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"DO I CARE THAT YOU ARE CREDIBLE AND WE ARE SIMILAR?" EXAMINING CREDIBILITY AND SIMILARITY AS EXPERIENCED BY SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the roles that similarity and credibility play in the influencer-follower relationship as experienced by followers. The data was collected using face-to-face semi-structured interviews that were conducted with 37 young adults, analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that there were shifts in how followers translated similarity and credibility, transforming the motives behind following influencers. Followers also do not view themselves as having similar values or personality traits to influencers. The level of trust and perceived credibility were lower versus that of existing literature. The study also shows that similarity plays a part in the decision to unfollow. The findings reflect changes in follower behaviour and ultimately the way they consume content from influencers.

KEY WORDS:

credibility, influencer-follower relationship, similarity, social media follower, social media influencer, source credibility theory

1 Introduction

Social media have changed the way brands interact and reach out to consumers. Gone are the days when consumers only received information and marketing messages from brands. Proactive user participation has been identified as one of the crucial attributes of social media. This is where users participate in product reviews and extensive product co-creation.[1] Hennig-Thurau et al. outlined that another fundamental aspect of social media is the extensive network and network effect, where users are able to communicate, create and share content with others.[2] This also fosters similar interest group interaction and a high degree of engagement

1   HENNIG-THURAU, T. et al.: The Impact of New Media on Customer Relationships. In *Journal of Service Research*, 2010, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 311-330.
2   HENNIG-THURAU, T. et al.: The Impact of New Media on Customer Relationships. In *Journal of Service Research*, 2010, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 311-330.

through communication and connection. Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan identified social media as a vital resource in marketing communications.[3]

Brands have recognised the shifts in information options that the average consumer has before making a purchase decision. They utilise social media in a plethora of ways to create awareness, reach out, communicate, and engage with their target audience ranging from electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)[4] to marketing communications[5] with eWOM being defined as product information that is communicated by consumers via the Internet.[6] While various studies prove the effectiveness of eWOM using social media by consumers and users of brands through various methods, for instance, product reviews, there is an increase of brands collaborating with consumers and individuals, referred to as influencers, who have a large online network of friends to generate content such as product endorsements and reviews.

Although a wealth of literature has proven that similarity[7] and credibility[8] are vital in consumers' decision-making on influencer selection, few explore whether they are still vital throughout the lifetime of the influencer-follower relationship. This study examines the changes in similarity and credibility throughout a follower-influencer relationship from the perspective of the follower, and explores the changes that are experienced. If similarity and credibility are key determinants that drive influencer selection, why do followers end up unfollowing? Are similarity and credibility consistently perceived and experienced by followers? This research was designed with these questions in mind.

2 Literature Review

Social Media and Brands

Social media are seen as a tool to attain relationship marketing goals.[9] The Internet has empowered consumers with the increase in terms of information access, options and choice.[10] Such empowerment has brought about changes in the dynamics of brand relationship where companies have less control over the brand and message as consumers now hold the power and possess the ability to both shape[11] and change[12] marketing messages using social media. Consumers have immediate access through social media to a vast resource of information shared by their peers about their product experiences; brands and products that essentially influences and shapes their attitudes and purchase decisions in a positive or negative fashion.[13]

The growth of social media which creates and encourages the continuous sharing of information has immensely influenced both consumer behaviour, and their purchase decision-making.[14] Consumers can access various sites and information sources such as influencers, product review blogs, or even endorsers to obtain various opinions before making a decision. At the same time, consumers themselves also generate content and contribute to the breadth of information on products and brands, when they post, like, blog, retweet or share their experiences via various social media platforms. This has changed the landscape in how digital content is consumed, where consumers are no longer passively obtaining information but they are also proactively creating and sharing content. Thus, we have seen the birth of the terms "prosumer", and "user-generated content" (UCG) where consumers are also producers and contributors of content.[15] Consumers have looked to social media as means for them to share brand experiences and to tell their stories, and to provide information with others through eWOM.[16] Apart from the consumer, social media influencers and celebrity endorsements are other sources of eWOM as well. Studies have shown that celebrity endorsements are considered credible sources in creating positive eWOM.[17]

Social Media Influencers

Consumers are extensively turning to social media platforms as a means of aiding their buying decision processes.[18] There is an exponential increase in the consumption of influencer-generated content[19] as consumers are more unresponsive when consuming content from brands.[20] Studies have found that brand-generated messages lack authenticity and are viewed as intrusive.[21] Consumers found influencers more credible than direct communication from brands,[22] making them powerful marketing resources[23], and making traditional marketing less effective.[24] Brands have switched to using influencers in their social media strategy,[25] with this strategy being increasingly embraced by companies.[26]

