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‘You really are a great big sister’ – parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing

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‘You really are a great big sister’ – parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing

This study examines the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing. A YouTube vlog entry by a social media influencer featuring the endorsement of a brand was studied, and an experimental design featuring two conditions related to audience comments was created. The results indicate that a parasocial relationship with the influencer builds the perceived credibility of the influencer, while comments by other audience members moderate the effect. Influencer credibility positively affects brand trust and purchase intention. The findings enhance the understanding of the role of an active audience in influencer marketing.

Keywords: influencer marketing, social media influencers, parasocial relationship, audience comments, credibility, brand trust, purchase intention

Summary statement of contribution

This study illuminates the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing on YouTube by showing comments have an effect on the endorsement an influencer provides through the constructs of parasocial relationship and influencer credibility. Blocking comments on YouTube may therefore affect influencer marketing because seeing other people's comments offers a way for audience members to verify their feelings about influencers and their endorsements.

Introduction

Interaction and relationship building between people is the heart and soul of social media. However, the dark side of online behaviour has led Facebook and Google to restrain interaction on some of their channels. In February 2019, it was announced that YouTube would be disabling comments on videos featuring minors due to predatory behaviour (Binder, 2019). Meanwhile, Instagram tested the hiding of the number of likes and views on people's posts to 'advance people's focus on the posted content' (Fitzgerald, 2019). It has also been claimed that Facebook is considering hiding the number of likes on its News Feed (Constine, 2019). These actions have received mixed responses: while some people feel these actions can create a healthier environment on social media (Graham, 2019), others, including social media influencers, feel disabling comments and interaction might damage their connection with their followers (Alexander, 2019). These actions also raises questions about possible impacts on influencer marketing.

To gain the attention and trust of consumers, brands have increasingly been turning to social media influencers – such as bloggers, YouTubers, and Instagrammers, some of whose social media accounts are followed by millions of people. Many brands have chosen to work with social media influencers because of the challenges they have encountered while engaging consumers directly on social media (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). According to industry reports, the budgets for influencer marketing are growing fast. It has been claimed that, in 2018, marketers spent more than $5 billion on influencer marketing on Instagram alone (InfluencerDB, 2019) and the global ad spend on influencer marketing could be up to $10 billion by 2020 (Mediakix, 2018).

The effectiveness of influencer marketing has intrigued both academics and professionals in recent years. To understand how influencer marketing works, many studies have examined the attributes of the influencers. Factors that have been found to

have an effect on the popularity and credibility of influencers, as well as the effectiveness of their endorsements, include social and physical attractiveness, attitude homophily (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019), trustworthiness, similarity, expertise (Munnukka, Maity, Reinikainen, & Luoma-aho, 2019), the ability to build parasocial relationships (PSRs) with followers (Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme, & LaGroue, 2018), and the perceived authenticity of the influencer and the influencer's content (Pöyry, Pelkonen, Naumanen, & Laaksonen, 2019). Only a few studies have been conducted on the role of the audience members in the effectiveness of influencers' endorsements. Munnukka et al. (2019) included audience participation in their model of endorsement effectiveness and examined how audience members' own participation (liking, sharing, and commenting) created a kind of ownership over the influencer's content and thus supported the effectiveness of the influencer's endorsement. This study builds on the ideas of audience participation and examines the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing. What is the effect of seeing other audience members' comments?

This study specifically examined the endorsement of a brand on YouTube by a young female social media influencer and studied the moderating role of audience comments in the interaction between the PSR with the influencer and influencer's credibility (IC). The variables used to measure the endorsement effectiveness included brand trust (BT) and purchase intention (PI). Although Instagram is currently the social media application where influencers are mostly followed (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), a YouTube vlog entry was chosen for this study to understand the possible effect of disabling comments on endorsement effectiveness.

Literature review

Social media influencers

Over the last decade, social media have offered a megaphone for individual content creators (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013) – making it possible for bloggers, vloggers, and other social media influencers to talk about their lives and express their emotions and opinions to large audiences in an authentic way (Morris & Anderson, 2015). Zoella, PewDiePie, and Casey Neistat are individuals who have made their way to global fame through YouTube videos and gained millions of followers on other social media channels, like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. This has been said to be a sign of a 'demotic turn' – referring to the visibility of ordinary people and their experiences on online and offline media, including user-generated content on social media (Turner, 2010).

Several definitions of social media influencers have emerged in recent years. One of the first definitions came from Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg (2011, p. 90); they defined social media influencers as a 'new type of independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media applications. In addition to the ability to influence, personal branding (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016), a large number of followers (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019), and the ability to monetise their following (Abidin, 2016) have been proposed as defining characteristics of social media influencers. In addition, Enke and Borchers (2019) highlighted the influencers' relationship-building capabilities and interaction with followers.

