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What Drives Engagement and Disengagement with Social Media Influencers?

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Abstract

Social media influencers (SMIs) offer marketers a new communication method called "influencer marketing", whereby they can promote and connect brands with audiences through their narratives and content. The level of engagement between the SMIs and their audience is an important criterion to be included in influencer marketing campaigns. Accordingly, this research explored the factors that lead to engagement and disengagement with SMIs to provide insights to SMIs for crafting their marketing strategy and to marketers to understand what to look for in a successful influencer. The results showed that an SMI's characteristics (authenticity, trustworthiness, expertise, social responsibility and legitimacy), content-related (informativeness and entertainment) and relational factors (parasocial interaction, influencer-self congruency, influencer commitment and role modelling) have a role in engaging with them. The results, on the other hand, also showed that there is no symmetry between what lead to engagement and what led to disengagement with influencers.

Keywords: Social media influencers; Influencer marketing; Engagement; Disengagement

Introduction

With the popularization of the Internet and social media, social media influencers have become powerful means of marketing communication. SMIs are known for their expertise in specific fields, competency to create valuable content and large number of followers on social media channels (Lou and Yuan, 2018). They express their opinions, offer tips on product usage and post pictures, videos or stories of products and services on their social media accounts, giving the impression that this content comes from "a person like you or me"- a non-cunning consumer [1]. Research [2] shows that 72 percent of Millennial and Generation Z consumers follow at least one influencer on social media, and 50 percent take SMIs' product suggestions into consideration, trusting their opinions about products or services. The power of SMIs has led marketers to develop a new communication method called "influencer marketing" whereby marketers collaborate with SMIs and use their content to promote and connect brands

with audiences [3,4]. Influencer marketing is described as a highly popular and effective form of marketing and is expected to become a 9.7-billion-dollar industry in 2020. Ninety percent of influencer marketing activities take place on Instagram, with an average earned media value of 5.78 dollars for every dollar spent [5].

SMIs are most commonly used in the fashion industry for endorsement [1]. Fashionistas such as Chiara Ferragni play prominent roles in the fashion industry, introducing branded designs to their followers by posting photos of themselves wearing the designs on their social media accounts [6]. The role of SMIs in fashion marketing is undeniable. However, the question is how to choose among SMIs to collaborate with in marketing campaigns. Influencers' business models are based on algorithms, which are grounded in the level of engagement between content creators and content consumers [7]. The success of SMIs is highly dependent on the interaction and engagement they achieve with



their audiences, and SMI engagement is measured by the number of followers, comments on their content and shares [8]. In other words, followers and their engagement with SMIs are instrumental in the sustainability of SMIs' business in the influencer marketing industry. The aim of the present study is to uncover the factors linked to online engagement or disengagement with SMIs through an exploratory research methodology. Previous research has identified several criteria for successful SMIs, such as authenticity [6], trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise [1], message value [9], originality, quality, uniqueness [10], homophily and parasocial interaction [11]. However, there is still a call for more research on SMIs, given the novelty and popularity of the subject [1].

Exploratory Research

An in-depth interview method was applied to explore the participants' thoughts and experiences to understand what leads to online engagement or disengagement with SMIs. In this study, the researchers explored the possibilities of new factors not mentioned previously in the literature. A total of 31 in-depth interviews were conducted with university students (20 females and 11 males) who followed at least one influencer on social media. The average age of the respondents was 21.5, and all of them were single. The appropriate number of interviews was determined by data saturation [12], which occurs when no new information or themes

emerge—this was achieved during the 31st interview. The research was conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire exploring participants' social media usage, influencer image, characteristics and reasons for online engagement or disengagement. The interviews were voice recorded, transcribed and coded after a thorough analysis. As a first step, all transcribed records were checked for accuracy and thoroughly examined as part of familiarization efforts. Second, important phrases in the transcripts were grouped into initial codes, enabling a more condensed point of view. After identifying similar wordings and answers in the transcripts, general themes were established according to relationships within the initial findings; these themes were then reviewed, defined and named. This six-phase approach was adopted by Braun V, et al. [13] in their approach to thematic analysis.

