

#PAIDPARTNERSHIP: HOW DO INFLUENCERS SHAPE CUSTOMER DECISION  
JOURNEY?

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#PAIDPARTNERSHIP: HOW DO INFLUENCERS SHAPE CUSTOMER DECISION  
JOURNEY?

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By Gözde Baycur Keçeci

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## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Gözde Baycur Keçeci, certify that

- I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have fully acknowledged and documented in my thesis all sources of ideas and words, including digital resources, which have been produced or published by another person or institution;
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## ABSTRACT

### #Paidpartnership: How Do Influencers Shape Customer Decision Journey?

Social media has enabled consumers to share their consumption experiences and recommendations via user-generated content. Some content creators who are called “influencers”, have differentiated due to their superior communication skills, perceived credibility, attractiveness, or expertise, attained popularity, and attracted brands as a new marketing communication channel. In addition to the attention of marketing practitioners, influencer marketing has received growing scholar attention; however, academic studies in the area are fragmented and the understanding of factors affecting the success of influencer endorsement and the impact on marketing outcomes is limited. The main contribution of this study is to develop a new construct that we name “influencer image”, whose underlying dimensions are, trustworthiness, authenticity, perceived expertise, physical attractiveness, popularity, and responsiveness; developing and validating a scale to measure it; and proposing a holistic model to predict the impact on brand awareness, brand attitude and purchase intention. After a comprehensive literature review and an exploratory qualitative study, an online survey is used to collect data from 1100 social media users and structural equation modeling (SEM) is used to test the hypothesized model. The findings demonstrated that influencer image directly contributes to brand awareness and brand attitude and indirectly contributes to purchase intention. The impact of influencer-brand fit on influencer image, brand awareness and brand attitude is positive and significant, and it indirectly contributes to purchase intention. The intensity of social media usage moderated the relationship. Theoretical and practical implications and predictions about the future of influencer marketing are discussed.

## ÖZET

#Ücretliortaklık: Influencer’lar Müşteri Karar Verme Yolculuğunu Nasıl Etkiler?

Sosyal medya, tüketicilerin tüketim deneyimlerini ve tavsiyelerini kullanıcı tarafından oluşturulan içerikler aracılığıyla paylaşmalarını sağlamıştır. “Influencer” olarak adlandırılan bazı içerik üreticileri, üstün iletişim becerileri, algılanan güvenilirlik, çekicilik veya uzmanlık nedeniyle farklılaşmış, popülerlik kazanmış ve yeni bir pazarlama iletişim kanalı olarak markaları kendine çekmiştir. Pazarlama pratiklerinin yanı sıra, influencer pazarlaması akademide de giderek artan bir ilgi görmüştür; ancak, bu alandaki akademik çalışmalar parçalıdır ve influencer kampanyalarının başarısını etkileyen faktörlerin ve pazarlama sonuçları üzerindeki etkisinin anlaşılması sınırlıdır. Bu çalışma, altta yatan boyutları güvenilirlik, samimiyet algılanan uzmanlık, çekicilik, , popülerlik ve yanıt verebilirlik olan yeni bir yapı -influencer imajı- geliştirerek bu boşluğu doldurmayı, bir ölçek geliştirmeyi ve influencer imajının marka farkındalığı, marka tutumu ve satın alma niyeti üzerindeki etkisini test etmek için bütünsel bir model önermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Kapsamlı bir literatür taraması ve keşifleyici nitel bir çalışmadan sonra, 1100 sosyal medya kullanıcılarından çevrimiçi anketle veri toplanmış ve yapısal eşitlik modellemesi (YEM) ile teorik model test edilmiştir. Bulgular, influencer imajının marka farkındalığına ve marka tutumuna doğrudan, satın alma niyetine ise dolaylı olarak katkıda bulunduğunu göstermiştir. Influencer-marka uyumunun influencer imajı, marka farkındalığı ve marka tutumuna doğrudan ve satın alma niyetine dolaylı olarak katkısı desteklenmiştir. Yüksek ve düşük yoğunluklu sosyal medya kullanan gruplar istatistiksel olarak anlamlı şekilde birbirinden ayrılmıştır. Influencer

pazarlamasının geleceęi ile ilgili teorik ve pratik ıkarımlar ve tahminler tartıřmasına da yer verilmiřtir.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AMOS Analysis of Moment Structures

AU Authenticity

AVE Average Variance Extracted

AW Brand Awareness

BA Brand Attitude

CFA Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFI Comparative Fit Index

CMIN/DF Chi-square/Degrees of Freedom

CR Composite Reliability

Df Degrees of Freedom

EFA Exploratory Factor Analysis

EX Perceived Expertise

FIT Influencer Brand Fit

GOF Goodness of Fit

INIM Influencer Image

KMO-MSA Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy

MLE Maximum Likelihood Estimation

MSV Maximum Shared Variance

NFI Normed Fit Index

PA Physical Attractiveness

PO Popularity

R Responsiveness

RMSEA Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

SEM Structural Equation Modeling

SNS Social Network Site

TLI Tucker Lewis Index

TR Trustworthiness

UGC User Generated Content

WOM Word of Mouth

WOMM Word of Mouth Marketing



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Motivation of the study

In 2020, when billions of people around the world are under lockdown and social distancing due to Covid-19 pandemic, number of social media users rose at the fastest rate in three years and reached to 4.20 billion (wearesocial.com, 2021). While the number of internet users have been rising sharply and mobile devices' penetration have been increasing, computer mediated environments started be more influential on consumption decisions (Kozinets, 1999, 2002), traditional marketing communication practices have changed dramatically (Alalwan, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017; Appel, Hadi & Stephen, 2020) . Since 2004, the beginning of Web 2.0, the web has transformed into an interactive and participatory space. User generated content (UGC) has gained considerable attention and started to dominate the web (Freeman & Chapman, 2007).

The rise of Web 2.0 and social media has brought two main revolutions to the marketing arena: First, brands got a chance to communicate with customers in a more rapid, easy and interactive way; the reach of their messages have enlarged. Second, user generated content on the web which includes product reviews, recommendations and complaints have made marketers rethink word of mouth. Brand communication used to be one-way in the pre-web 2.0 era and brands had all the power. However, the new way of communication altered the power relationship in a more democratized way (Niederhoffer et al., 2007). Although this revolution is challenging, it also enabled brands to communicate with users in a more creative way and led to value co creation (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014).

Social media users who create content about product evaluations, recommendations, brand experiences have started to influence the attitude toward the brand, emotion and purchase intention of other users to whom they communicate in social network sites (SNSs) (Dwivedi et al., 2020). Some content creators in SNSs gained more influential power compared to other users thanks to their credibility, expertise, attractiveness or charisma (Audrezet, Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Those social media content creators who influence lifestyle choices of their followers attained fame (Tan, 2017). When brands realized the power and impact of these influential content creators in SNSs or “influencers”, they allocated most of their marketing budget for collaborations with them for sponsored content (Nafees et al., 2021). Influencers positioned them as niche marketing communication channels to spread the brand messages in a more influential way (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). The shift from traditional communication channels to influencers led to a new era in marketing, called “influencer marketing” (Brown & Hayes, 2007; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

The rise of influencer marketing has its roots in Web 2.0, however, influencer marketing dates back to a much earlier era. In order to communicate their messages via credible sources, brands have collaborated with influencers for decades (Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). The first wave of influencer marketing was the era in which brands cooperated with celebrities and professionals to endorse their products (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1985; Erdogan, 1999; McCracken, 1989). Rock stars in coke advertisements or dieticians who recommend a specific yoghurt brand were the first example of influencers in the marketing context. Since consumers trust and respect professionals and admire celebrities, they were perceived as credible sources (Ohanian, 1990, 1991). Communication in the first era was one way and

limited to mainstream traditional media. Direct communication with celebrities was nearly impossible and their visibility was fully controlled by public relations specialists (Chung & Cho, 2017). Therefore, celebrity endorsers were not seen by the public as frequently as celebrity endorsement ads.

Word of mouth (WOM) is one of the most powerful resources that shapes consumers preferences and WOM is the main logic behind influencer marketing since influencers use WOM power to shape consumer decisions. Web 2.0 has been an era in which communication shifted from traditional media to the internet, which enabled internet users to share their opinion, experiences, information or WOM communications rapidly and easily as never before. We define the second wave of influencers as content generators on the web, such as bloggers or commenters in forums, who start online marketing-related communication or eWOM. The aim of content creators in this era was purely sharing information to help others and enjoying the popularity of their blogs. This era is conceptualized by Kozinets et al. (2010) as “The Organic Interconsumer Influence Model”. The influence and eWOM was defined as organic since there is no intervention or financial benefit from marketers. However, the popularity influencers get in the “blogosphere” was not generating revenue for bloggers, blogging was an amateur hobby rather than a profession.

When brands have discovered the power of branded content on the web that is not controllable yet and the huge potential of social media for marketing communication, the third wave has started. Kozinets et al. (2010) stated that the next stage of word of mouth marketing (WOMM) was “The Linear Marketing Influence Model” and the concept was parallel to what we call the third wave. This era is shaped by a linear relationship among brand, influencer and consumers. Marketers

make payments and send gifts to opinion leaders/ influencers and influencers disseminate desired marketing messages. Brand-influencer relationships have started with sending products to bloggers to try, however, as influencers have become professional content creators, monetary compensations were demanded and influencers have become the most popular marketing communication channel for most brands (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Lu, Chang & Chang, 2014).

Influencer marketing industry is estimated to exceed 13.8 billion dollars in 2021 (influencermarketinghub.com, 2021). In 2021, more companies are investing in influencer marketing and boosting their spending for influencers. “The State of Influencer Marketing 2021” report (Linqia, 2021) demonstrated that 71% of marketers plan to increase their influencer marketing budget. Influencer marketing industry and marketers’ intention to engage in influencer marketing activities are steadily increasing; yet, what marketers know about influencer marketing is not as much as what is unknown. Marketers need a grounded and comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon to capitalize on influencer marketing (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Although influencer marketing is top of mind for marketing practitioners, academic studies focusing on influencer marketing are still scarce (Torres, Augusto & Matos, 2019). The history of blogging on Instagram and YouTube is not longer than a decade, the entrance of brands in that arena to sponsor content is much more recent. Therefore, inclusion of that topic to marketing literature is in its infancy stage. In spite of a mounting academic interest in the past five years, research in this field is fragmented, partial and divergent (Vrontis et al., 2021). In spite of consensus on effectiveness of influencers’ posts on consumption decisions of their followers, to understand how influencers shape consumer behavior and attitude more grounded

empirical research is needed (Lou & Yuan, 2018; Wiedmann & Mettenheim, 2020). Backaler (2019) claims that most articles on influencer marketing are concentrating on tactics, not strategies. However, in order to maximize the impact of influencer marketing, a strategic marketing plan, not short term tactical campaigns should be implemented. More academic attempts are called on to define a successful influencer marketing strategy. This study creates a comprehensive framework to help practitioners to develop a sound strategic plan for influencer marketing.

The proposed study fills the research gap in influencer marketing by proposing a theoretical model which explains how influencers shape customer decision making journey. There is a mounting interest in revealing influencer qualities which lead to desired marketing outcomes (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Lee & Kim, 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Most studies on influencer marketing adopts credibility construct from communication literature and examines its impact on desired brand outcomes. However, credibility construct does not fully explain qualities that contribute to effectiveness of endorsements. The digital context brought the quest for a new construct which includes credibility yet goes beyond it. Thus, this study proposes a new construct, that we coin “influencer image” which is tailor made for digital influencers and expected to be a better predictor of consumer response when compared to credibility construct. Since influencer marketing in its infancy stage, new constructs and adaptation of well-established marketing constructs to influencer marketing is an urgent need that we addressed. Influencer image construct that we developed and validated, is a multidimensional construct that is more comprehensive since its underlying dimensions include credibility related perceived expertise, trustworthiness, authenticity, physical attractiveness, popularity as well as a relationship measure, responsiveness.

Although most studies in the literature overemphasize the impact of influencer qualities (mostly credibility) on endorsement effectiveness, they generally overlook other factors that can potentially affect the success of the endorsement. Besides influencer (source) characteristics and its outcomes, this study includes content (message) and follower (receiver) related variables such as frequency of branded post, brand prominence in the branded post and time the respondent spends in social media and measures the effect of these factors on brand awareness, brand attitude and purchase intention.

While influencer marketing literature is growing, exploratory search is an urgent need which will combine quantitative and qualitative techniques. In depth interviews with brands, influencers and followers are employed in this study to gather rich information which will lead to a better understanding of the ecosystem that brands, influencers and followers interplay.

This study contributes to both marketing literature and marketing practice. Influencer image construct we developed and a valid scale to measure it will be used in further studies in different contexts and hypothetical models. To the best of our knowledge, the proposed model of the present study is unique since it combines influencer, content and follower related predictors of marketing outcomes therefore we hope to contribute to the field to make it more fertile for further studies. To achieve this objective, the present study will conceptually define influencer image and develop a valid and reliable scale.

Besides academic contribution, practical contribution of the study is expected to increase effectiveness of influencer marketing activities of brands. Although influencer collaborations are very popular, little is known about how to choose the right influencer, the attitude of consumers toward endorsed brands, factors affecting

the success of collaborations. This study is proposing influencer image as a useful tool to select the most suitable influencers which is a big challenge for marketers. We expect practical usage of influencer image scale by influencer agencies and brands will lead to achieve better influencer-brand-campaign fit. Findings of this study will shade light on influencer marketing activities and help managers to make more informed decisions.

Understanding the ecosystem of influencer marketing will not only increase revenue of brands and influencers, but also will offer benefits for consumers. When consumers' reaction toward influencer collaborations and antecedents of these reactions are revealed empirically, influencers and brands better respond to consumers and thrive to create better value for consumers.