Social media influencers, such as YouTubers, build connections with their followers by addressing them directly and using a conversational style (Tolson, 2010). Self-disclosure adds to the influencers' perceived authenticity (Ferchaud et al., 2018) and encourages the audience's trust and feelings of intimacy (Huang, 2015). This, in turn, invites interaction, and audience members often seek to engage with influencers

by, for example, commenting on, liking, or sharing the influencer's social media posts. This kind of participation by audience members has been found to be positively associated with the formation of PSRs between audience members and social media influencers (Chung & Cho, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019).

Social media influencers are not only able to attract large audiences but also act as efficient marketers (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). Endorsing brands has proven very beneficial, both for social media influencers themselves and the brands. Brands can profit from the co-operation with influencers through, for example, heightened brand attitude (Munnukka et al., 2019), brand perception, purchase intention (Lee & Watkins, 2016), and a positive effect on the brand's ranking on search engines (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). For the influencers, co-operation with brands offers a way to monetise their fame (Liljander, Gummerus, & Söderlund, 2015) and possibly even further expand their influence. However, the monetary incentive is just one of the motivations driving influencers. Community building, acting as an advocate, and helping followers with their lives have also been found to motivate influencers (Archer & Harrigan, 2016).

It seems using social media influencers as endorsers might be even more effective than using traditional celebrities, especially when it comes to the younger generations (Southgate, 2017). Previous studies have shown that social media influencers may have a greater impact on purchase decisions than traditional celebrities, because social media influencers are perceived as more credible and relatable (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Fashion bloggers have even been referred to as 'fashionable friends' (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011), highlighting the intimacy of the relationship between influencers and their audiences. As the feelings of intimacy grow, the influencer may become an 'imaginary friend', one who is not perceived to be talking

about brands to conduct advertising but give advice on how to create a certain lifestyle through the use of brands (Lueck, 2015).

Parasocial relationships

PSR is a concept originally coined to explain the experience of a face-to-face relationship television, film, or radio audiences may have with media performers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSRs are imaginary relationships with media performers that begin with spending time with the performer through media consumption and that are characterised by perceived relational development with the performer and knowing the performer well (Brown, 2015, p. 275). As the experience evolves, media consumption becomes ritual-like and an important part of the audience member's life (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). For example, soap opera characters are often seen as familiar friends who regularly appear in people's living rooms (Sood & Rogers, 2000).

The origins of PSRs lie in the experience of parasocial interaction (PSI) – referring to an illusion of interaction, 'a simulacrum of conversational give and take' (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215), with a media performer. An illusion of eye contact through the camera and straight verbal and bodily address may trigger the experience of an actual interaction with the performer, luring the audience member into adjusting his or her own behaviour accordingly (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Other methods of creating the experience of PSI include developing the feeling of a personal, private, and informal conversation (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956), as well as openness and interactivity (Labrecque, 2014). Much like the televisual context, talking directly to the camera, greeting the audience (Frobenius, 2011), making eye contact with the audience and using eye-level angles (Zhang, 2018) are ways in which vloggers on YouTube, for example, can also build PSI and PSRs with their followers. YouTube has even been

referred to as a ‘technology of intimacy’ (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 309), highlighting the illusion of closeness the videos create.

The spectrum of PSRs is wide, and like social relationships, they range from parasocial friendships – liking and trusting the media performer, feeling solidarity with the media performer, and desiring self-disclosure from and communication with the media performer – to parasocial love, which entails strong emotional responses and even romantic desires involving the media performer (Tukachinsky, 2010). Nevertheless, PSRs are not always positive in nature, and the audience can experience such relationships with performers they do not like as well (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Therefore, negative relational behaviours, such as criticism, should also be taken into account when examining PSRs (Sanderson, 2009).

Both PSI and PSRs can be very powerful and can affect an audience member’s identity, lifestyle, attitude, and behaviour (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Parasocial experiences can, for example, add to the enjoyment generated by the media content (Jin, 2011; Xiang, Zheng, Lee, & Zhao, 2016), and the audience members’ level of concentration (Yoo, Kwon, & Lee, 2016), affect message acceptance (Kim, Zhang, & Zhang, 2016), draw audience members back to the content, and make them spend longer periods of time with the content (Quintero Johnson & Patnoe-Woodley, 2016). A PSR with an influencer also moderates the role of persuasion knowledge (Hwang & Zhang, 2018), implying that audiences may be less bothered by brand endorsements made by influencers perceived as ‘friends’.

Parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships on social media

According to Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 215), the defining characteristic of PSI is the lack of reciprocity. In the traditional media environment, where real-time feedback was

impossible, this definition was non-problematic. However, because social media channels are reciprocal in nature, the question arises as to whether it is possible to apply a concept that originated in the 1950s to the context of social media. Can social media have parasocial features?