Consumers find influencers to be more authentic, reliable and credible.[27] While influencer endorsements lead to monetisation from their followers,[28] the benefit extends beyond the monetary aspect. Scott argues that followers could repost the images on their pages which further increases the visibility of brands to a wider

3   See: KOTLER, P., KARTAJAYA, H., SETIAWAN, I.: *Marketing 3.0: From Products to Customers to the Human Spirit*. Hoboken : Wiley, 2010.
4   EVANS, N. J. et al.: Disclosing Instagram Influencer Advertising: The Effects of Disclosure Language on Advertising Recognition, Attitudes, and Behavioural Intent. In *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 2017, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 138-149.
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6   HENNIG-THURAU, T. et al.: Electronic Word-of-Mouth via Consumer-Opinion Platforms: What Motivates Consumers to Articulate Themselves on the Internet? In *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 2004, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 38-52.
7   KAPITAN, S., SILVERA, D. H.: From Digital Media Influencers to Celebrity Endorsers: Attributions Drive Endorser Effectiveness. In *Marketing Letters*, 2016, Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 553-567.
8   DJAFAROVA, E., RUSHWORTH, C.: Exploring the Credibility of Online Celebrities' Instagram Profiles in Influencing the Purchase Decisions of Young Female Users. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2017, Vol. 68, p. 1-7.
9   HAMBRICK, M. E., SVENSSON, P. G.: Gainline Africa: A Case Study of Sport-for-Development Organizations and the Role of Organizational Relationship Building via Social Media. In *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 2015, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 233-254.
10   LABRECQUE, L. I. et al.: Consumer Power: Evolution in the Digital Age. In *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 2013, Vol. 27, No. 4, p. 257-269.
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12   KAPLAN, A. M., HAENLEIN, M.: Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media. In *Business Horizons*, 2010, Vol. 53, No. 1, p. 59-68.
13   VIRTANEN, H., BJORK, P., SJOSTROM, E.: Follow for Follow: Marketing of a Start-Up Company on Instagram. In *Journal of Small Businesses and Enterprise Development*, 2017, Vol. 24, No. 3, p. 468-848.

14   HENNIG-THURAU, T., HOFACKER, C. F., BLOCHING, B.: Marketing the Pinball Way: Understanding How Social Media Change the Generation of Value for Consumers and Companies. In *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 2013, Vol. 27, No. 4, p. 237-241.
15   ABEZA, G., O'REILLY, N., REID, I.: Relationship Marketing and Social Media in Sport. In *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 2013, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 120-142.
16   CHU, S-C., KIM, Y.: Determinants of Consumer Engagement in Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) in Social Networking Sites. In *International Journal of Advertising*, 2011, Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 47-75.
17   SPRY, A., PAPPU, R., CORNWELL, B. T.: Celebrity Endorsement, Brand Credibility and Brand Equity. In *European Journal of Marketing*, 2011, Vol. 45, No. 6, p. 882-909.
18   ARORA, A. et al.: Measuring Social Media Influencer Index-Insights from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 2019, Vol. 49, No. C, p. 86-101.
19   FINK, M. et al.: Effective Entrepreneurial Marketing on Facebook – A Longitudinal Study. In *Journal of Business Research*, 2020, Vol. 113, No. C, p. 149-157.
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24   See: BROWN, D., HAYES, N.: *Influencer Marketing: Who Really Influences Your Consumers?* Oxford : Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008.
25   KULMALA, M., MESIRANTA, N., TUOMINEN, P.: Organic and Amplified eWOM in Consumer Fashion Blogs. In *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, 2012, Vol. 18, No. 3, p. 229-247.
26   LOU, C., YUAN, S.: Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media. In *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 2019, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 58-73.
27   POYRY, E. et al.: A Call for Authenticity: Audience Responses to Social Media Influencer Endorsements in Strategic Communication. In *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 2019, Vol. 13, No. 4, p. 336-351.
28   ABIDIN, C.: #familygoals: Family Influencers, Calibrated Amateurism, and Justifying Young Digital Labour. In *Social Media + Society*, 2017, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 1-15.

audience.[29] Influencers essentially contribute immensely to consumer enhanced brand awareness[30] and purchase intentions.[31] With the increase in consumers who use ad blockers, the effectiveness of common online advertising has been significantly reduced;[32] hence, brands need to rely on influencers to reach consumers.