## 1.2 Research questions

Research questions that will be addressed in the qualitative and quantitative study are:

- How are social media usage habits of consumers?: The first purpose of the study is to understand how consumers use social media. In depth interviews explored social media usage habits of respondents such as daily time spent on social media, usage frequency, most frequently used social media channels, content type they consume most and motivation to use social media.
- How do consumers perceive influencers and influencer marketing?: Previous research presented conflicting findings about how consumers perceive influencer endorsements. While some studies indicated that consumers' attitude is negative towards influencer marketing since it ruins the authentic social media environment, others argue that consumers' attitude towards

influencer marketing is much more positive compared to traditional advertising, since they perceive it as more authentic and trustworthy. We aim to explore factors that build trust towards influencers. This research contributes to the understanding of consumers' attitude towards influencers and influencer marketing.

- Why do people follow influencers?: People may have different motivations to follow influencers such as entertainment, keeping up with trends, being inspired and being informed. This study aims to discover these motivations.
- How can we describe and measure influencer image?: This study coined a new construct, influencer image to define qualities of the influencer that contributes to effectiveness of endorsements and proposes a scale to measure it. Hypothesized dimensions of influencer image are trustworthiness, perceived expertise, popularity, authenticity, physical attractiveness and responsiveness and we aim to explore how do these dimensions contribute to influencer image
- Does influencer-brand fit affect success of influencer collaborations?: Previous studies provide evidence that when there is a perceived perfect match, the effectiveness of the endorsement is higher. We aim to test the impact of the fit to understand if it is more likely to achieve desired marketing outcomes such as brand awareness, brand attitude, purchase intention. This study also explored how influencers and brands perceive fit concept and how they find perfectly matching partners.
- How does the frequency of brand endorsements affect success? When the frequency of collaborations increases, it may destroy the authenticity and trustworthiness of the influencers yet some studies argued that when



frequency is under a certain threshold, the awareness is low. This study aims to understand the consequences of branded posts' frequency and reveal which type of social media users are more sensitive to frequency of branded content.

### 1.3 Methodology

This study employed mixed methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques since influencer marketing is a new research stream calls for in depth understanding of attitudes and behavior of stakeholders in the influencer ecosystem. The first part of the study was qualitative, twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with influencers, social media users and brand executives. For the second (quantitative) part, combining the insights from in depth interviews and findings from previous literature, we developed a hypothetical model. The measurement instrument used in this study is developed by adopting from scales tested in previous research and when needed we developed original items. Data collected from a sample of 1100 respondents whose demographics are detailed in Chapter 5. Structural equation modeling (SEM) is used to test the hypothesized model.

### 1.4 Findings and implications

The main contribution of the study is to develop a new construct that we coined “influencer image”. Most previous studies were using credibility construct adopted from celebrity endorsement research; however this construct had some shortcomings to cover all qualities of the influencer. Influencer image construct we developed is a multidimensional construct whose underlying dimensions are trustworthiness, authenticity, perceived expertness, popularity, physical attractiveness and responsiveness.

EFA and CFA were conducted to test the dimensional structure of the influencer image construct and following that, structural model was tested to explore the relationship of influencer image with marketing outcomes such as brand awareness, brand attitude and purchase intention. Findings demonstrated that influencer image directly contributes to brand awareness and brand attitude and indirectly contributes to purchase intention. The impact of influencer-brand fit on influencer image, brand awareness and brand attitude is positive and significant and it indirectly contributes to purchase intention.

We hypothesized that the consequences of influencer image would differ for consumers who use social media for long hours (high intensity users) compared to consumers who spend less time (low intensity users). Social media usage moderated the relationship as hypothesized. For both groups, influencer - brand fit positively affects influencer image, brand awareness and purchase intention; however, for high social media intensity group, there is no significant change in brand attitude. We can conclude that high social media intensity group is accustomed to influencer endorsements and they see many as a result of long hours on Instagram and brand attitude remain unchanged whether there is a good fit or not although fit has an impact on influencer image for both groups. It can be concluded that heavy users hold influencers responsible for collaborating with a good match, and ignore the responsibility of brand.

In spite of the positive effect of influencer image on brand awareness, this effect is not significant for high social media usage intensity group. Since high intensity social media users are exposed to many branded posts on Instagram, brand awareness is difficult to raise even if the influencer has a very positive image.

### 1.5 Outline of the study

Initially theoretical background on Opinion Leadership Theory, WOM and eWOM, celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing is reviewed in Chapter 2. The methodology and findings of the qualitative study is summarized in Chapter 3. Synthesizing findings in the literature and in-depth interviews, hypotheses are developed and the hypothetical model is introduced in Chapter 4. After the theoretical background and conceptual framework of the study is displayed, research design and methodology are displayed in Chapter 5. Analysis of the quantitative data including analysis of the sample characteristics exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, reliability and validity of the scales and test of the structural models are outlined in Chapter 6. A comprehensive discussion on findings of the study, comparison with findings of previous research, future of the influencer marketing and possible research topics for further studies and limitations concludes the research in Chapter 7.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Consumer behavior research has been stressing on factors that influence consumers' decision making process. The main idea behind influencer marketing is consumers' influence consumption decisions of other consumers and some consumers have greater influential powers.

Social media influencers “*represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media*” (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90). Although social media was included in the scope of marketing in the last decade, influencers are not new to communication literature. Decades before social media influencers, political communication researchers were arguing that some “opinion leaders” influence their friends and families' opinions. If the opinion leader is an expert in an area, their influence can be much wider than friends and family. Advertisers discovered that celebrities are credible opinion leaders that can attract attention to endorsed products and celebrity endorsement ads have become highly popular since 1960s. In social media age, brands have witnessed that ordinary consumers who create content on SNSs can endorse their products as effectively as a celebrity does. Thus, social media influencers attracted attention as new generation opinion leaders or opinion leaders 2.0.

In order to better understand social media influencers and their impact on consumption decisions, the extant literature of opinion leadership theory and celebrity endorsement will be revisited in the next section.

## 2.1 Opinion leadership theory

Opinion leadership has its roots in the seminal work by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) which was examining voters' behavior in the 1940 United States presidential election and providing evidence that relatives, friends and co-workers have a powerful influence on voting decisions. Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step (multistep) flow model forms the basis of opinion leadership theory. The two-step flow of mediated information dissemination model challenged the assumption that media messages sent by a content producer directly reaches to the ears (or eyes) of the audience. According to two step flow of information theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Katz, 1957), mass media audiences are influenced both by the actual information that is distributed by media channels (news, for example) as well as a two-step distribution of the message through the gatekeepers' interpretation. The model states that mass media indirectly shapes the publics' attitudes, as a small group of individuals filter and reshape messages as information gatekeepers who forward a mass media message to their immediate circle. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) found that opinion leaders act as influential modifiers of information that was distributed through mass media sources. Ideas often flow from mass media to opinion leaders and after their interpretation to the opinion/ information seekers (Rogers & Cartano, 1962). The filter of an opinion leader makes the message more effective since interpersonal communication is more powerful in shaping thoughts of people compared to mass media (Weimann, 1994).

Rogers and Cartano (1962, p.435) describe opinion leaders as consumers "*who exert an unequal amount of influence on the decisions of others*" Another definition describes opinion leaders as persons who are regarded by a group, or by other people, as having expertise and knowledge and who are considered as

appropriate sources for information and advice (Eliashberg & Shugan, 1997). In marketing, the opinion leader is someone who informally influences the attitudes of other individuals in a desired direction (Reynolds & Wells, 1977). Scholars have coined many different terms to refer to opinion leaders: "leaders," "informal leaders," "information leaders," "adoption leaders," "fashion leaders," "consumption leaders," "influentials," "influencers," "sparkplugs," "gatekeepers," and "taste- makers." (Rogers & Cartano, 1962). The current study will use “social media influencer” or “influencer” in short while addressing opinion leaders of the digital age or opinion leaders 2.0.

In spite of numerous definitions in literature, opinion leadership concept is always associated with influence (Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastmen, 1996; Rogers & Cartano, 1962), and information/idea dissemination (King & Summers, 1970), or both. Opinion leaders directly (by word of mouth) or indirectly (by inspiring people and making people imitate them) have an important influence in their close circle including friends, family, relatives and peers (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995). Consumers influence other consumers in several ways: first, they act as role models who inspire imitation among other consumers who observe their choice and consumption behavior. Imitation theory predicts that when consumers face a choice problem, they imitate “the best” or in other words, other individuals who are likely to achieve the highest payoffs (Schlag, 1998, 1999). Second, they may influence others subtly by spreading ideas and information via word of mouth, since consumption frequently takes place in daily social conversations. Third, they recommend directly and verbally (Chau & Hui, 1998). Due to the rapid development of the technology, there has been a shift in many communication concepts (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

After the invention of the internet and social media, consumers have gained more power and control and access to more information in the online environment (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Online opinion leaders involved eWOM sharing texts, video, photographs in SNSs. (Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013; Tsang & Zhou, 2005; Watts & Dodds, 2007) Since online environments speed and enlarge the reach of information and opinion, opinion leaders have had a chance to maximize their influential power (Lyons & Henderson, 2005). Lack of face to face one to one interaction may be suspected to decrease the influence of the opinion leader, however though online opinion leaders may weaken their impact on a single consumer that they interact with, they are more likely to higher influential power in total as they can reach thousands or even millions of potential customers (Lin, Bruning & Swarna, 2018). Schäfer and Taddicken (2015) stated that the development of technology had made it necessary to adapt the concept of opinion leaders to the new digital contexts, since formerly separate channels of communication have been intermingling.

It is widely accepted that changing technology and digital revolution will affect opinion leadership. However, the valence of this effect leads to inconclusive discussions in literature questioning if influentials hypothesis still holds in computer mediated environments (Zhang, Zhao & Xu, 2016). Some scholars argue that the internet enabled consumers to reach limitless information and made the decision making process easier. Thus, any consumer can search for information through the web and there is less need for opinions from opinion leaders. Furthermore, internet and particularly social media communication enable firms to target audiences directly and convey their message without the intervention of opinion leaders (Schäfer and Taddicken, 2015).

However, the majority rejects that view claiming that heavy usage of the internet will increase the importance of and need for opinion leaders. The growing number of information sources, as well as their increasing interconnectedness leads to more complex choices, that advice, filtering, assortment and orientation may be helpful as never before. Before the internet revolution, opinion leaders may have an influence on the decisions of a small group of people from their family and acquaintances; yet, the rapid growth of the internet provided opinion leaders with a global, unlimited audience (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

Beside the need for online opinion leaders, the influential power of online opinion leaders has risen. The internet enabled opinion leaders with efficient ways to share information, moreover, information searching for opinion seekers have become faster and easier. Blogs, YouTube videos, Instagram posts and tweets generated by opinion leaders have a strong impact on consumer behavior, leading marketers to use these tools more heavily than before. Compared to traditional opinion leadership, online opinion leadership is more powerful due to its speed, convenience, one-to-many reach, and lack of face-to-face human pressure (Sun et al., 2006).

Although opinion leadership theory is one of the best established theories in communication, its adaptation to internet mediated environments still calls for further research. There are a limited number of empirical studies stressing on the application of opinion leadership theory to digital context and testing if there are any significant differences compared to offline context (Lin, Bruning & Swarna, 2018). Lyons and Henderson (2005) conducted a pioneering study that empirically compares the characteristics and behavior of opinion leaders in offline and online markets. They found that opinion leaders in computer-mediated environments possess significantly higher levels of enduring involvement, more innovative, tend to



exploratory behavior and have higher self-perceived knowledge than non-leaders. These findings seem to be parallel to opinion leadership characteristics found in studies in offline contexts. Online opinion leaders are also better in computer skills, have been using the internet for a longer period of time and connect to the internet more frequently for longer sessions than non-leaders. Online opinion leaders possess similar qualities with their traditional marketplace counterparts such as involvement, innovativeness, and acquiring more information. Sun et al. (2006) investigated antecedents and consequences of online opinion leadership and online opinion seeking. They found that internet usage and innovativeness are antecedents, online chatting and forwarding are consequences. Özgen and Kurt (2013) analyzed decision making styles of opinion leaders in social media and provided evidence that opinion seekers and leaders have significantly different decision making styles. Zhang et al. (2016) compared the impact of online opinion leaders to the impact of the crowd and concluded that although opinion leaders play a key role in starting a new trend, only if there is a following crowd, the trend is diffused.

Opinion leaders have a stronger influence than traditional mass media in influencing individuals' preferences and behaviors (Arndt, 1967). The interpersonal relationships of opinion leaders are viewed as more credible than messages from mass media sources and this makes them more effective (Feick & Price, 1987). Berkman and Gilson (1986), similarly, suggested that consumers find the information they receive from communications with domain-specific opinion leaders to be more credible than advertising messages. Opinion leaders and their messages were considered more credible since they do not represent commercial interests (Rogers, 2003). However, with the development of SNSs and brands' attraction to social media opinion leaders, opinion leaders started to represent "commercial

interest” (Shi & Wojnicki 2014). Brands which attempt to influence or incentivize influential presences within social media (e.g., popular bloggers, vloggers, Instagram and Twitter influencers) utilized the extant networks to strategically and influence consumer perceptions and behaviors (Carr & Hayes, 2014). Popular social media content creators had the opportunity to monetize their status as opinion leaders. As a result, opinion seekers perceive online reviews as less credible, since these reviews are influenced by a financial support by a third party, these perceptions decrease bloggers’ e-WOM influence. Previous literature has supported that a reviewer’s credibility is directly associated with the reviewer’s WOM influence (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971).