Giles (2002) introduced a continuum of social–parasocial encounters – stretching from simple dyadic, face-to-face encounters to thoroughly parasocial encounters with, for example, cartoon figures. According to Giles (2002), a dyadic conversation between two people in an online context would be classified as social, but the more people are added to the audience, the more illusionary and parasocial the interaction becomes. It has also been pointed out that not all social media users actively take part in discussions or share information. There are also 'lurkers', who mostly observe others but do not share much about themselves (Ballantine & Martin, 2005, p. 197).

While some researchers, such as Lueck (2015) and Tsiotsou (2015), retain the definition of parasocial as one-sided and non-reciprocal interaction, other studies have linked the creation of PSR to responsiveness. For instance, interactivity and referring to audience members by their usernames have been found to enhance the experience of PSR on social media (Labrecque, 2014). The responses do not even have to be directed at the person having the parasocial experience. Frederick, Choong, Clavio, and Walsh (2012) studied PSI between followers and athletes on social media and noticed that when the studied athlete responded to specific followers, it also heightened the parasocial experience for those followers, who were merely witnessing the interaction. It, therefore, seems that witnessing interactions between other people on social media can have an effect on people's own PSR.

Perceived influencer credibility

One of the factors determining the effectiveness of influencer endorsements is the perceived credibility of the influencer (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Munnukka et al., 2019). Credibility, also referred to as source credibility, adds to message acceptance (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016) and positive endorsement attitudes (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000; Pornpitakpan, 2004). Credibility consists of several dimensions – such as the attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness of the endorser (Ohanian, 1990; Chu & Kamal, 2008, Goldsmith et al., 2000). Other dimensions include perceived similarity with the endorser (Munnukka et al., 2019; Munnukka et al., 2016), the quality of the message, and a good endorser–product fit (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016).

Previous studies have found several drivers for credibility. These include a PSR with the endorser (Munnukka et al., 2019), previous experience with endorsers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), disclosure of sponsored content (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Hwang & Jeong, 2016), and the way in which the influencer uses self-disclosure (Huang, 2015). Interaction also contributes meaningfully to credibility, since comments made by other users seem to provide an important source of information for making of judgements about other people and their endorsements. People often use different kinds of cue or 'warrant' in online encounters to validate the self-presentation and truthfulness of others (Walther & Parks, 2002). Comments made by other people on social media can act as such cues and may even override mere self-descriptions (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009). It has been claimed that allowing comments on blogs supports the perceived expertise of the blogger, although no direct effect on credibility has been found (Hayes & Carr, 2015). This implies, however, that comments made by other audience members may enable

confirmation of the self-descriptions and endorsements of a social media influencer, but other constructs must also be involved because the effect of comments on credibility is not direct.

Trust towards brands

Brand trust (BT) refers to 'the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function' (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82), reducing the uncertainty consumers may feel towards a brand. It is based on consumer beliefs and increased knowledge of the brand (Yannopoulou, Koronis, & Elliott, 2011) and aids people in making decisions about brands (Lee, Kim, & Chan-Olmsted, 2011).

Trust is formed through interaction in the context of relationships (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Dervitsiotis, 2003) and is shaped by an individual's past experiences within similar contexts (Quandt, 2012). Trust in a brand can be built through engagement and relationships with the brand and different elements of the brand on social media (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014), but trust can also be transferred. Trust transfer takes place when initial trust in a target (a person, a group, or an organisation) turns into trust in another target (Stewart, 2003). For example, a consumer's trust in another consumer or a marketer in a social media brand community can turn into trust in an associated brand (Liu, Lee, Liu, & Chen, 2018). It has also been claimed that in an online brand community, both trust and distrust can spill over to affect the brand without direct involvement (Lay-Hwa Bowden, Conduit, Hollebeek, Luoma-aho, & Solem, 2017).

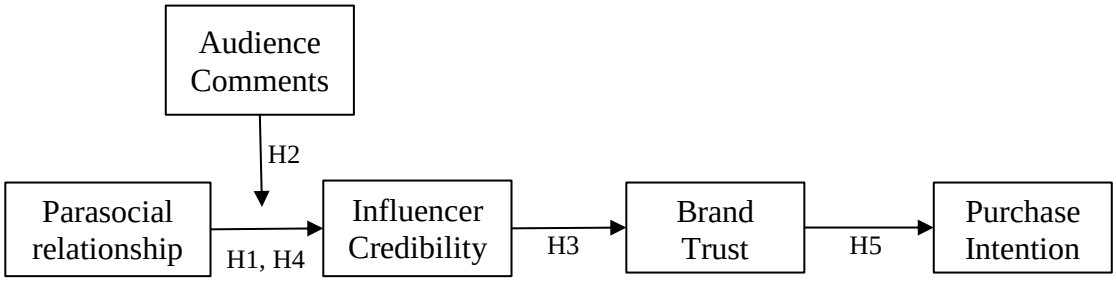
BT contributes to brand and purchase loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and has also been found to moderate the role of sales promotion in purchase decisions (Soni & Verghese, 2018). This suggests that BT can be a building block for purchase

intention (PI), that is, the consumer's willingness to purchase an endorsed product or service (Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991).