Source Credibility Theory

One of the key determinants of success for an influencer is credibility. Consumers choose to follow influencers due to perceived credibility and authenticity where the messages are less commercial and more authentic.[33] Endorser credibility is defined as the degree to which they are considered believable.[34] Jin and Phua found that those with a large number of subscribers are perceived by consumers as not only more attractive but also trustworthy, as propagated by the Source Credibility Theory.[35]

The concept of source credibility is centred upon the idea that attractiveness, knowledge/expertise and trustworthiness in the field of the endorsed product shape the perception that the consumer places on the information source.[36] Yoon, Kim and Kim conducted a study on the prediction of purchase intentions and attitudes toward brand and advertisement and found that attractiveness, knowledge/expertise and trustworthiness were important predictors.[37]

"Attractiveness" refers to the physical appearance and even the perceived personality of the source.[38] This is imperative as it catches the consumers' attention regarding a product or brand,[39] as attractiveness increases positive attitude towards advertising messages.[40]

In terms of "knowledge/expertise", it is defined as the extent to which a source is identified as possessing valid claims.[41] It can also be described as the know-how and competence which an endorser holds that can influence consumers to purchase products.[42] In a study conducted by Amos, Holmes and Strutton, the perception that the receiver or audience has pertaining to the expertise of the source was found to shape the effectiveness of the endorser.[43]

Ohanian defined "trustworthiness" as the level of confidence in the source's intention to convey valid claims.[44] Trustworthiness influences the effectiveness of advertising and leads to successful changes in attitude, positive purchase intentions and positive brand attitude.[45] To attain trustworthiness, there has to be a consistent delivery of promise.[46]

The perceived credibility of eWOM to a certain extent determines its effectiveness on consumer behaviours and attitudes.[47] On the other hand, Chen, Fay and Wang found that various studies on social media advertising asserted that a crucial factor of advertising effectiveness was consumers' attitudes towards it.[48] Sharing information online is seen as a beneficial shared resource.[49] Online friends are seen as effective mediums for information distribution, where eWOM creates a connection; a network of consumers that are connected.[50] While studies have shown that celebrity endorsements are effective,[51] other studies have found that consumers view information to be more credible when it is conveyed by a product reviewer or a blogger. This demonstrates a power and influence shift from traditional celebrities to online bloggers as the latter is perceived to possess more authenticity and accessibility.

Similarity

Apart from credibility, "similarity" also plays a crucial role in defining the relationship between influencer and follower.[52] Similarity or congruence, which is defined as the degree of likeness between follower and influencer, plays an integral role when followers make decisions on influencer selection.[53]

Based on the homophily principle which states that relationships are formed between those who are similar with each other,[54] at the same time, those who possess similarities with each other display a greater propensity to be attracted, trust and understand one another, as opposed to those who are viewed as dissimilar.[55] Similarity is increased when the followers comment on the influencers' posts,[56] as influencers are thought of as relatable and approachable long-distant friends,[57] backed by a sense of closeness that stems from the influencers directly addressing their followers in their posts.[58]

29   See: SCOTT, D.: *The New Rules of Marketing and PR: How to Use Social Media, Online Video, Mobile Applications, Blogs, News Releases and Viral Marketing to Reach Buyers Direct.* New York : Wiley, 2011.
30   HUGHES, C., SWAMINATHAN, V., BROOKS, G.: Driving Brand Engagement Through Online Social Influencers: An Empirical Investigation of Sponsored Blogging Campaigns. In *Journal of Marketing,* 2019, Vol. 83, No. 5, p. 78-96.
31   MARTINEZ-LOPEZ, F. et al.: Behind Influencer Marketing: Key Marketing Decisions and Their Effects on Followers' Responses. In *Journal of Marketing Management,* 2020, Vol. 36, No.7-8, p. 579-607.
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36   METHAQ, A. A. S.: The Impact of Source Credibility on Saudi Consumer's Attitude toward Print Advertisement: The Moderating Role of Brand Familiarity. In *International Journal of Marketing Studies,* 2011, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 63-77.
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38   METHAQ, A. A. S.: The Impact of Source Credibility on Saudi Consumer's Attitude toward Print Advertisement: The Moderating Role of Brand Familiarity. In *International Journal of Marketing Studies,* 2011, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 63-77.
39   GOLDSMITH, R. E., LAFFERTY, B. A., NEWELL, S. J.: The Impact of Corporate Credibility and Celebrity Credibility on Consumer Reaction to Advertisements and Brands. In *Journal of Advertising,* 2000, Vol. 29, No. 3, p. 43-54.
40   BAHRAM, R., et al.: Celebrity Endorser Influence on Attitude Toward Advertisements and Brands. In *European Journal of Social Sciences,* 2010, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 399-407.
41   ERDOGAN, B. Z.: Celebrity Endorsement: A Literature Review. In *Journal of Marketing Management,* 1999, Vol. 15, No. 3, p. 291-314.
42   GOLDSMITH, R. E., LAFFERTY, B. A., NEWELL, S. J.: The Impact of Corporate Credibility and Celebrity Credibility on Consumer Reaction to Advertisements and Brands. In *Journal of Advertising,* 2000, Vol. 29, No. 3, p. 43-54.
43   AMOS, C., HOLMES, G., STRUTTON, D.: Exploring the Relationship between Celebrity Endorser Effects and Advertising Effectiveness. In *International Journal of Advertising,* 2008, Vol. 27, No. 2, p. 209-234.