The biggest change and challenge that digitalization brought to the online opinion leadership concept is the monetary relationship between online opinion leaders and brands. When influencers turned their hobby of blogging to a profession, their financial motivation and genuine opinions about products have become hard to balance. As sponsored content share on the web increases, consumers lost their trust in online opinion leaders’ recommendations. In offline context, opinion leaders were knowledgeable friends telling where to shop, doctors recommending multivitamin pills or film stars that shared their beauty secrets and none of them were financially motivated to change our consumption preferences. (Well, at least we never knew even if they were! Marilyn Monroe famously said in an interview in 1952 that she wore "five drops of Chanel No. 5 and nothing else in bed." and no one thought that Chanel was paying compensation for this endorsement.)

Speaking of Marilyn Monroe, celebrities can be classified as opinion leaders who have a great power to create trends and change consumption behavior of the public. The next division will review the extant literature of celebrity endorsement.

## 2.2 Celebrity endorsement

Using celebrity endorsers to promote a product is a popular promotion strategy (Shimp, 2000). Endorser is defined as “*any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement*” (McCracken, 1989, p. 310). Celebrity endorsement is not a recent trend, it has its roots in the late nineteenth century (Erdogan, 1999). Celebrity endorsement positively influences consumers’ attitudes and purchase intentions (Bush, Martin & Bush., 2004; McCormick, 2016) since celebrities are admired, respected and consumers identify with them (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Thomson, 2006). Celebrities are perceived as attractive, likeable, dynamic and when they endorse a product, these qualities are expected to be transferred to the endorsed brand/ product, according to Meaning Transfer Theory (McCracken, 1989).

The impact of celebrity endorsement on sales revenue and profits is extremely positive (when successfully practiced). Pepsico. has achieved a 8% increase in sales volume in 1984, after a collaboration with Michael Jackson. After a decade, a 2% global rise in sales was attributed to Spice Girls campaign (Erdogan, 1999).

Although increase in sales is the ultimate goal of celebrity endorsement, besides sales, it has a positive impact on various desired marketing outcomes such as brand awareness, attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand, brand and ad recall, brand affect and favorable brand associations. Ads presenting celebrities create more positive responses such as higher level of attention directed to the ad (Buttle, Raymond, & Danziger, 2000; Dean & Biswas, 2001; Koernig & Boyd, 2009) and a more positive attitude toward the ad (Silvera & Austad, 2004).

Celebrity endorsement ads not only create positive attitude and awareness toward the ad but also contribute to desired brand outcomes. Celebrity endorsement positively affects brand awareness (Chan, Ng & Luk., 2013; Miller & Laczniak, 2011), attitude towards the endorsed brand (Till, Stanley, & Priluck, 2008), purchase intention (Atkin & Block, 1983; Lafferty, Goldsmith, & Newell, 2002; Ohanian, 1991; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983; Till & Busler, 2000) and brand loyalty (Miller & Laczniak, 2011).

The positive results of celebrity endorsements are well documented both practically and academically (Erdogan, 1999; McCracken, 1989; Ohanian, 1991). Marketing academia has put effort into revealing underlying factors of success in celebrity endorsement campaigns. The positive impact on the endorsed brand is attributed to different antecedents such as the qualities of the celebrity like credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1991), attractiveness (McGuire, 1985), popularity (Solomon, 1996) or the fit between the celebrity and the endorsed product/ brand (Kamins, 1990). Another explanation of the effect of celebrities on brand outcomes states that symbolic values that the celebrity represents transfer to the endorsed brand (McCracken, 1989). These hypotheses are complementary rather than competing for most of the time. When a “perfectly matching” celebrity endorses the product, favorable associations of the celebrity and attitude and affect toward him/her are transferred to the brand endorsed. The upcoming section gives details about these models which aim to explain how celebrities can shape consumption preferences and help brands to choose the right celebrity.

### 2.2.1 Source Models

The persuasion power of a message depends on the source that the message is received (Kelman, 1961; Meenaghan, 1995). Source models have two main sub-models which are known as “The Source Attractiveness Model” and “The Source Credibility Model”. These models are adopted from communication literature and adapted to celebrity endorsement context.

The source credibility model suggests that the message receiver accepts the messages that come from a credible source. The extant literature on celebrity endorsement effectiveness focuses on credibility of the endorser (Erdogan, 1999). Information disseminated by a credible source can change opinions, beliefs, attitudes and finally behavior. Source credibility model (Hovland, Jannis & Kelley, 1953) implies that celebrities are more effective than non-celebrities in opinion change and persuasion since they are perceived more credible.

Conceptualization of credibility is still ambivalent (Erdogan, 1999). Perceived expertise and trustworthiness are two major dimensions of credibility that most scholars agree upon (Dholakia & Stemthal, 1977; Hovland et al. 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1991). Ohanian’s (1991) highly influential study on celebrity spokespersons’ credibility conceptualizes credibility as a three-dimensional construct whose components are trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise.

Trustworthiness makes consumers accept product information the endorser shared, expertise, similarly increase respect to the endorser's product knowledge and increase the probability of decision making relying on that information (Shimp, 1997). Perceived similarity is an antecedent of trustworthiness and credibility since people tend to trust in people when they think that they are like them (Erdogan, 1999). Desphande and Stayman (1994) provided evidence that ethnicity of the

endorser has a significant impact on endorser trustworthiness and brand attitudes showing that people prefer celebrities from their own ethnic group and find celebrities from a different ethnic group less trustworthy and endorsement is less effective. McGuire (1985) suggested that the influential power of a message depends on similarity, familiarity and liking for an endorser.

Expertise of the endorser refers to its level of knowledge, skill and experience in a specific topic (Hovland et al. 1953; Ohanian, 1991). Expertise of the endorser affects consumers' preferences since it minimizes consumers' perceived risk and simplifies purchase decisions (Filieri, 2016; Langner, Hennings & Wiedmann, 2013). Celebrities' credibility depends on their perceived expertise according to the source credibility model. Perceived expertise is different from objective expertise, what really matters is how knowledgeable the message receiver thinks the endorser is, not the objective expertise (Erdogan, 1999). Sometimes two experts carrying exact skills and experience, for instance two doctors with the same degree and experience, might be perceived differently in expertise and one may be preferred probably as a result of better communication of expertise.

The source attractiveness model claims that attractiveness of the endorser affects likability of the endorser and endorsed product/brand (Choi & Rifon, 2012). Ohanian (1991) quotes Aristoteles: "Beauty is a greater recommendation than any letter of introduction" to underline the role of attractiveness in celebrity credibility. Ads on various media platforms supply evidence that supports. Magazines, TV commercials, and billboards are full of young, beautiful, attractive people who endorse a product and people buy these endorsed products pursuing the hope of being as attractive as billboard girls and guys.

Attractiveness halo effect is well documented in perception literature (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Lucker, Beane & Helmreich, 1981; Moore, Filippou, & Perrett, 2011) and suggests that attractive people are more likely to be perceived as having better personality traits. Therefore, celebrities who are attractive can be perceived as more honest, trustworthy, intelligent and knowledgeable and as an endorser, their persuasion power can be higher due to the halo effect.

Although positive effects are expected, the attractiveness of the endorser may backfire unexpectedly. Rossiter and Percy (1987) stated that there is a risk that consumers' attention is attracted by the celebrity and the product may be in shadow. Cooper (1984) suggests that the endorsed product, not celebrity endorser, must be the star. Otherwise, consumers recall the celebrity they have seen in ads, but not the brand.

### 2.2.2 The match up hypothesis

Although the credibility approach is useful to identify desired qualities of an endorser to increase endorsement effectiveness, opponents criticize that approach due to omission of the endorsed product/brand characteristics. Can an attractive, trustworthy and expert celebrity sell any product regardless of its brand and category? The match up research stream says "No, if the product does not fit the celebrity". The match up hypothesis suggests that when there is a good fit between endorsed brand/product and endorser, endorsement effectiveness increases (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; McCormick, 2016; Rice, Kelting, & Lutz, 2012; Rossiter & Smidts, 2012). On the contrary, when consumers perceive a mismatch between the influencer and the brand or if the information endorsers share is irrelevant, purchase intention decreases (Ilicic & Webster, 2013). If there is a lack of

a good match, consumers hardly believe the endorser actually likes, uses and recommends the product and think that the celebrity is bought by the brand (Erdogan, 1999).

Mishra, Roy, and Bailey (2015) adopted social-adaptation theory and attributional theory as a theoretical background to support the match up hypothesis. Social adaptation theory predicts that if the message receiver thinks that the information is adaptable, the message effectiveness is higher (Kahle & Homer, 1985). When influencer and brand match perfectly, social adaptation theory works better. Attributional theory posits that consumers think that the endorser is internally not externally motivated, if the celebrity is endorsing a brand with a good match (Mishra et al., 2015)

Evans (1988) points to another risk about weak-fit celebrity endorsement, suggesting that when celebrities do not seem relatable to the product or brand they endorse, people who are exposed to the ad remembers the celebrity but does not recall the brand or product that seems irrelevant. Evans (1988) names it “vampire effect” since the celebrity sucks all the attention like a vampire sucking the blood of a victim.

However, the match up hypothesis is also inadequate to explain endorsement effectiveness alone. The critiques mention the difficulty of definition of a good match. Although the arguments about fit are quite reasonable, when it comes to operationalizing it, there is neither a definition nor an exact measurement of the fit. Literature provides little evidence about what a good fit is. An example the literature suggests is attractive celebrities and beauty products. Kahle and Homer (1985) supported the match up hypothesis claiming that celebrity’s attractiveness has a



positive impact on the endorsed product if the product is claiming enhancing attractiveness.

### 2.2.3 Meaning Transfer Model

McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model explains how qualities of the celebrity are transferred to endorsed products and then transferred to consumers after purchase. Meaning transfer process has three stages, the first stage is the formation of the celebrities' image, elements of the image of the celebrity are transferred to products. Symbolic meanings of consumption objects are heavily discussed in marketing literature (Batra et al., 1996; Levy, 1959). Consumers choose products and brands that they wish to be identified with. To sum up, it is crucial for advertisers to deeply understand the values a celebrity stands for and if this value is desirable for the brand that will be endorsed and the target customers of that brand.

Celebrity endorsement research is one of the richest research streams in advertising literature which has a strong theoretical base adapted from communication discipline. Literature provides abundant evidence that shows effectiveness of celebrity endorsement and how celebrities affect consumption decisions. However, findings in celebrity endorsement literature are mixed, there is no consensus among scholars about which dimensions are more important, which criteria can be used by practitioners to select "right" endorsers. In spite of lack of consensus on the conceptualization and measurement of constructs, extant celebrity endorsement literature has strong theoretical roots and provides rich information from different perspectives.

Theoretical similarities for celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing exist both in theory and practices. In the recent decade, influencers in social media

started to endorse products like celebrities have done for decades and many companies allocated their budgets to collaborate with new-gen influencers rather than mainstream celebrities. Application of findings of celebrity endorsement research will be beneficial for both academicians studying in this new field and practitioners who want to increase influencer marketing effectiveness. The next section will discuss newly emerged and growing influencer marketing literature.

### 2.3 Influencer marketing

Making use of the influential power of opinion leaders and celebrity endorsers in order to market products and services is a frequently adopted marketing strategy (Appel et al., 2020). While social media usage is growing rapidly, opinion leaders in online communities started to affect attitudes and behavior of other people in the community (Casalo et al., 2018). Since these opinion leaders in online environments influence their audience, they are frequently referred as “social media influencers” or “influencers” in short (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). In this section, we summarize and discuss the literature of influencer marketing.

#### 2.3.1 Definition of the influencer

Freberg et al. (2011, p. 90) defines social media influencers as “*third party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.*” Another definition states that influencers are “*content creators who accumulated a solid base of followers...through blogging, vlogging or creating short-form content*” (DeVeirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017, p.801).

Most definitions in the literature describe social media influencers based on three key characteristics. First characteristic is content creation in SNSs in various

forms. The second condition is having an audience; however, the size of the following group is not imposed. The earlier studies in the literature described influencers with a large number of followers; however in recent years most research and practical cases proved the impact of nano and micro influencers whose followers are less than 100.000 (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Although the size of the audience is not a strict condition to be considered an influencer, not everybody who shares content on social media is an influencer. As the term “influencer” suggests, one should have an influential power on their audience to be regarded as an influencer; therefore, the third and the most important characteristic of an influencer is the ability to influence the attitude and behavior of the audience.

In addition to content creation, audience and influential power, “personal brands” influencers built is highlighted, as the description of Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) highlight that influencers “*generate a form of ‘celebrity’ capital by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic ‘personal brand’ via social networks, which can subsequently be used by companies and advertisers for consumer outreach*” (p. 194).

Opinion leadership theory suggests that opinion leaders have high involvement with a product class and as a result of their sustaining involvement, they are more likely to pursue knowledge and share it with opinion seekers (Venkatraman, 1989). The definition Keller and Fay (2016) suggested refers to involvement, information seeking and sharing tendency of influencers, which is “*...everyday consumers who are substantially more likely than the average to seek out information and to share ideas, information, and recommendations with other people. They do this both through volunteering their opinions about products and*

*services that they feel passionate about, and by being turned to for their knowledge, advice, and insights” (p. 1).*

### 2.3.2 The emergence of influencer marketing

As a result of the increasing number of stimuli in the environment in the digital age, the effectiveness of conventional advertising has been diminishing (Breves et al., 2019). Computer mediated environments have brought new challenges to advertisers who try to adapt to the online paradigm; since ad-blocks and banner blindness diminish the impact of ads (DeVeirman et al., 2017). In order to attract the attention of consumers in online environments, brands had to find more authentic, entertaining and soft ways for brand communication and highlighting their products and services (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Furthermore, traditional media channels were ineffective to reach millennials and convey brand messages. Millennials are digital natives who were born in a digitalized world, rather than digital immigrants who are used to traditional, offline media (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin., 2008; Parasuraman & Colby, 2015, Prensky, 2001; Wesner & Miller, 2008).

