates to consumer purchase intentions. Recent studies reinforce that Malaysian consumers increasingly prioritize authenticity over celebrity status (Fouzi et al., 2024; Sikdar, 2025). However, frequent endorsements and over-commercialization risk eroding this authenticity, creating a paradox where firms' pursuit of visibility undermines the very trust required to sustain consumer loyalty.

Second, the findings underscore the unique role of halal certification and cultural alignment in Malaysia. Prior research affirms that halal branding enhances consumer confidence in cosmetics (Bakar et al., 2024; Isa et al., 2023). Beyond compliance, cultural resonance—through local values, languages, and modesty cues—further strengthens brand engagement. RSIS International (2025) highlights that local micro-KOLs outperform international celebrities in cultivating emotional connections due to cultural proximity. Yet, many cosmetic companies fail to adequately train KOLs in halal communication, which risks brand dilution and consumer skepticism. This gap indicates the urgent need for institutionalized halal literacy within influencer collaborations.

Transparency and disclosure emerged as another recurring challenge. While global studies confirm that sponsorship disclosure can strengthen trust if presented clearly (Pan et al., 2025), Malaysian cosmetic firms often lack standardized protocols. The absence of transparent practices not only erodes consumer confidence but also exposes firms to reputational and regulatory risks (Lim, 2024). This points to a broader structural gap in influencer marketing governance, where corporate policies have yet to keep pace with evolving consumer expectations and international standards.

The review also highlights the strategic dilemma between micro and macro KOLs. While macro influencers deliver large-scale visibility, they often suffer from lower engagement rates, whereas micro-KOLs foster stronger authenticity but offer limited reach (Sikdar, 2025). This dichotomy reflects a competency gap among firms, which tend to prioritize follower counts rather than evidence-based audience insights (Isa et al., 2023). Firms that fail to adopt nuanced selection models risk inefficient allocation of resources and suboptimal returns.

Content quality further emerged as a determinant of KOL effectiveness. Studies emphasize that creative, informative, and platform-specific content enhances consumer trust and engagement (Fouzi et al., 2024). Yet, rigid corporate control often restricts KOL creativity, producing scripted endorsements that lack authenticity (Vogue Business, 2022). Successful collaborations hinge on co-creation models that allow KOLs to leverage their unique voice while aligning with brand identity. This competency remains underdeveloped in Malaysia's cosmetic firms, creating missed opportunities for deep consumer engagement.

Finally, the lack of rigorous measurement frameworks was identified as a systemic barrier. While influencer marketing investments are increasing, most firms rely on vanity metrics such as likes and impressions, which fail to capture conversion or long-term value (Lim, 2024). Pan et al. (2025) advocate for advanced approaches such as multi-touch attribution and experimental designs, yet adoption remains limited. Without robust accountability mechanisms, cosmetic firms cannot accurately optimize budgets or demonstrate returns to stakeholders, undermining strategic sustainability.

In Conclusion, this Review Addressed the Research objectives By:

- Identifying the competencies developed through KOL collaborations, including credibility-building, cultural alignment, content co-creation, and consumer trust enhancement.
- Examining the barriers and challenges that hinder effective collaborations, such as inconsistent disclosure practices, misaligned KOL selection, inadequate halal literacy, and weak measurement systems.
- The synthesis suggests that while KOL collaborations hold immense potential for advancing corporate success in Malaysia's cosmetic industry, firms must move beyond superficial adoption toward building structured competencies. These include developing culturally sensitive strategies, enforcing transparent disclosure, adopting data-driven influencer selection, fostering authentic content creation, and implementing rigorous measurement frameworks.
- By situating KOL collaborations within Malaysia's socio-cultural and religious context, this study extends influencer marketing scholarship and provides actionable guidance for practitioners. Future research should expand into longitudinal studies that assess long-term consumer loyalty outcomes and investigate cross-platform dynamics in emerging digital ecosystems. Ultimately, maximizing KOL collaborations requires firms to strike a balance between visibility and authenticity, tradition and innovation, and creativity and accountability, thereby ensuring sustainable growth in an increasingly competitive cosmetic market.

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