44   OHANIAN, R.: Construction and Validation of a Scale to Measure Celebrity Endorsers' Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness. In *Journal of Advertising,* 1990, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 39-52.
45   GOLDSMITH, R. E., LAFFERTY, B. A., NEWELL, S. J.: The Impact of Corporate Credibility and Celebrity Credibility on Consumer Reaction to Advertisements and Brands. In *Journal of Advertising,* 2000, Vol. 29, No. 3, p. 43-54.
46   ERDEM, T., SWAIT, J., LOUVIERE, J.: Brand Credibility, Brand Consideration, and Choice. In *Journal of Consumer Research,* 2004, Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 191-198.
47   ERKAN, I., EVANS, C.: The Influence of eWOM in Social Media on Consumers' Purchase Intentions: An Extended Approach to Information Adoption. In *Computers in Human Behavior,* 2016, Vol. 61, p. 47-55.
48   CHEN, Y., FAY, S., WANG, Q.: The Role of Marketing in Social Media: How Online Consumer Reviews Evolve. In *Journal of Interactive Marketing,* 2011, Vol. 25, No. 2, p. 85-94.
49   CHEUNG, C., LEE, M.: What Drives Consumers to Spread Electronic Word of Mouth in Online Consumer-Opinion Platforms? In *Decision Support Systems,* 2012, Vol. 53, No. 1, p. 218-225.
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51   SPRY, A., PAPPU, R., CORNWELL, B. T.: Celebrity Endorsement, Brand Credibility and Brand Equity. In *European Journal of Marketing,* 2011, Vol. 45, No. 6, p. 882-909.
52   KAPITAN, S., SILVERA, D. H.: From Digital Media Influencers to Celebrity Endorsers: Attributions Drive Endorser Effectiveness. In *Marketing Letters,* 2016, Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 553-567.
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58   ERZ, A., CHRISTENSEN, A. B. H.: Transforming Consumers into Brands: Tracing Transformation Processes of the Practice of Blogging. In *Journal of Interactive Marketing,* 2018, Vol. 43, p. 69-82.

Martensen et al. examined how followers experience increased levels of trust and are more persuaded by influencers the greater the similarity between them and the influencers.[59] Followers are able to identify themselves with the influencers as they perceive that they share many things in common such as values, and interests.[60] Studies have shown that the higher the similarity, the more positive consumer evaluations are.[61] Positive attitude positively affects purchase intention,[62] where social media influencers have been found to be effective at influencing purchase behaviour.[63]

3 Method

This study used a qualitative and interpretive approach where data was collected using a semi-structured interview method. The participants were selected based on the following criteria; (1) young adults who were active social media users, (2) those who follow influencers actively on their social media accounts (active refers to checking the influencer accounts at least once a day). The selection criteria were made to ensure that the samples are not only familiar with social media influencers but they also follow them ensuring that they display high engagement levels with influencers.

Data Collection Procedure

The samples were collected using a two-step process. First, using convenience sampling, a simple survey was administered among 243 undergraduate students. The questionnaire addressed the students' social media usage, the influencers that they follow, and their behaviour toward the influencers. Based on the answers, a number of 37 students were recruited using judgment sampling to participate in the interview sessions. The samples were aged $18 – 26$, ($M_{age} = 21.19$, $SD_{age} = 1.79$), with 48.6% male and 51.4% female. The participant profile is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Profile