Brands seek new solutions to overcome lower attention to advertising and new channels to reach generation Y and Z who are hard to communicate via conventional advertising. Most brands have shifted from traditional advertising on online environments such as banner ads to sponsoring content of social media influencers as they are more authentic and engaging (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). Marketers who seek eWOM started to offer compensation to online opinion leaders (either in cash or gifts) in exchange for review of their products and services in SNSs (Forrest & Cao, 2010). The marketing practices involving bloggers and vloggers have opened a new chapter in social media, that is influencer marketing.

Influencer marketing is defined as promoting products, services and brands through use of key content creators who exert influence over potential buyers (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Carter (2016, p.2) highlights the awareness raising objective of influencer marketing, describing it “*a rapidly growing industry that attempts to promote products or increase brand awareness through content spread by social media users who are considered to be influential*”. The definitions in literature agree upon promotion through content of influential social media users.

Since the introduction of influencers into the marketing arena, boundaries of influencer marketing exceeded the endorsement of products and services. Influencer marketing concept has broadened to include not only promotion of products and services but also values, habits and a complete lifestyle (Raggatt et al., 2018; Sokolova & Perez, 2020, 2021). Thus, new and more comprehensive definitions are needed to inspire thinking of influencer marketing in broader terms.

### 2.3.3 Categorization of research themes in influencer marketing literature

#### 2.3.3.1 Source characteristics and consumer outcomes

When influencer marketing practices increased in popularity among marketing executives, the first question emerged was how to choose the right influencer to endorse the brand. The practitioners believe that the success of an influencer endorsement was a direct consequence of influencers’ qualities, as a result, the main question was “Who?” rather than “How?” Parallel to practice, first attempts in influencer marketing research stressed on influencer characteristics that contribute to desired marketing outcomes such as increased brand awareness, positive brand attitude and lifted sales (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019, Trivedi, 2018).

This research theme is still the most popular among influencer marketing studies (Vrontis et al, 2021).

The influencer characteristics research stream has its roots in extant communication and celebrity endorsement literature. Most studies that explore the impact of influencer characteristics and their consequences adapt source models to influencer context. Source models (The Source Credibility Model and The Source Attractiveness Model) claim that the acceptance and effectiveness of a message depends on the characteristics of the source of the message (Hovland, Jannis & Kelley, 1953). The higher the credibility and attractiveness of the source (social media influencer in this context), the higher the probability of the acceptance of the message by the receiver.

Marketing academia borrowed source models to explain how celebrity endorsement leads to desired marketing outcomes (McCracken, 1989). The conceptualization of the credibility of the celebrity by Ohanian (1991) has been revisited for influencer marketing research. While some studies employed influencer credibility construct (i.e. Breves et al., 2019; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2020) as Ohanian (1991) conceptualized, some researcher selected one or two dimensions of credibility, such as expertise or trustworthiness and explored their outcomes (Hughes, Swaminathan, & Brooks, 2019; Ki & Kim, 2019; Trivedi & Sama; 2020; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). Some scholars attempted to broaden source credibility perspective by adding dimensions that are exclusively for influencers that are argument quality, social influence and issue involvement (Xiao et al., 2018).

Nearly all studies supported a positive correlation between influencer credibility and related characteristics and consumer outcomes. Purchase intention

was chosen as the dependent variable in the majority of hypothesized models.

Credibility (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Fink et al., 2020), attractiveness (Torres et al., 2019), expertness (Trivedi & Sama, 2020); trustworthiness (De Jans et al., 2018) are independent variables that are most frequently visited. Influencer credibility and related dimensions are also shown to lead to brand attitude (Breves et al., 2019) parasocial interaction (Sakib et al., 2020), brand trust (Reinikainen et al., 2020) attitude towards the add and product attitude (Schouten et al., 2020), attitude towards the influencer (Ki & Kim, 2019), attitude towards the endorsement (Torres et al., 2019).

#### 2.3.3.2 Source congruity and consumer outcomes

Celebrity endorsement studies frequently referred to the match up hypothesis to unveil the impact of congruence between endorser and the endorsed brand/product (Kamins, 1990). Numerous scholars adapted the match up hypothesis to explore the impact of endorser-brand fit on endorsement effectiveness.

Torres et al. (2019) provided evidence that brand congruence has a significant impact on attitude towards the endorsement and an indirect impact on brand attitude and purchase intention. Moreover, the impact is stronger than the impact of attractiveness. Breves et al. (2019) stated that the fit of influencer and brand increases the effectiveness of advertising both directly and indirectly through the credibility of the influencer. Brand- influencer fit contributes to the trustworthiness of the influencer (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020; Pang. et al., 2016), persuasiveness of the message (Jung et al., 2016) and credibility of the endorsed product (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020).

#### 2.3.3.3 Content characteristics and consumer outcomes

Although research exploring the factors affecting endorsement effectiveness primarily focus on influencer characteristics, content attributes are strong predictors of the success of the influencer endorsement.

Uniqueness and originality of the content increase the intention to interact, recommend the influencer to others and follow the advice of the influencer (Casalo et al., 2018). The quality of the content is the antecedent of engagement and intention to follow influencers' recommendations (Magno, 2017).

The value offer of the content also affects the effectiveness of the endorsement. While hedonic value of the content leads to engagement (Hughes et al., 2019), informative value and interactivity of the content positively affect the attitude towards the influencer (Ki & Kim, 2019). If the content is visual, aesthetics play an important role in the effectiveness of the content. Ki and Kim (2019) stated that visually aesthetic content contributes to a perception of taste leader and desire to mimic the influencer and create eWOM. Visual contents in which the influencer is seen with endorsed products create a positive brand attitude (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). On the other hand, when the commercial motivation of the content is high, trustworthiness of the influencer, interest in content, willingness to consume more content and the credibility of the endorsement diminish (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020).

#### 2.3.3.4 Disclosure of paid partnership and consumer outcomes

The impact of disclosing openly when a brand sponsors a content may have contradicting effects on the effectiveness of the endorsement. Firstly, literature suggests that consumers are skeptical about branded content since they think



influencers may have extrinsic-financial motivation to recommend the brand (Audrezet et al., 2020). Zhu and Tan (2007) argued that paid content in online context must be regarded as advertisement because the motivation of these posts is not solely sharing a consumption experience; rather, the motivation is financial. Since most audiences regard sponsored content as an advertisement and respond negatively to it, influencers sometimes may hesitate to openly disclose the sponsorship. The studies testing the influence of sponsorship disclosure agreed upon negative effects on parasocial interaction, influencer trustworthiness, credibility, persuasiveness, brand attitude, evaluation of the influencer and higher skepticism (Boerman, 2020; De Jans et al., 2018, De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Kim & Kim, 2021; Sah, Malaviya & Thompson, 2018).

Most studies showed that effectiveness of the endorsement decreases when the influencer discloses that it is sponsored; however, hiding the sponsorship may cause a deeper harm. If the sponsorship is not disclosed by the influencer but revealed by a third party, distorted parasocial interaction leads to negative attitudes towards the influencer and diminishes credibility of the influencer (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015).

#### 2.3.3.5 The interaction between influencer and audience

The success of an influencer endorsement is an outcome of the relationship of the influencer with followers as much as the qualities of the influencer and the content. Followers of an influencer may perceive the influencer as a friend and develop a parasocial relationship (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011; Farivar et al., 2020). Though opinion leadership perspective was dominant in influencer marketing literature, the impact of parasocial relationships has recently attracted scholarly attention (Hu et al.,

2020; Munukka et al. 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Opinion leadership and parasocial relationships complement each other to explain the impact of influencers on their followers since followers may seek both opinion and a close relationship, like a friendship. Parasocial interaction is correlated with stickiness to the influencer, wishful identification, compliance intention and purchase intention (Hu et al., 2020; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sakib et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Stronger bonds between the influencer and the followers lead to an increase in the consumption of the content of the influencer (Folkvord et al., 2019). A perceived similarity also contributes to effectiveness of the influencer (Kim & Kim, 2021).

#### 2.3.4 Contexts in influencer marketing literature

Since influencer marketing is still in its infancy stage, scholarly attempts are mostly focused on to underlie the general mechanism of influencer marketing effectiveness; however, the results of the studies may not be generalizable and needs to be tested in different contexts (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Most studies in the literature are not product specific, only a few studies examine influencers from category context. As a result of the mounting investment of fashion and cosmetics brands to influencer marketing, most category specific research focus one of them (Duffy & Hund, 2015, Jin et al., 2019; Jin & Ryu, 2020; Jin & Muqaddam, 2021; Renchen, 2020; Trivedi, 2018). Luxury product category is another popular context within influencer marketing (Jin & Ryu, 2019; Kim & Ko, 2012; Trivedi & Sama, 2020). More studies testing effectiveness of influencers in food and beverages, electronics and services are needed to better understand the context dependence of preliminary findings.

Social media platforms can be a fertile context for influencer marketing research and cross-platform studies are rare although interesting findings are very likely. Among all social media platforms, Instagram and Youtube are the most frequently visited contexts (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2016; Evans et al., 2017; Lee & Watkins 2016; Sokolova & Perez, 2020). However, emerging platforms such as TikTok and Clubhouse will attract scholarly attention in near future. Cross-platform comparison studies are rare yet these studies might be fruitful in order to test social media platform as a moderating variable between influencer /content characteristics and marketing outcomes (Jin et al., 2019).

## CHAPTER 3

### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

This study adopts a triangulation approach in order to combine the advantages of qualitative and quantitative methods. Churchill and Iacobucci (2002) recommend researchers to make use of in depth interviews in order to have deeper knowledge on a specific topic. Following the comprehensive literature review including review of academic sources, press and social media accounts of numerous brands and influencers, the second step involved qualitative in-depth interviews to obtain a deeper understanding of influencers', brands' and consumers' perspective. The in-depth interview is a primary research method to understand the nature of a phenomenon (McCracken, 1988; Wengraf, 2001). Since influencer marketing is at its infancy, starting with in-depth interviews to gather rich data about the influencer ecosystem was a vital step.

#### 3.1 Sample

Since the main purpose of the qualitative part of the study is to gather deep and rich information about influencer marketing from all different stakeholders in the influencer ecosystem, the sample should have included influencers, social media users who follow influencers, and marketing professionals who engage in influencer marketing practices. Purposive samples of two global brands' managers (one is a well-known cosmetic brand and one is a leading technology company), five influencers from diverse content themes (one fashion, two lifestyle and two entertainment bloggers/vloggers) and five content consumers who are college students between 20-28 years of age and studying at a European university were

interviewed. Saturation in responses suggested this sample size was sufficient to capture the range of responses. Interviews were conducted between May 2016 and February 2017. Details about interviewees are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. In-depth Interviews Sample Details

|                |      |                 |   |
|----------------|------|-----------------|---|
| Interviewee 1  | T.K. | Brand Executive | Cosmetics Company                                     |
| Interviewee 2  | B.S. | Brand Executive | Tech Company  |
| Interviewee 3  | K.G. | Influencer      | Entertainment, 1 Million+ followers on YouTube        |
| Interviewee 4  | D.S. | Influencer      | Lifestyle, 62K Instagram followers                    |
| Interviewee 5  | M.K. | Influencer      | Entertainment, 85K Instagram followers                |
| Interviewee 6  | D.G. | Influencer      | Fashion, 270K Instagram followers                     |
| Interviewee 7  | B.G. | Influencer      | Lifestyle, 6K Instagram influencers (Nano influencer) |
| Interviewee 8  | E.E. | Follower        |   |
| Interviewee 9  | T.Y. | Follower        |   |
| Interviewee 10 | A.G. | Follower        |   |
| Interviewee 11 | H.B. | Follower        |   |
| Interviewee 12 | G.T. | Follower        |   |

### 3.2 Data collection

Drawing on aforementioned literature, interview questions were developed separately for influencers, brands and consumers. We opted for open ended questions in order to dive deeper and gather rich information. The interviews were semi-structured, therefore the flow of interviews brought new questions besides pre-determined questions, enabling customizing the instrument.

Interview questions for brands included items such as:

- Please describe your influencer marketing strategy.
- How do you plan your influencer marketing projects?
- Which criteria do you use to select influencers to collaborate?
- How do you measure ROI?
- Do you ask systematic feedback from influencers?

- How do you allocate your marketing communication budget between traditional media and social media?
- Do you intervene in branded content of influencer?
- What are the biggest challenges of influencer marketing?

Influencers' interview questions included:

- How do you define an influencer? A successful influencer?
- Do you have separate channel strategy for different social media channels?
- Which criteria do you think as important while selecting brands to collaborate?
- Do you consider the match between your followers and brands' target consumers?
- What kind of challenges and difficulties you face while you are working for a sponsor brand?
- Do you think influencers should position themselves as celebrities?
- Do you disclaim when content is sponsored and how does it affect your followers?
- Do you measure the effectiveness/ROI of your branded projects?
- Do you share your followers' feedback with the sponsor brand?
- Do brands include you in product design or R&D processes?
- How do you cope with haters? Are they threatening your relationship with brands?

Some examples of interview questions for consumers are:

- Please tell us about your social media usage habits. How much time do you spend, which channels/themes do you prefer, which influencers do you follow?
- What are your motivations to follow influencers?
- Do you think influencers have an impact on your consumption decisions?
- Do you have a bad experience about an influencer-recommended product? If yes, how did you feel?
- What do you think about sponsored content? When a content is disclaimed as sponsored, how does it affect your attitude?
- Is it important to see similarities between you and the influencer to feel a stronger bond?
- What makes your trust in an influencer weaken?
- Which qualities of an influencer are of higher importance?"

The duration of the interviews was between 30 to 80 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded (asked the consent of the interviewee before recording, one brand manager asked not to use voice recording, and the interviewer only took notes and transcribed).