Conceptual model and hypotheses

Based on the reviewed literature, the following conceptual model is suggested:

Figure 1. Conceptual model: Parasocial relationship, influencer credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in building brand trust and purchase intention.



Audience members often form strong emotional bonds with social media influencers and engage in PSR with them (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Since the experience of knowing an influencer well (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019) has been found to drive credibility, a PSR with an influencer is expected to act as an antecedent to the influencer's perceived credibility (IC). The first hypothesis is thus as follows:

H1: PSR with a social media influencer positively affects IC.

Despite the relationships that audience members have with influencers, uncertainty can still prevail when it comes to brand endorsements made by influencers. Warrants or cues are, therefore, needed (Walther & Parks, 2002), which can be instantiated through comments made by other people (Walther et al., 2009). Since witnessing other people's interactions seems to enhance PSR (Frederick et al., 2012), although no direct effect between comments and credibility has been found (Hayes & Carr, 2015), the second hypothesis is suggested as follows:

H2: Reading comments made by other audience members moderates the relationship between PSR and IC; thus, reading comments strengthens the relationship between the two constructs.

It has been claimed that trusting relationships can foster further trusting relationships (Luoma-aho, 2018), and that trust can transfer from one target to another (Stewart, 2003). This implies that trust in a social media influencer can also transfer to a brand that the influencer uses or recommends, that is, a brand that he or she trusts. Accordingly, the third and fourth hypotheses are as follows:

H3: IC positively affects BT in the brand that the influencer endorses.

H4: IC mediates the PSR-BT relationship.

BT helps people to deal with the uncertainty they may have when making decisions about brands (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Lee et al., 2011). Since researchers have identified the moderating role of BT in purchase decisions in online shopping (Soni & Verghese, 2018), it seems likely that trust in a brand that an influencer endorses could also influence PI. The final hypothesis is therefore suggested as follows:

H5: Trust in the brand recommended by the influencer positively affects audience members' intention to buy the endorsed brand.

Methodology

Research design

To be able to study an actual endorsement and capture the experiences of real followers, the research was carried out in co-operation with a Finnish online community for young girls. The community features several vloggers on its website. With the assistance of a community manager and a producer, a vlog entry by a female lifestyle vlogger was chosen for the study. The inclusion criteria were a vlogger who had a sizeable audience,

regularly co-operated with brands, and recently uploaded an endorsement video for a brand. The chosen vlogger was a young woman in her 20s, with around 70,000 followers on her YouTube channel. Her videos include different kinds of lifestyle content, but she also gives tips and advice of interest to teenage girls such as what to consider when starting at high school or how to use an epilator. She has a special video concept for giving advice, named 'Big Sis', alluding to her role as a kind of big sister to her followers. The video chosen for the study included an endorsement for a private health-care services provider, which offers, among other things, sexual health services for young women. The service provider is a fairly well-known brand, with over 400 service units around the country. In the video, the vlogger visits a gynaecologist at one of the health clinic's units and openly talks about her experience with the brand. The fact that the video is made in co-operation with the health-care services provider is mentioned in the information box and at the beginning of the video. At the beginning of the video, the vlogger also says, 'This video was done in co-operation with…' and then mentions the name of the endorsed brand.

The study followed an experimental two-way between-subjects design. Two experimental conditions were constructed (audience comments presented/audience comments not presented). The studied video was uploaded, along with a survey questionnaire, on SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire was anonymous. The participants were first asked about their age, and only participants aged 16 or above were allowed to continue filling the questionnaire. The remaining participants were then asked to share their general thoughts about vloggers co-operating with brands. The participants then watched the embedded video. To study the causal effect of exposure to audience comments in the constructed model, two experimental conditions were designed. The participants were directly requested to read the audience comments in the 'audience

comments presented' condition. Thirteen screen shots of actual comments from the influencer's YouTube channel were presented to the respondents in this condition. Since the audience responded well to the video, all shown comments were positive in nature and included praise of the vlogger, such as 'This will really help a lot of people. Great video!' and 'Really nice video!' The comments also included heart emojis and smileys. In the 'audience comments not presented' condition, no such request was made, and no audience comments were presented. Finally, the participants answered a few control and background questions, as well as questions about the perceived credibility of the vlogger, PSR with the vlogger, their trust in the endorsed brand, and their possible intention of purchasing the endorsed service.