ID	Gender	Age	Main Social Media Platform	Social Media Usage Frequency	Main Influencer Topic(s)
P1	F	20	*YouTube, Instagram, Twitter*	Very often every day	Fashion, Beauty
P2	M	21	*YouTube, Facebook, LINE*	4 – 5 times per day	Gaming
P3	F	24	*Instagram, LINE*	2 – 3 times every hour	Fashion, Travel
P4	M	22	*YouTube, Instagram, LINE*	4 times per day	Gaming, Fitness
P5	M	21	*YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, LINE*	5 times per day	Gaming, Fashion, Travel
P6	F	22	*Instagram, Facebook, LINE*	6 times per day	Fashion, Fitness, Beauty
P7	M	21	*YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, LINE*	Very often every hour	Travel, Gaming, Tech
P8	M	25	*YouTube, LINE*	4 hours per day	Gaming, Tech, Fashion
P9	F	22	*Instagram, Twitter, LINE*	3 – 4 hours per hour	Food, Fashion, Beauty
P10	F	19	*Instagram, LINE*	A few times every hour	Fashion, Beauty, Travel
P11	F	22	*Instagram, Facebook, LINE*	Very often every day	Fashion, Beauty, Gaming, Tech
P12	F	23	*YouTube, Instagram, LINE*	3 – 4 times per hour	Food, Fashion, Beauty
P13	M	19	*YouTube, Facebook, Twitter*	Very often every day	Gaming, Tech, Fitness
P14	M	20	*Instagram, Facebook, LINE*	6 times per day	Tech, Fitness
P15	F	19	*Instagram, Twitter, LINE*	A few times every hour	Food, Lifestyle, Fashion
P16	M	26	*YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, LINE*	6 – 8 times per day	Gaming, Fitness
P17	F	20	*Instagram, LINE*	4 times per day	Food, Travel. Fashion, Tech
P18	F	21	*Instagram, Twitter, LINE*	Once every hour	Food, Fashion
P19	M	22	*YouTube, Instagram, LINE*	3 times per hour	Gaming, Tech
P20	F	20	*Instagram, Facebook, LINE*	Once every hour	Fashion, Beauty, Travel
P21	F	19	*Instagram, LINE*	4 times per hour	Fashion, Beauty
P22	M	22	*YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, LINE*	4 times per day	Tech
P23	F	23	*Facebook, Twitter, LINE*	A few times every hour	Fashion, Beauty
P24	F	19	*Instagram, LINE*	3 – 4 times per day	Fashion, Food
P25	M	23	*YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LINE*	5 – 6 times per day	Gaming, Tech
P26	F	22	*YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, LINE*	5 hours per day	Fashion, Beauty, Food
P27	F	23	*YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter*	A few times every hour	Gaming, Fashion, Beauty
P28	M	19	*YouTube, Instagram, LINE*	5 – 6 times per day	Fashion, Food
P29	M	22	*YouTube, LINE*	4 hours per day	Gaming, Tech
P30	F	21	*YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LINE*	A few times every hour	Fashion, Food, Travel
P31	M	21	*Instagram, Twitter, LINE*	A few times every hour	Gaming, Tech, Fashion, Travel
P32	F	19	*Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LINE*	5 – 6 times per day	Fashion,
P33	F	20	*Instagram, Facebook, LINE*	Very often every day	Fitness, Fashion
P34	M	19	*Instagram, Twitter, LINE*	3 – 4 times per day	Gaming, Tech
P35	M	20	*YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LINE*	Very often every day	Tech, Fashion, Food
P36	M	20	*YouTube, Twitter, LINE*	A few times every hour	Gaming, Tech, Fashion
P37	M	23	*YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, LINE*	Very often every day	Tech, Fashion

Source: Own processing

There was a pre-established agenda and standard questions as this will act as a means to achieving the maximum feasible level of validity across the data gathered.[64] The interview started with the types of social media that were used to view the digital contents that participants consume on social media. The interview also explored the influencers that they follow and the motivations for following as well as their experience. Participants were asked about their content sharing habits, including the types of contents from the influencer that they share and the reasons for doing so. Scales from Martensen et al. were adapted to shape the questions for "credibility",[65] whereas for "similarity", scales were adapted from Ruef et al.[66] The interview sessions were

59   MARTENSEN, A.: How Citizen Influencers Persuade Their Followers. In *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 2018, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 335-353.
60   KELMAN, H. C.: Interests, Relationships, Identities: Three Central Issues for Individuals and Groups in Negotiating Their Social Environment. In *Annual Review of Psychology*, 2006, Vol. 57, No. 1, p. 1-26.
61   CHOI, S. M., RIFON, N. J.: It Is a Match: The Impact of Congruence between Celebrity Image and Consumer Ideal Self on Endorsement Effectiveness. In *Psychology & Marketing*, 2012, Vol. 29, No. 9, p. 639-650.
62   GOLDSMITH, R. E., LAFFERTY, B. A., NEWELL, S. J.: The Impact of Corporate Credibility and Celebrity Credibility on Consumer Reaction to Advertisements and Brands. In *Journal of Advertising*, 2000, Vol. 29, No. 3, p. 43-54.
63   DJAFAROVA, E., RUSHWORTH, C.: Exploring the Credibility of Online Celebrities' Instagram Profiles in Influencing the Purchase Decisions of Young Female Users. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2017, Vol. 68, p. 1-7.