### 3.3 Data analysis and findings

As Miles and Huberman (1994) stated, the first step was data reduction. All interviews were summarized, sentences out of context were removed, and highlighting themes were defined. After transcribed data is selected, simplified, and organized, analyzing the transcriptions, themes and patterns were identified and interpreted.

### 3.3.1 Brands' influencer marketing strategies and practices

Brand representatives we interviewed were actively taking part in influencer marketing planning and operations. They were quite aware of the rise of influencer marketing, even one declared that their all marketing communication budget is allocated to influencer marketing, giving print ads zero budget. Interviewee 1, the interviewee who is a marketing manager in a global cosmetics company suggested that influencers' may make contributions either organically or inorganically.

When an influencer recommends one of our products that he/she likes, that she/he paid for without our intervention, it is organic. If we sponsor, it is inorganic. For inorganic projects, we meet influencers, make a plan, offer a budget and pay for it. Seeding is another method, in between, semi-organic. It is not a product influencer finds and buys, we send it as a gift. The influencer shares it with followers.

She stated that they do not make influencers feel like they are obliged to post about products, influencers are free to choose to mention about the product or not. If an influencer does not share a post about a gift product, they do not end their relationship, she may not like it or could not try it yet but if the silence is continuing, the brand chooses not to send the gift because it also has a cost for the company although there is no extra payment. In order to encourage influencers to share the product, T.K. says that they add something instagrammable into the package. She said that they sent insta-worthy hats with their new sunscreen lotion. "Currently offline" were written on hats, most influencers shared it with the lotion however some influencers used the hat without tagging or mentioning the brand or the lotion, which was disappointing for the brand.

Two brands we interviewed highlighted two challenges in influencer marketing projects: The first challenge is to choose the right influencers, the second is to measure ROI. Number of influencers are rising day by day and it is getting harder to find an influencer whose image, values and language is matching with the



brand. Most companies still rely on soft metrics such as number of likes and views however, hard metrics related to finance are harder to measure. T.K. stated that she believes choosing influencers to collaborate is brands' responsibility and their brand does not leave this task to an agency.

We work with an agency for influencer marketing but we make our influencer list by ourselves and tell the agency the names we would like to sponsor. Many brands in our industry work in this way such as M. and Y.R. No agency gives a perfect influencer marketing support 100%. We, brands, know better than agencies. Bloggers like it more, they know you and like you. If you see them as "business", they also behave in this way. We want more sincere relationships with them. If we could not manage to build a friendly relationship, the influencer content cannot be sincere. One influencer, G.E. was one that we could not build this relationship with. She gave information about the product and did whatever we asked, but she seems like she hates us. We did not work with her again.

B.S., a manager from a world-wide technology company, also underlines the importance of choosing the influencer whose image will benefit, not harm the brand. He states that influencers are like brands' spokespeople, brands give their reputability in the hands of the influencers, hoping they take care of them. He had a negative experience with an influencer they collaborated and spend a big budget to promote a new technological product:

We launched a new product (an application) and in order to promote it, we decided to work with an influencer. We chose two alternatives, both have over one million followers. The first candidate demanded a very high budget (a six-digit number in TL) thus, we chose the second, who is also very popular among young people, therefore looks suitable for our target segment. We set a meeting, but her agent did not let us meet her and directly tell about our product and expectations about the content. The agent was not a professional guy at all. The YouTuber whom we have never seen before she broadcasts the video made a terrible mistake: She asked her followers to share their phone numbers and she would choose one to try the app and make a phone call during the video. What she was supposed to do was to buy a new simcard and share it with followers and talk to the first one who called. This mistake created a suspicion about customer data privacy and some consumers unfortunately thought that our company asked for telephone numbers. That was not the last mistake, after one or two weeks, she used an application which is our biggest rival during video.

Brand managers stated that the match between followers and the target consumer segment of the brand is vital. The quality, demographics and purchasing power of the followers are more important than the number of followers. T.K. states that:

Our products are more expensive than substitutes in drugstores, therefore we firstly target women who earn enough money to afford our products, not teenagers. S.Ö. or M.Ö. for example, they are very famous makeup vloggers however most of their followers are very young and do not earn money, only a very small fraction of them can afford the products. Therefore, we do not want to work with those influencers. One friend from our agency told me that they hosted an event with M.Ö. for another brand and all attendees of the event were high school and elementary school students.

As well as the match between brands' typical potential customers and followers, the match between the product that will be promoted and the influencer should not be ignored, T.K. adds:

We know famous influencers and their followers well. We think about the product and try to find the influencer who tells it best. For example, S. shares deductive videos, she likes exploring new and innovative products and trying them and teaching them how to use them. If we need to educate customers about usage of a new product, if we are launching an innovative product, our first choice is S. If we are launching an eyeshadow, we choose makeup influencers who are best in eye makeup.

Authenticity of the content is of highest importance for brands. When an influencer does not really like the brand and product and endorse it just for financial purposes the endorsement success is low. B.S.'s experience about using rival products in consecutive videos was a problem since it destroys authenticity.

When the content does not seem authentic, it cannot be successful. Influencers should behave naturally. The most successful contents that make our sales reach the peak are "Favorites" and "Cosmetic Use-Ups" because they have a feeling of reality.

Finally, both brand managers mentioned the lack of reliable ROI measures. For the technology company interviewed, the rate of download of the application after release of the YouTuber's video was the measure of the return of the campaign. T.K. stated that they give promo-codes to influencers, when they share a branded content

they offer their followers a discount using a personalized code. They also put affiliate links under YouTube videos when a product is mentioned. Therefore, the effectiveness of influencers in conversion can be compared. (Note of the author: When the interview was conducted Instagram had not launched the swipe up feature yet, therefore it was harder to see the impact on sales). T.K. said that:

Sometimes, even without a campaign with budget, an influencer organically explores a product and recommends it. We see skyrocketed sales statistics of a product which we do not promote lately, when we ask shops, salespeople state that many customers visited the shop with screenshots of an influencer photo or video. Thus, we can estimate the power of the influencer in increasing sales.

### 3.3.2 Influencers' attitude and behavior

Authenticity, sincerity and trust were the most frequent themes in influencer interviews. When they are asked about the factors that are most important for influencers' success, they named these three factors as vital. Interviewee 3, a group who own an entertainment YouTube channel with more than one million followers declare that:

We are still authentic, we are from the public. Our followers think that we are also like them and behave as if we are friends. Our followers made us so popular and successful and we try very hard to protect this intimate and sincere relationship, we do not want to be distant. People say "I don't want an influencer who I feel hesitant to go and say hi when I see in real life". We three have nothing to do with being cool. We are sympathetic instead.

D.S., a lifestyle insta-blogger and a YouTuber who shares cooking videos, describes a successful influencer as an authentic person and adds:

I am a blogger who has been creating content even before Instagram. I was writing a blog, like a diary. We started as amateurs but we slowly became more professional. When turned from amateur to professional, you lose your innocence and believability like everything that is commercialized. Followers have become very skeptical and hardly believe us (influencers). I still try to stay amateur, I broadcast cooking videos, I do not want it to be like a TV program, you hear the voice of my son saying he is hungry, I do not use

professional equipment. I do not cook to share on YouTube, but I share what I am cooking for dinner. It is more sincere.

M.K., an influencer who has above 85k Instagram followers and generating entertainment content also highlights sincerity:

My followers send me messages such as “You are just like my brother/father”. If you become a snob or fake, you cannot be successful. Some influencers try to be “cool” but being sincere is more important. Your followers made you what you are today. If you are real and sincere, they like you more.

Being perceived as trustworthy is crucial for all influencers interviewed. They perceive sponsored content as a threat to trustworthiness. Brand collaborations are their main source of turnover, however they all believe that the balance is hard to achieve. They have different strategies for sharing paid content without irritating followers. M.K. proposes that:

Whatever you do, some followers do not want to see ads (paid content). I do not like to say directly “Hi friends, go to that page, follow that brand, buy it”. If the brand also does a favor for followers, I prefer it and followers also like it. For example, a tourism company offered me a vacation with followers, it was very entertaining.

K.G. tries to justify the money they earn from brand collaborations:

What irritates our followers most is ads (sponsored content). We broadcast videos to make our living. We explain that we also have expenses in our business, we spend money to generate content. Sometimes one follower writes a negative comment about sponsored content, another follower replies: “What can they do? They travel to create videos, how will they make money without sponsors?”

D.G., a popular fashion influencers with over 220k Instagram followers, states:

If I do not like a product, I never recommend it. If a brand I do not know offers sponsorship, first, I ask them to send samples, I try and if I am satisfied, the collaboration starts.

D.S.’s statement is parallel to D.G.’s:

A product should not be promoted without believing in it, before trying and seeing the results. If an influencer shares a content without thinking if it is true or not, his/her content loses all effectiveness. If influencers promote all products when a brand offers to do so, it will not be different from ads in

magazines. I am satisfied with the money I earn from sponsorships, therefore I do not sacrifice the quality of my content for more money. If all influencers do not behave in this way, this business will lose all credibility. Especially for cosmetic products it is much more important because of health reasons. Moreover, I cannot say a mascara that costs 200 tl is very good if I am not satisfied. Otherwise, some people will pay this money for a bad product and I feel very sorry for that.

Interviewee 7, a nano influencer who generate content in lifestyle theme has 6k Instagram followers, have just turned out to a content creator from a content consumer:

Before entering into this business, I had a naïve attitude towards sponsored content, I was thinking that the influencer explored a product and friendly recommended it. When brands sponsor ten influencers simultaneously and they share the same sponsored content, it is not believable at all, the sincerity diminishes.

Influencers are aware that when a branded content does not declare it is a paid content, followers are irritated more; however, they are in general reluctant to declare since effectiveness decreases. When a content consumer is exposed to a sponsored content, the financial purpose behind it decreases the authenticity and trust. The consumer can use a perceptual filtering mechanism to brand messages in the content as if it is an ad on TV. K.G. says that when they declare a sponsor, some followers write comments such as “do not watch this video, only ad”. D.S. states:

If it is hidden, it is more effective. I personally do not click a sponsored video because I do not believe that the content will be original and creative if it is created for promotion.

When choosing a brand to endorse, influencers think about the match not to lose credibility and trust. Three influencers mentioned they choose brands only if they believe and trust. Since Interviewee 7 is a nano influencer, she stated that she had no chance to choose brands, therefore she had no criteria and positively responded to all offers brands made. K.G. declared a different perspective:

We have no criteria to choose a brand. If they can pay for the content we create the content. A Turkish proverb says that “*Parayı veren düdüğü çalar*”

*(He who pays the piper, calls the tune).* Yet, we think about the brand and if we believe that a collaboration will be not beneficial, we tell it frankly. If we do not tell it, the content may not be effective and this brand may give up online marketing completely. It harms the industry as a result. Satisfying the brand is important for us.

Some influencers in the sample highlighted that brands overvalue the number of followers and underestimate the quality of followers. D.S. says that:

My followers are between the ages of 20-40, 30% is male and mostly from A-B socio-economic group. My followers are really very respectful and open minded. Most of Turkish influencers face negative comments when they share an alcoholic drink or a church photo, but these posts do not irritate my followers. Brands started to select us again since they have already seen that the number of followers is not the most important criteria. One influencer may have one million followers but are they your target audience? Can they buy your products? What if most of them are teenagers that cannot afford your products?

D.G. has a similar proposition:

I have 130k followers, not too much but the performance of my collaborations are better than influencers who have much more followers because my followers are between 25 and 40, from AB social economic group, living in urban areas and have a high purchasing power.

An important insight from interviews with influencers is the weakness of feedback systems. Influencers take a lot of feedback from followers when they recommend a product but they do not share this valuable information with brands. They are also not included in design and R&D processes although it could be very valuable to use market knowledge of influencers while designing new products or making revisions.

### 5.3.3 Followers' attitude toward influencers and influencer marketing

The primary motivations of the consumers in the sample are being entertained, learning more about their hobbies, and having a good time by looking at nice pictures and videos. Different social media channels are preferred for different motivations. YouTube is mostly used when the motivation is learning or

entertainment, Instagram serves mostly aesthetic purposes and Twitter is used to keep up with the news.

Paid content is not perceived as negative as brands and influencers assume- on the condition that the frequency is acceptable and the context is suitable. E.E. states that it is no problem until the influencer exaggerates. T.Y. says that:

My attitude towards brand-influencer collaborations depends on their frequency. I like to see branded content occasionally. Maybe I really would like to buy it and I need advice. For example, seeing a content promoting a coffee bean may be nice for me, because I can buy and try it. If I follow an influencer sharing content about travels, a flight ticket campaign he announces is useful. Yet, if branded content is too frequent, it is overwhelming.

A.G. holds a more negative attitude towards paid content:

I do not like this kind of content too much. When I see influencers that I like promoting a brand I say “I loved you, why did you do that?”

When paid content is disclosed, most consumers react with prejudice, however if they understand it is not disclosed although it is sponsored, the reaction is more negative. H.B. states that:

Sometimes I see YouTube videos with sponsored hashtags, it is very irritating. I watch these videos just because I am curious but I do not buy these products. These promoted products do not seem attractive to me. D.Ö. for example, is a transparent influencer, when it is sponsored, she declares. I do not buy from the sponsor brand but I watch her other videos (which no declared sponsor is seen) and I may buy the products mentioned in these videos.

A.G. declares she is happy with the new rule of Facebook for sponsor disclosure:

I hate when the paid content is not disclosed it is very dangerous. There are many people who cannot discriminate between what is branded and what is not. Kids and under-educated people are more vulnerable. I get very angry when I see this kind of content. I have heard about the new regulation, it is a good sign.

Most followers prefer more sincere and authentic influencers that they feel similar to themselves. In order to have a more intimate and close relationship, they like some personal content such as daily vlogs, family pics. Yet, the frequency is also crucial

here. If a follower follows an influencer for a content for a specific theme such as cooking or make up videos, personal content should not exceed content related to the theme. T.Y. says that:

If I follow an influencer because I like her, I like to learn more about her, I like to see her family pics, vacations, and I can be curious about her daily life. However, if I follow an account about travel for stunning views, I would not like personal photos.