The data analysis showed that factors leading to online engagement with SMIs include authenticity, trustworthiness, expertise, informativeness, role modelling, entertainment, parasocial interaction relationships, influencer commitment, the degree of congruence between oneself and an influencer, legitimacy and socially responsible behavior. The factors leading to disengagement with SMIs, on the other hand, were commercialization, lack of entertainment, lack of trustworthiness and poor role modelling. Figure 1 summarizes the findings of the research.

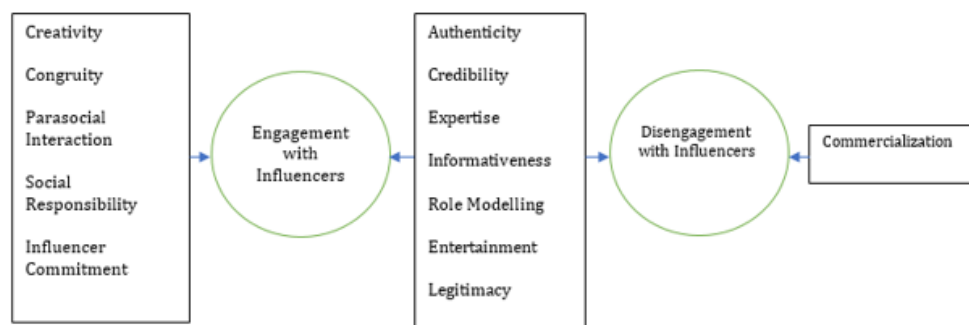


Figure 1.

Authenticity was reported as an important characteristic in an SMI. Participants stressed that if an SMI is genuine and credible, distinguishes themselves from others by being unique and providing original contents without changing their personality over time, they are worth interacting with. Followers also attached great importance to an SMI being knowledgeable about the contents discussed or featured on their channels and expect SMIs to provide honest reviews and recommendations—trustworthiness and expertise were considered essential factors. Participants expected SMIs to be trustworthy, conventional sources of information through which they could learn more about their areas of interest. In a more personal perspective linked to informativeness, participants expected SMIs to be role models who could inspire

and teach their followers. Another essential dimension confirmed in this exploratory study is entertainment. The participants stated that SMIs should be pleasant to watch, entertain their followers and provide interesting contents. Having fun and spending enjoyable time on social media with SMIs plays an important role in followers' online engagement with them.

Influencer–follower relationships and the harmony between them were also important reasons to engage with SMIs. Participants engaged with SMIs if they saw the SMI as part of their social circle, as a real friend—in other words, if the participant formed a parasocial interaction relationship. They even anticipated commitment from SMIs; they wanted the SMI to care for them in return and act with the followers' interests in mind. Additionally, followers expected

influencer-self congruency with regard to values and personality. Some participants expressed the importance of SMIs' legitimacy and their conformity with community values and norms in general. Finally, followers expected SMIs to be socially responsible and support current social causes, such as gender equality, anti-racism and environmental sustainability.

The most important reason to disengage with SMIs, on the other hand, was commercialization. Sharing too much sponsored content and prioritizing profits in content creation eventually led to distrust among followers of SMIs. Commercialization was also reported to negatively affect other dimensions, such as source credibility, authenticity, informativeness and entertainment. Lack of legitimacy was another important dimension affecting unfollowing or unsubscription behaviors among followers. Incompatibility of SMIs with community values, norms and moral principles was a redline for most followers. Participants reported racism, abusiveness and use of offensive language, in addition to differences of opinion in politics and morals, as reasons to end their online engagement with influencers.

Conclusion

The results of the study showed that not all reasons for engaging or disengaging with SMIs provide symmetrical results. Commercialization, for example, was a reason to disengage; however, a lack of commercialization did not assure engagement with SMIs. On the other hand, all of the factors mentioned in the research can be categorized as SMIs' characteristic (authenticity, trustworthiness, expertise, social responsibility and legitimacy), content-related (informativeness and entertainment) or relational factors (parasocial interaction, influencer-self congruency, influencer commitment and role modelling). Thus, to obtain engagement, SMIs need to consider how to integrate various aspects. Similarly, brand managers should consider these dimensions when deciding which influencer to work with for endorsement. Acting socially responsible appears as a new dimension affecting engagement and disengagement with SMIs. In future studies, researchers may consider all the dimensions uncovered in this research and explore their effects on SMI engagement and disengagement in quantitative research.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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