64   See: WILSON, A.: *Marketing Research – An Integrated Approach*. 2nd Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ : Prentice-Hall, 2006.
65   MARTENSEN, A.: How Citizen Influencers Persuade Their Followers. In *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 2018, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 335-353.
66   RUEF, M., ALDRICH, H., CARTER, N.: The Structure of Founding Teams: Homophily, Strong Ties, and Isolation among US

recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed using thematic analysis that focuses on themes and patterns of behaviour.[67]

Analysis

This study adopted thematic analysis which involved interpreting and categorising data into the different themes that emerged.[68] All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed, followed by coding and identifying recurrent themes.

4 Findings and Discussion

Five main themes emerged from the interviews, namely *credibility and trust are not positively tied together all the time, expectations of credibility differ, similarity not as a prerequisite to follow, similarity as a means of attaining the ideal self,* and *similarity leads to disassociation.* A summary of the themes and sub-themes is offered in Table 2. To provide support for the themes accordingly, verbatim quotes from the interviews are included where appropriate.

Theme 1: Credibility and Trust Are Not Positively Tied Together All the Time

Brands use influencers to drive purchases and build brand loyalty. Influencers have been proven to be not only an effective means of eWOM but also to create higher brand attitude.[69] This stems from influencers being viewed to be more credible.[70] For some participants, while credibility was acknowledged, the level of trust varied:

"He (Influencer) is credible. I believe quite a lot of what he says but not everything."
(Participant 3)

"Those who teach things (not those who sell things) are more credible."
(Participant 14)

"Sometimes it depends on the information. I think sometimes the influencer is a credible source if he is not trying to sell me anything."
(Participant 24)

However, some stated that while the credibility of the influencer got them to follow, the moment they find out that the influencers are paid by brands the followers experience a decline in trust:

"I trust the influencer up till the point that they start receiving money from brands to peddle their products. That makes them not credible sources at all."
(Participant 8)

"Generally, I trust that the influencer is objective. However, that is all gone if they are being paid. Money changes everything."
(Participant 14)

On the other hand, a small majority felt that getting paid does not mean that trust is all lost between follower and influencer. They felt the credibility of the influencer will not be damaged from receiving payment:

"Nothing is for free. It is fine (for the influencer) to get paid. They need to make a living, don't they? If I trust the influencer, it will not matter if they are paid or otherwise."
(Participant 6)

"I am sure it doesn't matter so much if they (influencers) are paid. I am sure they won't risk their reputation by simply endorsing brands and products that could eventually hurt their influencer brand."
(Participant 14)

Theme 2: Expectations of Credibility Differ

The followers' perception toward their relationship with the influencers defines the perceived level of credibility bestowed upon the influencers. The participants were uncertain of the influencers' credibility when they only view them more as sources of information, or a transactional relationship.

"I don't trust them (influencer). I will just take the information and test the products out in the store myself."
(Participant 1)

"I don't believe them 100%. I follow them to get information about what is hot and upcoming and the latest trends and I check (the information) on other sites to make sure that I have the correct information."
(Participant 37)

"Even if I have some similar values with the influencer, I am unsure if what they say is credible."
(Participant 27)

On the other hand, followers who have a more emotional bond with the influencers displayed certainty and confidence in the credibility of the influencers.

"I am close to the influencer. He replies my comments a lot. I think he very well-versed in his area and extremely credible."
(Participant 23)

"I enjoy commenting on the influencer's posts. She likes my replies. She is very famous because everyone knows she is the best."
(Participant 36)

Regardless whether the participants found the influencers to be highly credible or otherwise, they expected influencers to behave in an ethical manner, including disclosing accurate information about whether the product is good or bad. This was an interesting finding in itself since whilst some found the influencers to have lower credibility, and at the same time these followers had lower trust in influencers, yet the expectation for ethical behaviour was high.

"I expect influencers to behave ethically. It doesn't matter if I think they are credible or not."
(Participant 9)

"The ones (influencers) that I follow should be ethical and I expect them to behave that way."
(Participant 14)

Entrepreneurs. In *American Sociological Review*, 2003, Vol. 68, No. 2, p. 195-222.
67   ARONSON, J.: A Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis. In *The Qualitative Report,* 1994, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 1-3.
68   BRAUN, V., CLARKE, V.: Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. In *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 2006, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 77-101.
69   DJAFAROVA, E., RUSHWORTH, C.: Exploring the Credibility of Online Celebrities' Instagram Profiles in Influencing the Purchase Decisions of Young Female Users. In *Computers in Human Behavior,* 2017, Vol. 68, p. 1-7.
70   DE VEIRMAN, M., CAUBERGHE, V., HUDDERS L.: Marketing Through Instagram Influencers: The Impact of Number of Followers and Product Divergence on Brand Attitude. In *International Journal of Advertising,* 2017, Vol. 36, No. 5, p. 798-828.

