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GROWING INFLUENCER CREDIBILITY TO DRIVE ENDORSEMENT EFFECTIVENESS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

STUDY OBJECTIVE AND BACKGROUND

In contrast to the growth of influencer marketing during the pandemic (Ward, 2021), trust has declined globally, especially for social media (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). This has great implications for influencer marketing as social media is the key communication channel of most influencers. While audiences come to influencers for genuine content, brand sponsorship can generate distrust when they realize its covert marketing tactics and commercial orientation (Esteban-Santos et al., 2018; Martínez-López et al., 2020). Thus, enhancing consumers' trust towards influencers is one of the key factors for successful digital relationships among consumers, influencers, and brands.

Scholarly research on influencer marketing, specifically on credibility has started to flourish from 2016 onwards. Credibility in influencer marketing research is often based on previous celebrity endorsement literature (Martínez-López et al., 2020) which might overlook the unique characteristics of social media influencers and the digital environment. Therefore, a consolidated review is necessary to integrate and synthesize the current state of knowledge to provide the basis for and to encourage further research. This review serves this purpose by developing a conceptual framework that integrates the antecedents and outcomes of influencer credibility in the digital context. Moreover, it aims to uncover gaps in literature and guide future research directions.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

We used the Scopus scientific database to search for published research papers with the terms describing influencers (e.g., bloggers, vloggers, opinion leaders, micro-celebrities, live-streamers) and credibility (e.g., trust, benevolence) in the title, abstract and keywords. Then, the authors selected peer-reviewed articles which were published in the scholarly journals listed in the Academic Journal Guide 2018 by the Chartered Association of Business Schools to ensure the quality. We focused on the credibility of social media influencers and excluded articles exclusively about traditional celebrities or

eWOM. From 2016 to 2020, there were 39 articles including 34 quantitative studies (87%) and five qualitative studies (13%).

The Source Credibility Model (Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Ohanian 1990) was found to establish a key theoretical foundation for the influencer credibility construct in the majority of studies. The results revealed that influencer credibility is driven by three groups of antecedents. First, strengthening influencer credibility can be achieved through influencers' positive self-presentation, interaction and relationship with their audiences (e.g., Argyris et al., 2020; Jun and Yi, 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Second, a sponsorship disclosure with additional justification seems to be a better option to maintain influencer credibility given the negative effect resulting from ad recognition (e.g., Hwang and Jeong, 2016). Finally, the perceived fit of influencers with brands, content or audiences serves as a heuristic cue for consumers to trust the endorsement (e.g., Breves et al., 2019). Nevertheless, its impact declines when consumers get to know more about the influencers. In terms of outcomes, the findings show that influencer credibility is a predictor for favorable attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Munnukka et al., 2019; Pick, 2020). Influencer credibility also fosters content credibility and brand trust (Martínez-López et al., 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020).

DISCUSSION

This study makes two contributions to the influencer marketing literature. First, it provides a conceptual framework integrating the antecedents and outcomes of influencer credibility. The framework takes into account distinctive characteristics of influencers in the social media context. Second, it suggests five main questions for future research on the topic: (1) How do influencers and consumers' characteristics, interaction, and relationship affect influencer trust formation? (2) What types of sponsorship disclosure serve their purpose ethically and transparently without compromising influencer credibility? (3) To what extent does influencer credibility depend on perceived fit, and what are the potential moderators? (4) How does influencer credibility drive desirable engagement behaviors (e.g., sharing, liking, commenting)? (5) How is influencer credibility transferred to content credibility and brand trust, and is there a similar reverse impact from content credibility and brand trust to influencer credibility?

The findings also support managers and influencers in conducting influencer marketing effectively, transparently and ethically through cultivating trusted relationships.

The limitation of this study is that it has not yet explored the levels of contribution of different antecedents towards influencer credibility. Furthermore, a standardized way to measure them is still missing. More research is needed to confirm and enrich our findings.

Keywords: Source credibility, Trust, Social media influencers, Influencer marketing

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