Expertness is an important factor while deciding to follow an influencer. E.E. declares that:

Expertness of the influencer is very important. I should feel that I can learn from them. Influencers should be very good in the theme they are specialized, and if they can create contents from multiple areas, it is even better. You follow an influencer for basketball news and you also see cooking content. You think “Wow, he is good at everything!

H.B. says that she loves seeing influencers’ daily life and it contributes to trust:

I want to know influencers personally. I love influencers’ “my morning/evening routine” kind of videos, I like seeing what they eat. Watching their daily life, not only makeup videos, make me feel closer to them, like friends. As I feel closer, I start to purchase recommended products. When a friend recommends something, you buy it, when a stranger recommends, you hesitate. Trust is built when we know them better.

Finally, the interviews with consumers provided evidence that consumers devote more time to follow influencers. One of our interviewees, G.T. declared that she has just started a YouTube channel on beauty theme. Other engaged social media followers in the sample also declared if they had time, they would like to share content about their interests and hobbies.



## CHAPTER 4

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESEARCH MODEL

#### 4.1 Development of the influencer image construct

The most common research stream in influencer marketing literature is characteristics of the influencer and its influence on marketing outcomes such as brand attitude and purchase intention (Vrontis et al., 2021). Source characteristics theme in extant celebrity endorsement literature heavily concentrated on which qualities of the endorsers (the source that gives the message) affect message acceptance and persuasion. Findings of influencer marketing and celebrity endorsement studies shed light to this research to develop a new construct measuring qualities of the influencer in a comprehensive way.

Source credibility constructs have been measured since the 1960s in various studies in advertising, marketing, communication literature (DeSarbo & Harshman, 1985; Simpson & Kahler, 1981; Wilding & Bauer, 1968; Wynn, 1987). Dimensions mostly measured in these studies included trustworthiness, expertness, competence, dynamism, objectivity, safety, attractiveness, authoritativeness, believability and sociability.

The source credibility model of Ohanian (1990) is one of the most influential studies explaining what makes a celebrity credible. Ohanian conceptualizes credibility as a three-dimensional construct whose underlying dimensions are expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness. Most influencer marketing research revisited this conceptualization to measure influencer credibility (Breves et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2019).

In spite of numerous studies measuring source credibility, there is no consistency among researchers as to how many dimensions define credibility and what they are. Inconsistencies in the literature motivated us to revisit source credibility concept and enlarge it to a more comprehensive construct named “influencer image” which includes popularity, responsiveness and authenticity beside trustworthiness, perceived expertise and attractiveness of credibility construct. We revised credibility and added new dimensions in order to adapt it to social media context. Popularity became easily measurable since number of followers on social media indicate it clearly. Responsiveness have become an important factor that impacts the ties between influencer and follower, since social media is an interactive space, differing from mainstream media. Therefore, we came up with a six-dimensional new construct, influencer image. Proposed dimensions will be detailed further.

#### 4.1.1 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the “*honesty, integrity and believability of an endorser*” (Erdogan, 1999, p.297). Brands collaborate with endorsers who are perceived as honest, believable, and dependable (Shimp, 1997). Trustworthiness is mostly described as a characteristic of endorser credibility (Breves et al., 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2020). Antecedents and consequences of trustworthiness in source credibility context are examined by numerous researchers. Trustworthiness can be predicted by popularity, parasocial relationship, commercial orientation, and endorser-brand fit and can influence attitude towards the ad, product/brand attitude, and purchase intention (Vrontis et al., 2021).

#### 4.1.2 Authenticity

Authenticity attribute is attracting a growing research interest since consumers are looking for authenticity in products and brands (Chronis & Hampton, 2008).

Authentic is mostly used as a synonym of real and opposite of fake; however, in branding literature the meaning is broader. The authenticity of a brand or a personal brand depends on whether it has intrinsic or extrinsic motivations (Audrezet et al., 2020). Brands are perceived as inauthentic if they only strive for higher profits; on the other hand, authentic brands are thought to have non monetary purposes and their marketers are believed to be enjoying being in the business (Moulard, Garrity & Rice., 2015; Moulard, Raggio & Folse, 2016). The intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation theory also holds for person brands such as politicians, artists, celebrities (Moulard et al., 2016). Influencers as personal brands may also focus on intrinsic motivations and share content based on their passions and values to be perceived as authentic. Influencers who share their thoughts openly, transparent in brand collaborations achieve better evaluation of endorsement and brand due to higher authenticity (Hu et al., 2020). Authenticity is closely related to trustworthiness however it is a different construct that this research hypothesizes to be an underlying dimension of influencer image.

#### 4.1.3 (Perceived) Expertise

Expertise refers to the level of knowledge, experience and skills one possesses. In endorsement effectiveness perspective perceived expertise is taken into consideration rather than objective expertise since the perception of expertise is more powerful in shaping attitudes and behavior compared to the actual knowledge. Crisci and

Kassinove (1973) suggested that perceived level of expertise, such as changing “dr” to “mr” has a significant influence on respondents' compliance with the recommendation. Perceived expertise or competence is a commonly agreed dimension of source credibility (DeSarbo & Harshman, 1985; Simpson & Kahler, 1980, 1981; Wynn, 1987; Ohanian, 1990). The earliest opinion leaders were experts such as doctors, dentists, historians or soldiers. Influencer marketing studies which have their roots in opinion leadership and celebrity endorsement literature supported that expertise of the influencer is a dimension of its credibility and affects endorsement success (Hughes et al., 2019; Ki & Kim, 2019; Trivedi & Sama, 2020).

#### 4.1.4 Physical Attractiveness

Physical attractiveness is accepted as an important predictor of endorsement effectiveness since attractive people in ads attract more attention and evoke the desire to look similar by taking their advice (Erdogan, 1999; Kahle & Homer, 1985). Moreover, the halo effect leads to a misperception that attractive looking people are also good at unrelated contexts (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Most source credibility models take attractiveness as a dimension of credibility (DeSarbo & Harshman, 1985, Ohanian, 1990).

#### 4.1.5 Popularity

The impact of popularity on endorsement success is supported by numerous studies in influencer marketing and celebrity endorsement literature (Hill, Troshani, & Chandrasekar, 2017; Ladhari, Massa, & Skandrani, 2020). De Veirman et al. (2017) argued that the likability of the influencer stems from his/her popularity. Increased popularity gives the influencer a celebrity-like status.

#### 4.1.6 Responsiveness

The main difference between celebrities in traditional media and influencers in social media is the attainability and relatability of the latter. If an influencer responds to comments, they are perceived as more attainable. When celebrity endorsement has evolved to influencer marketing, one-way communication from the brand through endorser to the public has transformed into two-way communication. Social media users write comments, send messages and ask influencers questions and the communication between influencer and the follower starts a parasocial relationship (Hu et al, 2000). Parasocial interaction is the antecedent of perceptions of endorsement and purchase intention (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Reinikeinen et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Responsiveness of the influencer contributes to building a parasocial interaction and leads to a more positive influencer image.

As a result of the discussion about the dimensions of the influencer image construct, we hypothesize that:

H1. a) Trustworthiness, b) authenticity, c) perceived expertise, d) popularity, e) physical attractiveness, f) responsiveness are significant dimensions of influencer image.

#### 4.2 Outcomes of influencer image

Influencer image construct which consists of trustworthiness, authenticity, perceived expertise, physical attractiveness, popularity, and responsiveness is expected to have a positive relationship with marketing outcomes such as brand awareness, brand attitude and purchase intention. Influencer marketing literature provides evidence that influencer credibility has a positive effect on brand awareness (Lou & Yuan,

2018), attitude (Schouten et al., 2019), purchase intention (Fink et. al, 2020), compliance intention (Sakib et al., 2020). Since influencer image construct is built upon influencer credibility, it is expected to find evidence for relationships in similar directions.

In addition to influencer credibility, underlying dimensions of influencer image such as attractiveness, popularity, expertise and their impact on marketing outcomes have been empirically tested (Torres et al., 2019). Attractiveness (Trivedi & Sama 2020, Yuan & Lou, 2020), expertise (Hughes et al, 2019), trustworthiness (Schouten et al.), popularity (Hill et al., 2017) affect brand attitude and/or purchase intention.

Therefore, the current study posits that:

H2: Influencer image has a direct positive effect on a) brand awareness, b) brand attitude, c) purchase intention.

H3: Brand awareness mediates the relationship between influencer image and a) brand attitude, b) purchase intention.

H4: Brand attitude mediates the relationship between influencer image and purchase intention.

#### 4.3 The outcomes of brand prominence

Product placement practices are very frequent in film, TV and video games industries and social media content is the most recent discovery for product placement. Gupta and Lord (1998) provided evidence that prominent product placement (easily seen, such as the Pepsi vending machine in the house in Tom Hanks's movie *Big*) outperforms subtle placements (such as a Pepsi logo not catching the eye). Therefore, it is expected that in influencers' content, prominence

of brand is a necessary condition to increase brand awareness and later than, brand attitude and purchase intention.

When brand/product placement is prominent enough, this brings two main benefits. First, recall and recognition increases after exposure to the product. Second, prominence of brands signals an explicit endorsement. Russell and Stern (2006) claim that endorser and brand association becomes stronger when the endorser explicitly shows the brand as a symbol of support, commitment and honesty. Besides a direct positive impact on influencer image, brand awareness, brand attitude and purchase intention, brand prominence indirectly contributes to them through the mediation of influencer image and brand awareness

Hence, the present study hypothesizes that:

H5: Brand prominence has a direct positive effect on a) influencer image, b) brand awareness, c) brand attitude, d) purchase intention

H6: Influencer image mediates the relationship between brand prominence and a) brand awareness, b) brand attitude, c) purchase intention.

H7: Brand awareness mediates the relationship between brand prominence and a) brand attitude, b) purchase intention.

H8: Brand attitude mediates the relationship between brand prominence and purchase intention.

#### 4.4 The outcomes of influencer-brand fit

Match up hypothesis states that only if the conveyer of the message (celebrity endorser) and the endorsed product is congruent the message is accepted (Forkan, 1980; Kamins, 1990). The extant celebrity endorsement literature provides evidence that match up hypothesis hold and well-matching celebrities and products/brands

result in better attitude and behavioral outcomes (Kahle & Homer, 1985, Ohanian, 1991; Till & Busler, 2000). The congruence between endorser and the brand not only contributes to attitude towards the brand but also the attitude towards celebrity, since they are perceived as more believable (Kamins & Gupta, 1994).

The match-up hypothesis is adapted to social media influencers context to test if the fit between influencer and brand has an impact on endorsement effectiveness, similar to celebrity endorsement context. The congruence between the influencer and the brand endorsed is shown to be a strong predictor of the effectiveness of the endorsement (Torres et al, 2019). When the influencer and the brand has a good fit, it positively contributes to brand attitude and behavioral intentions, both directly and indirectly through increasing influencer's perceived credibility (Breves et al., 2019).

Therefore, the current research posits that:

H9: Influencer-brand fit has a direct positive effect on a) influencer image, b) brand awareness, c) brand attitude, d) purchase intention.

H10: Influencer image mediates the relationship between influencer-brand fit and a) brand awareness, b) brand attitude, c) purchase intention.

H11: Brand awareness mediates the relationship between influencer-brand fit and a) brand attitude, b) purchase intention.

H12: Brand attitude mediates the relationship between influencer-brand fit and purchase intention.

#### 4.5 The outcomes of frequency of sponsored posts

The extant advertising literature has stressed on how the frequency of an ad influences its effectiveness (Broussard, 2000; Naples, 1997; Tellis, 1997). When frequency of an ad is below a certain threshold, the effectiveness is low due to



insufficient recall; however, a rise in ad frequency contributes to brand choice at a decreasing rate (Tellis, 2008). It is a very tough job to determine the optimum frequency and number of repeated exposure to affect brand recall and purchase.

Frequency in influencer marketing context may refer to frequency of posts endorsing the same product in order to increase followers' memory and remind the endorsed product until a behavioral or attitudinal change happens or frequency of any sponsored post. The present study refers to the latter while examining the impact of endorsement frequency.

Authenticity of the influencer may be damaged by monetary purposes since they are believed to have extrinsic-financial motivations to endorse a product rather than intrinsically motivated to do so (Audrezet et al., 2020). When an influencer shares sponsored content very frequently, some followers may consider his/her less authentic and less trustworthy since they think the influencer endorses each and every product as long as she/he is paid a satisfactory fee. Martinez-Lopez et al. (2020) provided evidence that post's commercial orientation negatively impacts trustworthiness of the influencer. Frequency of paid content, thus, can make an influencer perceived as commercially oriented and less trustworthy.

Hence, the present study hypothesizes that:

H13: The frequency of sponsored posts has a negative impact on a) authenticity, b) trustworthiness of the influencer.

#### 4.6 The moderating effect of social media usage intensity

Influencer marketing literature heavily stress on influencer characteristics such as credibility, popularity or attractiveness of the influencer (Fink et al., 2020, Hill et al. 2017, Trivedi & Sama, 2020) or the impact of disclosure of the sponsor (Boerman,

2020; De Jans & Hudders, 2020; De Jans et al., 2018; De Jans et al., 2020 ; Kim & Kim, 2020; Stubb et al., 2019; Stubb & Colliander, 2019; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2016) to explore factors affecting endorsement effectiveness. A limited number of studies have taken influencer and audience interaction into consideration such as parasocial interaction (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Reinikainen et al. 2020; Sakib et al., 2020). Research which includes the audience characteristics to predict outcomes of the endorsement is rare. Munnukka et al. (2019) investigated the role of audience participation in creating parasocial relationships and influencer credibility. Ki et al. (2020) posited that followers' ideality, relatedness and competence needs fulfilment increase purchase intention.