Participants

The survey link was shared on the Snapchat channel of the online community that features the vlogger. Three small gift cards and a magazine subscription were offered as raffle prizes for the respondents. During the 24 hours that the link was available, 1,138 respondents opened the link. In the end, the study resulted in 309 questionnaires adequately completed. Seven responses were later omitted from the group that was exposed to audience comments because they responded negatively to the statement 'I read the comments', which was used to confirm manipulation. Thus, the final data sample included 302 responses. The respondents in the final sample were sufficiently and equally distributed across the two manipulated groups (n = 146 'no audience comments'; n = 156 'audience comments'). Most of the respondents were female (99%), 0.3% were males while 0.7% gave no response. Most of the respondents were also 20 years old or younger (98%). The vlogger (mean 4.25, std. 1.75), as well as the endorsed brand (mean 4.19, std. 1.52), was considered moderately familiar to the

respondents (1 = not familiar, 7 = very familiar). The video was mostly regarded as an advertisement, with the mean value of 5.64 (std. 1.26) on a seven-point scale (1 = fully disagree, 7 = fully agree). The majority of the respondents had seen the video before (71%) and had also liked it (93%).

Measures

One independent construct (PSR) and three dependent constructs (IC, BT, and PI) were measured. PSR was measured using an eight-item, seven-point Likert scale adapted from existing scales (Labrecque, 2014; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Quintero Johnson & Patnoe-Woodley, 2016; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). IC was measured using an eleven-item, seven-point Likert scale adapted from existing scales (Morimoto & La Ferle, 2008; Munnukka et al., 2016; Ohanian, 1990). BT was measured using a four-item Likert scale adapted from an existing scale (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). PI was measured using a three-item Likert scale adapted from existing scales (Dodds et al., 1991; Lee & Watkins, 2016). In addition, an independent variable of audience members' comments was measured using a single item on a dichotomous scale (0 = did not read audience comments, 1 = read audience comments) to separate the two experimental conditions in the analyses. The respondents in the latter condition were also presented with the statement 'I read the comments' on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 7 = fully agree) to check for manipulation. The averages of the ratings of PSR, IC, BT, and PI were computed after confirming the scale validity by confirmatory factor analysis, using SPSS Amos software, and were used as single ratings. The single ratings were standardised, so their mean values were set as 0.

Results

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with SPSS Amos was first done to confirm the validity and unidimensionality of the measurement scales. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis with factor loadings are presented in Table 1. The variables loaded well to their assigned factors, with loading values between 0.62 and 0.94. The reliability and validity of the factor constructs were assessed through composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), between-factor correlations, and the square root of AVE values (Table 2). The composite reliabilities (CR) of the constructs were found to be over 0.9, thus demonstrating good internal reliability. Since the AVE values were also clearly above the cut-off value of 0.5, and the square root of the AVEs exceeded the between-factor correlations in the case of each construct, the constructs were assessed as demonstrating adequate convergent and discriminant validity (Ping, 2004).

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Measures and Items	*CFA Loading*
Parasocial Relationship	
I look forward to watching the influencer on her channel.	0.87
If the influencer appeared on another YouTube channel, I would watch that video.	0.74
When I am watching the influencer, I feel as if I am part of her group.	0.84
I think the influencer is like an old friend.	0.80
I would like to meet the influencer in person.	0.82
If there was a story about the influencer in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.	0.77
The influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.	0.80
When the influencer shows me how she feels about the brand, it helps me make up my own mind about the brand.	0.77
Perceived Influencer Credibility	
I feel the influencer is honest.	0.87
I consider the influencer to be trustworthy.	0.86
I feel the influencer is truthful.	0.85
I consider the influencer to be sincere.	0.77
I feel the influencer knows a lot about the service.	0.78
I feel the influencer is competent to make assertions about the service.	0.80
I consider the influencer sufficiently experienced to make assertions about the service.	0.81
I consider the influencer an expert on the service.	0.81
The influencer and I have a lot in common.	0.62
The influencer and I are very alike.	0.62
I can easily identify with the influencer.	0.67
Brand Trust	
I trust this brand.	0.89
I rely on this brand.	0.90
This is an honest brand.	0.92
This brand is safe.	0.87
Purchase Intention	
I consider it likely that I would purchase this service from this brand.	0.92
I consider it possible that I would purchase this service from this brand.	0.79
I consider it probable that I would purchase this service from this brand.	0.94
Audience Members' Comments	
Not reading versus reading audience members' comments	n.a.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations

Measures	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
PI	0.92	0.79	**0.89**				
PSR	0.93	0.64	0.54	**0.80**			
IC	0.94	0.60	0.51	0.75	**0.77**		
BT	0.94	0.80	0.56	0.50	0.63	**0.89**	
OC[1]	n.a.	n.a.	0.01	-0.05	-0.06	-0.10	**n.a.**

Note. [1]= a single item variable on a dichotomous scale. CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; PI = purchase intention; PSR = parasocial relationship; IC = perceived influencer credibility; BT = brand trust; OC = reading other audience members' comments.