"Isn't being ethical a basic expectation? I don't know if they are all the time but that (ethical behaviour) should be a basic."
(Participant 25)

Theme 3: Similarity Not as a Prerequisite to Follow

Various studies have consistently found that people tend to follow those whom they can relate to, while others seek to mimic.[71] The participants were asked to identify the qualities and attributes of the influencers that they follow and to discuss whether their values and personality were similar or they could relate to the influencers on a personal level.

Firstly, while the participants followed various kinds of influencers, ranging from health, fashion to skills such as video making, a majority did not find that they were similar personalities and values with the influencers. This was prevalent when followers placed importance on merely gaining specific knowledge and information from the influencers. The followers also viewed their relationship with the influencers as merely transactional, hence shaping different actions, expectations and investment from the followers.

"I follow to get information. That is all. I don't see any similarities in personality or values (between myself and the influencer)."
(Participant 6)

"I won't say the influencer is like me. We are very different in many things but I want to know different perspectives so I follow him."
(Participant 9)

"No, we are not similar for sure. I follow because I respect his dance skills and I want to learn from him."
(Participant 13)

"The influencers whom I follow have different life values from me. It is interesting to see what they do but I do not want to be like them."
(Participant 20)

"I guess I do see some similarities. I mean we are both interested in photography but that is just having similar interests. Not personality or values."
(Participant 26)

"I do not see the similarities but I do think the influencer has good qualities of optimism and effort."
(Participant 36)

While existing literature proves that people tend to follow influencers who are similar to them in terms of values which make them more relatable, the results showed a different set of findings. The participants placed more emphasis on the information that they can obtain from influencers. Similarities seemed to lie only within both having similar interests. They did not identify themselves with the influencers neither did they aspire to become like the influencers. This shows an interesting shift in the way contents are consumed and the perception towards influencers.

Theme 4: Similarity as a Means of Attaining the Ideal Self

Participants seek information from influencers that is new and novel. They also look for information that can inspire and give them new ideas as well as teach them things.

"I chose to follow to get new ideas and suggestions, especially what products and fashion styles are new and upcoming."
(Participant 18)

"I look for products but do not buy everything that is being recommended. I only get tips and ideas and then check them out on other review websites first."
(Participant 21)

"I only follow those who have very good video making skills. I am interested in making videos so I only follow those whom I think can teach me something."
(Participant 24)

On the other hand, there is also the element of sharing information that shapes the type of information that is sought for when participants select influencers to follow. Participants voiced motivation to share what they learned and gained from influencers with those around them and to be seen as a source of invaluable information.

"My friends say I am a source of fashion trends. I usually share what I learned from the influencer with them."
(Participant 21)

"I kind of enjoy sharing the new stuff that I pick up from the influencer. In a way I feel kind of cool being the person who knows more about stuff."
(Participant 27)

The results reflected the theme of regarding influencers as sources of information not for self-consumption but also as a form of social currency. Participants viewed themselves as information intermediaries and focused less on building brand relationships and purchases.

Theme 5: Similarity Leads to Disassociation

Participants have unfollowed influencers whom they have consistently been following closely. They found that while influencers were useful sources of information, they reported to opt to unfollow them when they perceived that there was too much similarity between themselves and the influencer, including the types of information being posted.

This can be explained by the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) that states that people have two types of needs; the need to assimilate and the need to differentiate.[72] Hence, the greater the similarity, the stronger the need for the follower to differentiate and in this case, it leads to either reducing interaction or disassociating through unfollowing the influencer.

"I always unfollow (the influencer) when there is the information is something that I would also post myself. It becomes very boring."
(Participant 2)

71   KI, C.-W., KIM, Y.-K.: The Mechanism by Which Social Media Influencers Persuade Consumers: The Role of Consumers' Desire to Mimic. In *Psychology and Marketing*, 2019, Vol. 36, No. 10, p. 905-922.

72   LEONARDELLI, G. J. et al.: Optimal Distinctiveness Theory: A Framework for Social Identity, Social Cognition, and Intergroup Relations. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 2010, Vol. 43, p. 63-113.

"I definitely have stopped following when each post is just like me talking to myself."
(Participant 17)

"I reduce checking the influencer's posts because I want to be different instead of following the same things that the influencer does. Sure, I followed because we have similar interests but I am still myself. A unique individual."
(Participant 22)

There was a feeling of reduction or loss in the value that they were obtaining from the influencers. While the participants welcomed information and sought information from influencers, the moment they felt they could anticipate the future posts the value of the influencer dropped significantly. The lack of novelty and surprise led to the need to disassociate or reduce checking the influencers' posts.