The impact of the level of social media usage intensity on consumers' response to influencer endorsements is overlooked. Although there is lack of empirical support showing the effect of the social media usage on marketing outcomes, we expect that people who use social media heavily vs. low may respond differently to influencer content.

Since the literature does not suggest a direction, this study does not predict the valence of the impact; yet predicts that the interplay among influencer image, endorsement frequency, brand awareness, brand prominence, brand attitude, purchase intention and influencer brand fit will be different for high social media usage intensity group and low social media usage intensity group. Therefore, it is predicted that social media usage level is a significant moderator variable in the hypothesized model.

Thus, the current study posits that:

H14: Social media usage intensity level significantly moderates the interplay among influencer image, endorsement frequency, brand awareness, brand prominence, brand attitude, purchase intention and influencer brand fit.

The hypothesized model is shown at Figure 1.

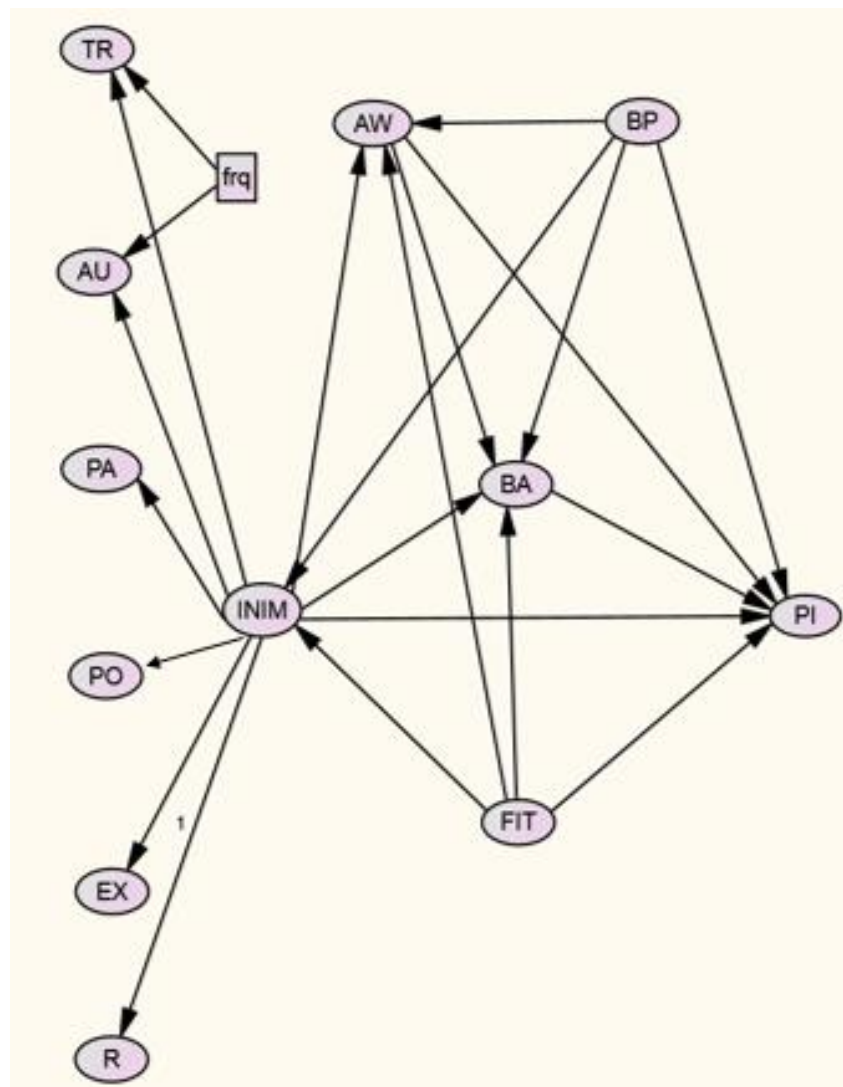


Figure 1 The hypothesized model

## CHAPTER 5

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### 5.1 Measurement

This study collected data via online surveys. The measurement instrument used in this study mostly consists of instruments of previous studies whose validity and reliability are tested and adapted those scales to influencer marketing context. Besides, we generated several original items depending on the knowledge gathered from extensive literature review and in-depth interviews when literature does not offer existing measurement instruments.

The structure of the survey consisted of three main parts. It started with a disclaimer ensuring data privacy and declaration of the purpose of the study. After the disclaimer, the first part of the survey consisted of warm-up questions about social media usage habits of respondents: “How frequent do you use social media?”, “How much time do you spend using social media?”, “Which social media channels do you use actively?”, “In which social media channel do you spend your most online hours?”, “Do you follow any social media influencer?”

For those who declare that they do not follow any influencer, the survey ends and they are not included in the sample. Respondents who follow influencers go on to answer the second part of the questionnaire. Reminding the influencer definition first, respondents are asked to choose an influencer and look at their Instagram profile (especially branded posts) and choose a branded post. Branded post definition is shared with participants to make it clear. Firstly, names of the influencer and brand are asked, besides, respondents are asked to take a screenshot of the social media post/story and upload it. Screenshots were compulsory to go on the upcoming

questions of the survey. The purpose of these screenshots is to check if the picture represents a real branded post of an influencer or not. Frequency of branded posts that chosen influencer was also asked. Constructs this study aims to measure and borrowed/developed scales are listed below. The complete survey in both Turkish and English can be seen in Appendix A and Appendix B respectively.

**Disclosure of Paid Partnership:** A direct yes/no question “Does the influencer openly disclose that it is a paid partnership in the branded content?” was asked.

**Brand (Product Placement) Prominence:** A three item, seven-point Likert scale to measure prominence of brand in shared content is developed by the author of this study: “In this post, brand is very prominent”, “In this post, brand outshines the content”, “In this post the first thing that catches the eye is brand”.

**Brand Awareness:** A three item seven-point Likert scale adapted from Yoo, Donthu and Lee’s (2000) brand awareness scale. Items adapted are: “This post helped me to recognize that brand”, “I can recognize X among other competing brands”, “Thanks to this post, I know this brand better”

**Purchase Intention:** Purchase intention is measured by Putrevu and Lord’s (1994) scale consisting of three items (seven-point Likert scale): “It is very likely that I will buy this brand”, “I will purchase this brand the next time I need this type of product”, “I will definitely try this brand.”

**Attitude Towards the Brand:** The current study adapted Holbrook and Batra’s (1987) attitude toward the ad scale (four items, seven point semantic): I dislike this brand / I like this brand, I react favorably to this brand/ I react unfavorably to this brand, I feel positive toward this brand/ I feel negative toward this brand/ This brand is bad/ This brand is good.

**Influencer-Brand Fit (Source Congruity):** Perceived source congruity is measured using the scale of Kirmani and Shiv (1998) consisting of three items ranging from 1 (high congruity) to 7 (low congruity): appropriate-inappropriate, fits well with the brand-fits poorly with the brand, matches the brand-does not matches the brand.

**Trustworthiness:** Trustworthiness of the influencer is measured by Ohanian's (1990) five-item, seven-point differential scale, anchored by dependable-undependable, honest-dishonest, reliable-unreliable, sincere-insincere, trustworthy-untrustworthy.

**Perceived Expertise:** Perceived expertise of the influencer is measured by Ohanian's (1990) five-item, seven-point differential scale, anchored by expert-not an expert, experienced-inexperienced, knowledgeable-unknowledgeable, qualified-unqualified, skilled-unskilled.

**Physical Attractiveness:** Attractiveness of the influencer is measured by Ohanian's (1990) five-item, seven-point differential scale, anchored by attractive-unattractive, classy-not classy, beautiful/handsome-ugly, elegant-plain and sexy-not sexy.

**Popularity:** Popularity of the influencer will be measured by a three item, seven-point differential scale developed by the author of the current study: popular-unpopular, have too many followers- do not have too many followers, well-known-not well known.

**Authenticity:** Moulard et al. (2015) measured human brand authenticity using a three-item scale: "Is genuine", "Seems real to me", "Is authentic". We adapted this scale converting a seven point differential: Genuine/not genuine, authentic/inauthentic, seems real/does not seem real.

Responsiveness: A two item, seven-point differential measure for responsiveness of the influencer is developed: “Always helps her followers/ never helps her followers”, “Always responds followers’ comments/ never responds to followers’ comments”.

The last part of the survey consists of demographic questions (age, sex, income and education). Survey questions are translated to Turkish asking the feedback of three judges and making necessary revisions in translation.

A pilot study of 23 respondents is conducted in order to discover potential flows and users’ understanding of questions as well as definitions of influencer and branded posts. Revisions to make questions clearer were made before starting data collection for the main study.

## 5.2 Data collection procedure

Data collection procedure is outsourced to an unbiased market research firm. We organized a survey on Google Forms. The market research firm only had the responsibility to distribute the link of the survey to appropriate respondents and did not take any role in measurement design or data analysis. The reason to collaborate with a market research firm is to reach a larger sample in a shorter period of time and eliminate generalizability problems since the research firm has a very large and diversified user base.

## 5.3 Sampling

### 5.3.1 Sample design

The unit of analysis of the present study is individuals. Purposive sampling method is preferred since it is the appropriate technique to select individuals who are proficient in the topic of interest (Cresswell & Clark, 2011). For this study, the target sample

should be composed of individuals who are knowledgeable about social media influencers. Thus, the sampling frame of the study is limited to social media users who follow at least one social media influencer.

Target sample size for this study was around 1000 since structural equation models require large sample sizes, preferably larger than 500 (Hair et al., 2010).

### 5.3.2 Sample characteristics

1706 respondents completed the survey, however, only 1100 of them were valid. 606 responses were eliminated and the reason for elimination for most responses were problems about choosing a brand-influencer collaboration.

Demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized below at Table 2. The sample is dominated by young, highly educated female social media users. Distribution of the sample seems similar to characteristics of global social media users. We Are Social 2021 report states that users between the ages of 25-35 constitute the biggest share of social media users (Wearesocial.com, 2021). Similarly, the biggest percentage of the sample of this study is between 24 and 30. Although global social media users' gender distribution is more balanced compared to our sample, Digital 2021 report states that female users use social media or brand search more than male social media users; therefore, a female dominated sample is more appropriate for the purpose of the study.

In addition to demographic characteristics, social media habits of respondents were examined by several questions. The sample of the current study mostly consists of heavy social media users. According to We Are Social's Digital 2021 report, average time spent using social media is two hours and 25 minutes (Wearesocial.com, 2021). The sample consists of people who spend more time



compared to average users on social media, since nearly two thirds of them report that average daily social media time exceeds three hours. Instagram is the most widely used social media channel in the sample, in line with the purpose of the research which focus on influencers on Instagram. Details about social media usage habits of the sample are illustrated at Table 3.

Table 2. Demographics of the Sample

| Gender                            |     |       | Age           |     |       |
|-----------------------------------|-----|-------|---------------|-----|-------|
| Female                            | 740 | 67.3% | 14-18         | 73  | 6.6%  |
| Male                              | 356 | 32.4% | 19-23         | 271 | 24.6% |
| Other                             | 4   | 0.4%  | 24-30         | 381 | 34.6% |
| Working Status                    |     |       | 31-40         | 294 | 26.7% |
| Student                           | 316 | 28.7% |               |     |       |
| Working                           | 443 | 40.3% | >40           | 81  | 7.4%  |
| Unemployed/ Retired/<br>Housewife | 341 | 31.0% |               |     |       |
| Education Level                   |     |       | Income Level  |     |       |
| High School Student               | 85  | 7.7%  | <2001 TL      | 427 | 38.8% |
| High School Graduate              | 194 | 17.6% | 2001-4000 TL  | 328 | 29.8% |
| University Student                | 250 | 22.7% | 4001-6000 TL  | 177 | 16.1% |
| University Graduate               | 499 | 45.4% | 6001-8000 TL  | 97  | 8.8%  |
| Master/PhD Student                | 16  | 1.5%  | 8001-10000 TL | 39  | 3.5%  |
| Master/PhD Graduate               | 56  | 5.1%  | >10001 TL     | 32  | 2.9%  |

Table 3. Social Media Usage Behavior of the Sample

| Time Spent on Social Media            | Frequency | %     |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|-------|
| 15 minutes or less                    | 7         | 0.6%  |
| 15-30 minutes                         | 23        | 2.1%  |
| 30-60 minutes                         | 85        | 7.7%  |
| 1-3 hours                             | 289       | 26.3% |
| 3-6 hours                             | 449       | 40.8% |
| >6 hours                              | 247       | 22.5% |
| Most Widely Used Social Media Channel | Frequency | %     |
| Facebook                              | 22        | 2.0%  |
| Instagram                             | 833       | 75.7% |
| Snapchat                              | 4         | 0.4%  |
| Tiktok                                | 14        | 1.3%  |
| Twitch                                | 1         | 0.1%  |
| Twitter                               | 52        | 4.7%  |
| Whatsapp                              | 1         | 0.1%  |
| YouTube                               | 173       | 15.7% |

## CHAPTER 6

### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents details of quantitative analysis of the data. Data collected via online survey is analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 and IBM SPSS AMOS 25 software packages. After imputing missing variables and checking normality and outliers; reliability tests and exploratory factor analysis are conducted to scales. Secondly, using SPSS Amos, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is run as SEM is the most widely used method to explore complex relationships among numerous observed and latent variables (Hair et al., 2010).

#### 6.1 Reliability analysis

In order to check the reliability of the measurement instrument, cronbach alpha values were calculated for each construct via SPSS software and illustrated at Table 4. All values are above 0.8 indicating that all constructs have very high reliability.