Manipulation check

To confirm the manipulation that the respondents who were presented with audience comments had carefully read the comments, a two-item measure on a seven-point Likert-scale (1 = fully disagree, 7 = fully agree) was applied ('I read the audience comments very carefully' and 'I was highly interested in those comments'). The mean value of carefully reading audience comments was 4.63 (std. 1.43) and that of being interested in the comments was 3.74 (std. 1.55). Seven respondents who responded that they had not read the presented comments were removed from the data.

Test of main effects and mediation

The results of testing the main effects and mediation are presented in Table 3. First, the independent direct effects of PSR and IC on BT were assessed. The effects were significant and positive in both cases – IC ($\beta = .66$, $t = 9.95$, $p < .001$) and PSR ($\beta = .67$, $t = 15.68$, $p < .001$). When PSR and IC were included in the same model, the direct effect of PSR on BT turned insignificant ($\beta = -.01$, $t = -0.22$, $p > .05$), thus suggesting the mediating effect of IC between PSR and BT. PSR and IC together explained 45% of the variance of BT. PSR explained 61% of the variance of IC. The indirect effect of PSR on BT was β 0.42. The significance of the indirect effect was further confirmed by the Sobel test ($Z = 9.03$, $p < .001$). Trust in the endorsed brand was found to positively

affect the audience's intention to buy the endorsed brand (β = .58, t = 12.25, p < .001), explaining 33% of the variance of PI.

Table 3. The results of the main effects and mediation

Main effects	**t Value**	**Pr > |t|**	**β**	**R^2**	**Hypothesis**
IC → BT	9.95	< 0.001	0.66	0.45	
PSR → IC	21.64	< 0.001	0.78	0.61	H1
PSR → BT	15.68	< 0.001	0.67	0.45	H3
Mediation					
PSR → BT	-0.22	ns.	-0.01		
PSR → IC	21.64	< 0.001	0.63	0.61	
PSR→IC→BT[1]	9.03	< 0.001	0.42		H4
BT →PI	12.25	< 0.001	0.58	0.33	H5

Note. [1]Sobel test applied; PSR = parasocial relationship; IC = perceived influencer credibility; BT = brand trust;

Test of moderation

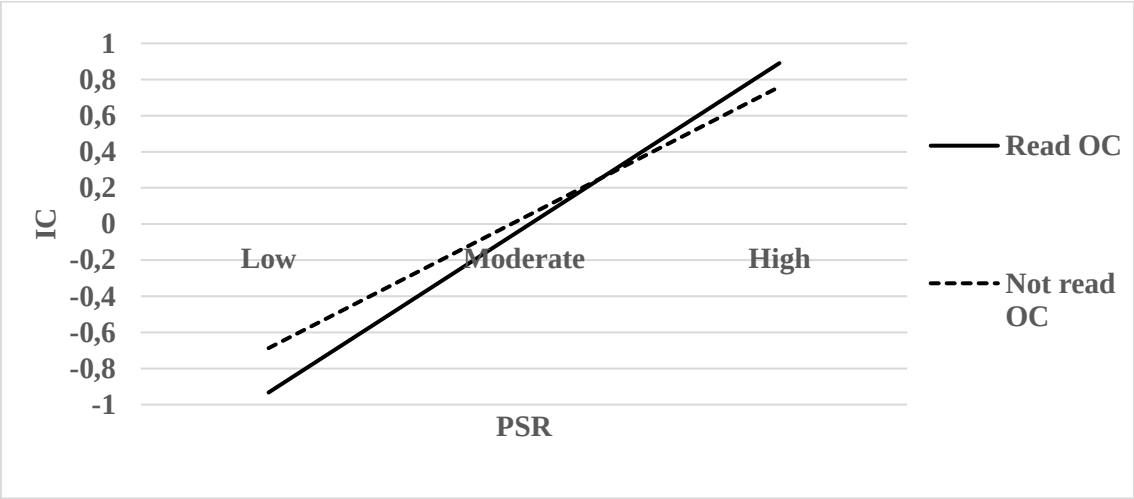
To test the moderation effect of reading other audience members' comments on the PSR–IC relationship, an interaction effect analysis was conducted using the Andrew Hayes PROCESS macro in SPSS. OC was defined as a categorical indicator in the PROCESS macro that is required when conducting interaction effect analysis with a dichotomous variable. The results in Table 4 show that although reading other audience members' comments had no direct effect on IC (β = -.06, t = -0.79, p > 0.05), it had a significant and positive interaction effect with PSR on IC (β = .15, t = 2.61, p < 0.01). The interaction effect is also shown in Figure 2. This suggests that reading other audience members' comments strengthens the PSR–IC relationship. Therefore, the effect of a PSR with the influencer on his or her perceived credibility is stronger when the audience has a chance to review other audience members' comments.