"I don't like seeing so many similar posts from the influencer. It makes me bored and annoyed."
(Participant 7)

"I followed because I am interested, that is true but it was because I was interested at that moment (I followed). Maybe after that my interest declined because I became more knowledgeable (than the influencer). I wish there was a filter function so I get only contents when I want and what I want."
(Participant 30)

"I only unfollowed one influencer. She always posted very long posts and even when I have not read it, I already knew what she would post (her contents are always the same type). I was so irritated that I unfollowed her."
(Participant 33)

"I just want to see content that is novel. We can be somewhat similar yet she (influencer) should post exciting surprises instead of predictable. Similar doesn't mean she must be boring or become my virtual twin."
(Participant 35)

Table 2: Summary of themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Credibility and trust are not positively tied together all the time.	Level of trust varies even when credibility is acknowledged.	Credibility acknowledged by the follower but there the trust that they place in the influencers differs based on the actions of the influencer (for example, selling a product vs teaching will lead to different levels of trust).
	Credibility does not guarantee trust.	Credibility can exist; however, trust depends on whether the influencer is being paid for the endorsements.
Expectations of credibility differ.	Type of relationship and perception towards influencers determine the perceived level of credibility.	Transactional relationships do not require a high level of perceived credibility.
	Ethical behaviour is not dependent on credibility.	Credibility does not affect the ethical expectations placed on the influencers by the followers.
Similarity not as a prerequisite to follow.	Followers select influencers based on what they seek to learn/acquire.	Influencer selection depends of the objective of the followers.
	Followers maintain a transactional relationship with influencers.	Similarity is not the main determinant as followers are interested in merely getting information, and less interested in establishing bonds.
Similarity from as a means of attaining the ideal self.	Influencer selection is based on similarity to ideal self.	Followers choose influencers with the hopes of attaining their ideal selves.
	Followers view some similarity that need further development to reach ideal state.	Followers see some similarities between themselves and influencers, and hope that they (followers) are able to develop themselves further from this relationship to reach their ideal selves.
Similarity leads to disassociation.	A high degree of similarity causes followers to unfollow.	When there is a high degree of similarity, followers feel the need to differentiate.
	Followers perceive that there is no more value that can be obtained from following the influencer.	Influencers are viewed as too similar to followers, which creates lack of novelty in content, and thus reduces their value.

Source: Own processing

5 Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on social media from the perspective of followers. First, the findings underline a change in the way followers view influencers. Influencers who gain more trust and are viewed to possess expertise that builds their credibility, have been proven in various studies to be more effective.[73] However, the results from this study show that followers tend to be unsure of the credibility of influencers and display less trust and are therefore less emotionally vested. The increase in brands using influencers and the rise of paid endorsements have caused a shift in how consumers and followers view influencers. There is more doubt and scepticism on the part of the consumer and follower when it comes to brand recommendation and endorsement. However, as the relationship seems to be more transactional, followers tend to only view the information independent of the influencers' level of credibility.

This study also showed that unlike existing literature suggests, similarity in values and ability to relate do not play a strong determining role in follower-influencer relationship and dynamics. The findings show that most followers focused mainly on gaining new ideas, and information that would be of benefit to them, either through personal consumption or as a means of creating and building social currency. They are aware that the influencer is different from them; however, they are still following as the content fits their interests, highlighting the determinant of influencer selection being more transactional than emotional. Followers, on the other hand, select influencers based on the perception that the influencers can propel them towards attaining their state of ideal selves. On the other hand, too much similarity triggers disassociation, often leading the follower to unfollow the influencer.

It should be noted that this study was conducted within a small pool of 37 participants. Further investigation is recommended with a larger sample size from a broader age group as well as from different geographic regions. This could help to explore if demographic and geographic aspects would influence the findings. Apart from that, as the study revealed several key aspects that were important that led to the act of following and unfollowing influencers, further study using quantitative methods should be undertaken to understand the strength of the relationships between the different variables as well as to explore if different clusters of followers can be uncovered.

Different themes surfaced from this study, which warrants future research. The gap between credibility and ethical expectations makes this an interesting area to explore. First, the reasons that cause this gap to exist should be investigated and proper constructs determined. The attitudes, perception and values of followers followed by their perception towards influencers could form the first step. Another area that is of interest is the optimum amount of similarity in order to prevent disassociation.

Future research should also consider the different constructs in understanding how to extend the length of relationship between follower and influencer as well as the constructs involved in the act of refollowing. Quantitative methods should be adopted in future studies accordingly.

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