Table 4. Interaction effect analysis

DV = IC	**t Value**	**Pr > |t|**	**β**	**R^2**	**Hypothesis**
PSR	14.14	< 0.001	0.58	0.63	
OC	-0.79	> 0.05	-0.06		
PSR x OC	2.61	< 0.01	0.15		H2

Note: DV = dependent variable; PSR = parasocial relationship; IC = perceived influencer credibility; OC = reading others audience members' comments.

Figure 2. Interaction graph of the effect of PSR x OC on IC



Note: PSR = parasocial relationship; IC = perceived influencer credibility; OC = reading others audience members' comments.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature on endorsement effectiveness and influencer marketing on social media, illuminating the focal role of audience comments. Previous studies showed that audience participation, such as commenting, can contribute to the formation of PSRs between audience members and social media influencers (Munnukka et al., 2019; Rihl & Wegener, 2019). Since the construct of the PSR supports IC (Munnukka et al., 2019), audience participation can also be connected to endorsement effectiveness. This study adds to the previous findings by demonstrating that both participation by audience members and on behalf of other audience members can have an effect on the endorsement the influencer makes, through the constructs of PSR and IC.

No direct effect between comments and IC was observed, which is in line with the findings of Hayes and Carr (2015). However, a moderating effect of audience

comments between the constructs of PSR and IC was found. It would appear, then, that online commenting alone does not necessarily advance the credibility of the endorser and that a relationship (even a parasocial one) with the influencer is essential. Since a parasocial experience between consumers and brand representatives has been found to add to engagement (Men & Tsai, 2013; Pressrove & Pardun, 2016), it seems likely that experiencing PSR with a social media influencer will motivate followers to comment, thereby increasing the credibility of the influencer in the eyes of other audience members. These findings highlight that, when it comes to influencer marketing, it is not just the number of followers the influencer has or the attributes of the influencer that matter, but also the active role that followers play in supporting the social media influencer through commenting. This suggests that social media influencers' ability to create active communities around themselves can also be seen as one of their defining characteristics.

The study also shows that PSR with an influencer can eventually turn into trust in a brand recommended by the influencer, reducing the uncertainty that people might have towards the brand. Since such uncertainty is further reduced by reading comments written by other audience members, there may be a 'virtuous circle' of trust at work, whereby high levels of trust between audience members and the influencer act as a breeding ground for more trust, which may even become institutionalised into the wider society (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). Fostering trust between social media influencers and their audiences can, therefore, be seen as a way of contributing to social capital, the glue that holds communities together, enabling people to collaborate and socialise with each other (Luoma-aho, 2018; Portes, 1998; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993).

However, the virtuous circle could also turn into a vicious circle if the credibility and trustworthiness of the influencer is somehow violated in the eyes of the audience

members. This could happen, for example, through a lack of transparency in disclosing sponsored content (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015) or the publishing of content that is perceived as inauthentic (Luoma-aho, Pirttimäki, Maity, Munnukka, & Reinikainen, 2019), although these kinds of practices seem mainly to harm the influencer rather than the endorsed brand (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Luoma-aho et al., 2019). This suggests that trust and distrust may transfer differently and that although trust in an influencer can turn into trust in brands that the influencer endorses, distrust of the influencer may not necessarily have a similar effect.

A vicious circle may also arise where the claims made by the influencer are somehow incorrect or even harmful. A recent U.K. study showed that many weight-management blogs are providing health information lacking in evidence and transparency and failing to meet the national nutrition criteria (European Association for the Study of Obesity, 2019). A strong, friend-like PSR with an influencer making such false claims might still motivate the followers to comment, thus supporting the influencer and the claims being made, which could amplify the harmful message, even creating a so-called echo chamber – an environment in which consumers are mainly exposed to views that conform to their own (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). The role of audience comments also leads to questions about possible fake comments in boosting the effectiveness of influencer endorsements. Given the claim that new AI systems will soon be as good as human writers (Wakefield, 2019), producing large amounts of fabricated supporting comments could become a reality, with followers being manipulated by fake support.

Finally, the prior evidence about the role of BT in consumers' purchase decisions in the traditional and online shopping contexts (e.g. Chauduri & Holbrook, 2001; Lee et al., 2011; Soni & Verghese, 2018) were found to apply in the social media

context as well. BT appears as an important construct in the context of YouTube endorsements and health-care services when explaining how the endorsement of a brand by a social media influencer leads to increased PI. Furthermore, the findings present PSRs with social media influencers as a focal construct in trust transfer from the social media influencer to the endorsed brand. Therefore, trust transfer seems possible not only between consumers and brands or marketers and brands (Liu et al., 2018) but also between social media influencers and brands, with the audience playing an integral role. Furthermore, the present study also suggests, in the health-care services context, trust transfer and BT in relation to the uncertainty consumers feel towards a brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) are particularly important in understanding the effectiveness of social media brand endorsements on consumers' purchase decisions.

Managerial implications

The results highlight the role of audience comments in building IC and endorsement effectiveness on YouTube. Social media influencers have raised concerns over YouTube's decision to block comments on certain channels and have expressed fears that this could affect their connection with their followers (Alexander, 2019). Questions have also been raised about the possible effects of this decision on influencer marketing. According to the findings of this study, blocking comments on YouTube may be consequential for influencer marketing because seeing other people's comments offers a way for the audience to verify their feelings about the influencer and his or her endorsements. Given that previous studies have shown that interactivity on behalf of the target of the parasocial experience (e.g. an athlete) may enhance PSR (Frederick et al., 2012; Labrecque, 2014), interaction should, in fact, be encouraged. Brands engaging in influencer marketing can also support this by offering influencers enough information

about the endorsed brand, service, or product so that influencers can feel confident about answering questions and comments from their followers.

The results also show the significance of the PSRs that audiences develop with social media influencers. This implies a change in mindset, away from considering the mere size of the audience to considering the influencer's relationship with his or her audience. As the demand for influencer marketing rises, influencers have become selective in their choice of partners (Ember, 2015). Understanding the audience–influencer relationship could become an asset to marketers, as they compete for the best influencers.

In addition, since the interaction between audience and influencer seems to play an important part in building the credibility of the influencer, it is important to consider what motivates the audience to participate and comment. It has been shown that brands often find it difficult to persuade consumers to participate (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016), which indicates that superimposing branded content on an influencer's social media channel may not be the best way to go. Letting go of control and allowing the influencer to decide how the brand is best portrayed in the content may lead to an end result that better motivates the audience to comment.

With regard to influencers, the results imply that in order to be effective endorsers, they need to have the courage to open up their lives and build trusting relationships with their followers. This may be risky, because PSRs are not always positive in nature (Tian & Hoffner, 2010) and may expose influencers to negative relational behaviours, such as criticism (Sanderson, 2009) or even trolling. Continuous self-presentation on social media is a stressful job and interaction with followers takes a lot of time. These, however, seem to be the keys to a successful career as a social media influencer.

On the basis of audience comments, it seems the theme of the video studied was inspiring, and it is possible the benefit for the influencer was not only the compensation obtained for cooperation but also that she was able to portray herself as a 'big sister' to her audience. She is not an expert on health care, but someone who understands and is trusted on issues that are crucial in the lives and minds of young women. By portraying herself in this way, she may even have been able to strengthen her relationship with her followers. Although influencers often allow brands to enter their personal channels only if they are being paid (Archer & Harrigan, 2016), it seems that with the right combination of brand, theme, content, and influencer, the co-operation between influencer and brand can bring benefits other than money for the influencer and trust in the sponsoring brand. A strengthened relationship between the influencer and his or her audience also seems like a possible outcome, meaning that brands could contribute positively to the relationship building between influencers and their followers.

Research limitations and future studies

This study has several limitations but is also offers new avenues for future studies. The research design involved only one vlog and a single video. The findings may be specific to the kind of service, brand, or personality of the vlogger studied here. Future studies should, therefore, test the presented conceptual model and experimental setting on other services, brands, and social media contexts to validate these results. Instagram is increasingly used in influencer marketing, and it would be interesting to test the presented conceptual model using brand endorsement made with Instagram Stories.

The experimental setting was also rather simple, and there might have been additional factors interacting with the constructs of the present model that were not included in the present study. For example, the vlogger replied to some of the comments

that were presented to the respondents of the study and this might have affected the results. To exclude the interference of influencer participation on the results, future studies should test how the impact of comments changes when an influencer participates in the discussions. The setting also included mainly positive audience comments and a positive brand endorsement. The effects might have been different in the case of clearly neutral or even very negative comments and negative or neutral brand endorsements.

As this study concentrated on manipulating only the audience comments, it cannot be confirmed that there is a causal effect between a PSR with the influencer and BT, only a correlation effect. Therefore, it is possible that the respondents would have shown a high trust towards the studied brand even if the social media influencer had not endorsed the brand. To confirm a causal effect, an experimental setting with a manipulation of the PSR could be used in future studies.

The age of the respondents may also explain some of the results, as a clear majority (98%) of the respondents were fairly young (20 years or younger). The respondents can be said to represent a new age cohort, the Generation Z, referring to people born circa 1995–2010 (Priporas, Stylos, & Fotiadis, 2017; Turner, 2015). This generation is regarded as more receptive to advertising featuring social media influencers than earlier generations are (Southgate, 2017). Younger audiences also tend to have more intense parasocial experiences (Kyewski, Szczuka, & Krämer, 2016). Future studies could include comparisons between the different tech-oriented generations – X, Y, and Z.

Finally, the context of the study was YouTube. The most popular application for social media influencers at the moment is Instagram (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), which is also the leading social media application for influencer marketing (Brown, 2019). The

conceptual model presented in this study should, therefore, be tested in the case of a brand endorsement on Instagram to conclude on its comprehensive applicability to influencer marketing.

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