Table 4. Cronbach's Alpha Scores of the Constructs

| Construct                      | Cronbach's Alpha |
|--------------------------------|------------------|
| Brand Awareness                | 0.918            |
| Purchase Intention             | 0.948            |
| Brand Attitude                 | 0.969            |
| Influencer-Brand Fit           | 0.908            |
| Brand Prominance               | 0.945            |
| Physical Attractiveness        | 0.937            |
| Popularity                     | 0.897            |
| Authenticity                   | 0.94             |
| Responsiveness                 | 0.961            |
| Trustworthiness                | 0.945            |
| Perceived Expertise            | 0.937            |
| Overall Influencer Image Scale | 0.837            |

## 6.2 Exploratory factor analysis

### 6.2.1 EFA for influencer image construct

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is conducted to explore underlying dimensionality of a construct and to check internal reliability. EFA is a vital step when developing a new measure whose factor structure is unclear and has no theoretical support (Hair et al., 2010). Influencer image is a new second order construct proposed in the present research. Although literature gives clues about the underlying factor structure of the construct, factor analysis is vital to develop a reliable scale.

The first step of EFA is running Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) and Barlett's Test of Sphericity test in order to be sure that sample size is large enough to run EFA and data is appropriate. A minimum acceptable score for KMO test is 0.5 (Kaiser, 1974). KMO value of .960 indicates a highly adequate sample size and Barlett's Test of Sphericity resulted in a chi square value of 27713.037 at df. 253 significant at .000 level, respectively, supporting the existence of correlation among factors.

Following KMO and Bartlett's tests, anti image matrices and communalities were checked and all values exceeded 0.5 which is commonly accepted threshold value. When EFA is performed with Varimax rotation, eigenvalues are greater than one for four factors. However, a four-factor solution is not theoretically meaningful and conceptually different constructs (authenticity, perceived expertise and trustworthiness) loaded on the same factor.

In order to retest the underlying dimensionality of the influencer image, we tried to force the number of factors rather than using eigenvalue is greater than one cut off. The researcher predetermined the number of factors as six in order to see if authenticity, perceived expertise and trustworthiness dimensions will load on

different factors when the number of dimensions increased. Principal component analysis extraction method and Equamax rotation method was selected. The results of the analysis showed that one item (EX1: expert-not an expert) from expertise scale creates a double loading problem and this item is eliminated from further analysis. After deleting the EX1 item, EFA was rerun using the same criteria. KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity was revisited. Test results indicated that data and sample is appropriate for further factor analysis (KMO=.958 and chi-square=26516, df=231, p=.000). Anti image matrices and communalities were checked, all values were exceeding 0.5.

When six factors are extracted, 85% of the total variance is explained. All factor loadings and variance explained by each factor is summarized in Table 5.

#### 6.2.2 EFA for overall scale

The analysis procedure conducted in 6.2.1 is replicated for overall scale before we start further analysis. Besides influencer image dimensions, we included purchase intention (PI), brand awareness (AW), brand attitude (BA), brand prominence (BP) and influencer-brand fit (FIT) constructs of our scale in EFA.

First, we checked Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) and Barlett's Test of Sphericity test in order to be sure that sample size is large enough to run EFA and data is appropriate. KMO value of .946 indicates a highly adequate sample size since higher than 0.5 and Barlett's Test of Sphericity resulted in a chi square value of 45290.189 at df. 703 significant at .000 level, respectively, supporting the existence of correlation among factors. Anti image matrices and communalities were checked, all values were exceeding 0.5.

When eleven factors are extracted, 86% of the total variance is explained. All factor loadings and variance explained by each factor is summarized in Table 6.

Table 5. EFA (Influencer Image Construct)

|                                   | Factor Loading | Variance Explained |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Factor 1: Trustworthiness         |                | 58.833             |
| TR1                               | 0.779          |                    |
| TR2                               | 0.773          |                    |
| TR3                               | 0.748          |                    |
| TR4                               | 0.722          |                    |
| Factor 2: Authenticity            |                | 8.940              |
| AU1                               | 0.715          |                    |
| AU2                               | 0.747          |                    |
| AU3                               | 0.753          |                    |
| AU4                               | 0.679          |                    |
| Factor 3: Popularity              |                | 6.188              |
| PO1                               | 0.869          |                    |
| PO2                               | 0.894          |                    |
| PO3                               | 0.856          |                    |
| Factor 4: Physical Attractiveness |                | 4.412              |
| PA1                               | 0.678          |                    |
| PA2                               | 0.661          |                    |
| PA3                               | 0.742          |                    |
| PA4                               | 0.834          |                    |
| PA5                               | 0.649          |                    |
| Factor 5: Perceived Expertise     |                | 4.412              |
| EX2                               | 0.686          |                    |
| EX3                               | 0.698          |                    |
| EX4                               | 0.702          |                    |
| EX5                               | 0.676          |                    |
| Factor 6: Responsiveness          |                | 2.985              |
| R1                                | 0.926          |                    |
| R2                                | 0.791          |                    |
| Total Variance Explained          |                | 84.9               |

Table 6: EFA (Overall Scale)

|                                   | Factor Loading | Variance Explained |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Factor 1: Trustworthiness         |                | 39.137             |
| TR1                               | 0.760          |                    |
| TR2                               | 0.751          |                    |
| TR3                               | 0.724          |                    |
| TR4                               | 0.701          |                    |
| Factor 2: Brand Attitude          |                | 16.032             |
| BA1                               | 0.707          |                    |
| BA2                               | 0.907          |                    |
| BA3                               | 0.910          |                    |
| BA4                               | 0.866          |                    |
| Factor 3: Authenticity            |                | 7.125              |
| AU1                               | 0.705          |                    |
| AU2                               | 0.737          |                    |
| AU3                               | 0.742          |                    |
| AU4                               | 0.668          |                    |
| Factor 4: Popularity              |                | 5.236              |
| PO1                               | 0.863          |                    |
| PO2                               | 0.888          |                    |
| PO3                               | 0.852          |                    |
| Factor 5: Physical Attractiveness |                | 4.694              |
| PA1                               | 0.654          |                    |
| PA2                               | 0.638          |                    |
| PA3                               | 0.727          |                    |
| PA4                               | 0.845          |                    |
| PA5                               | 0.643          |                    |
| Factor 6: Perceived Expertise     |                | 3.620              |
| EX2                               | 0.662          |                    |
| EX3                               | 0.681          |                    |
| EX4                               | 0.686          |                    |
| EX5                               | 0.667          |                    |
| Factor 7: Brand Prominence        |                | 2.608              |
| BP1                               | 0.773          |                    |
| BP2                               | 0.894          |                    |
| BP3                               | 0.830          |                    |
| Factor 8: Influencer- Brand Fit   |                | 2.121              |
| FIT1                              | 0.839          |                    |
| FIT2                              | 0.889          |                    |
| FIT3                              | 0.873          |                    |
| Factor 9: Purchase Intention      |                | 2.08               |
| PI1                               | 0.779          |                    |
| PI2                               | 0.769          |                    |
| PI3                               | 0.806          |                    |
| Factor 10: Brand Awareness        |                | 1.733              |
| AW1                               | 0.780          |                    |
| AW2                               | 0.762          |                    |
| AW3                               | 0.710          |                    |
| Factor 11: Responsiveness         |                | 1.535              |
| R1                                | 0.916          |                    |
| R2                                | 0.774          |                    |
| Total Variance Explained          |                | 85.921             |

### 6.3 Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted as a further step to confirm if the theorized dimensionality is present or not. As a result of a detailed literature review and interviews, we built influencer image as a six-dimensional construct whose underlying dimensions are trustworthiness, authenticity, popularity, physical attractiveness, perceived expertise and responsiveness. Two CFA were run sequentially to test dimensionality we hypothesized of the construct. First, newly developed influencer image scale was tested. Goodness of fit (GOF) indices and correlations among underlying dimensions were assessed. Second, before testing causal relationships of the hypothesized structural model, correlations among constructs in the model and their dimensions were investigated. Hair et al. (2010) strongly recommends validating the measurement model before conducting SEM for the structural model. For this purpose, CFA will be conducted and goodness of fit (GOF) will be checked before running further SEM analyses.

#### 6.3.1 Influencer image measurement model

Influencer image construct is hypothesized to be a six-dimensional construct whose underlying dimensions are trustworthiness (TR), authenticity (AU), perceived expertise (EX), physical attractiveness (PA), popularity (PO) and responsiveness (R). Trustworthiness and authenticity have four items, perceived expertise has five items yet one is removed during EFA procedure, physical attractiveness has five, responsiveness has two and popularity has three items. Hypothesized measurement model is illustrated at Figure 2.



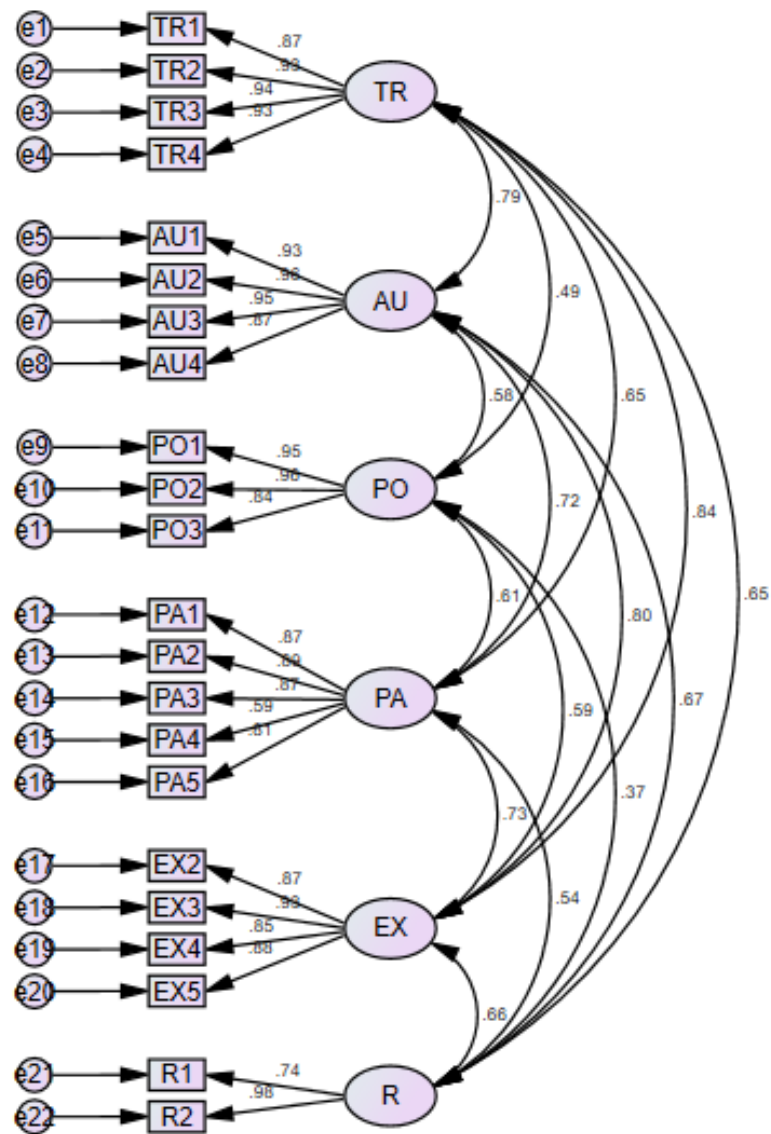


Figure 2. Influencer image measurement model

CFA results proved that all items have high loading (threshold value is 0.5) on the latent variables and are all significant therefore unidimensionality is supported.

#### 6.3.1.1 Reliability and validity assessment

After assessing unidimensionality, validity and reliability of the model needs to be checked. In order to establish reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity, widely used measures; Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance

Extracted (AVE), Maximum Shared Variance (MSV); are calculated and summarized at Table 7.

Table 7. Validity Estimates for the Influencer Image Measurement Model

|    | CR    | AVE   | MSV   | MaxR(H) | R     | AU    | PA    | PO    | EX    | TR    |
|----|-------|-------|-------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| R  | 0.854 | 0.749 | 0.456 | 0.955   | 0.866 |       |       |       |       |       |
| AU | 0.962 | 0.863 | 0.642 | 0.969   | 0.675 | 0.929 |       |       |       |       |
| PA | 0.906 | 0.662 | 0.534 | 0.926   | 0.544 | 0.722 | 0.814 |       |       |       |
| PO | 0.942 | 0.845 | 0.377 | 0.962   | 0.369 | 0.577 | 0.614 | 0.919 |       |       |
| EX | 0.933 | 0.777 | 0.714 | 0.938   | 0.659 | 0.801 | 0.731 | 0.593 | 0.881 |       |
| TR | 0.954 | 0.839 | 0.714 | 0.958   | 0.647 | 0.793 | 0.652 | 0.490 | 0.845 | 0.916 |

In order to check internal consistency among scale items, construct or composite reliability should be assessed. Construct reliability is high if a group of items of a latent variable are sufficiently correlated with each other. For composite reliability, the widely accepted threshold is 0.7 (Hair et. al, 2010). CR scores for all constructs of the model are above 0.8 indicating highly reliable measures.

Convergent validity is the extent to which a measure relates to other measures of the same phenomenon (Hair et. al, 2010). Convergent validity tests if observed variables of a latent variable explain the latent variable well. Average variance extracted (AVE) is preferred over CR to assess convergent validity. AVE is “*a summary indicator of convergence calculated from the variance extracted for all items loading on a single construct*” (Hair et al., 2017, p.111). Malhotra and Dash (2011) state that “*AVE is a more conservative measure than CR. On the basis of CR alone, the researcher may conclude that the convergent validity of the construct is adequate, even though more than 50% of the variance is due to error.*” (Malhotra & Dash, 2011, p.702). An AVE score over 0.5 indicates an adequate level of

convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All variables in the measurement model meet that requirement.

Discriminant validity check is a widely accepted prerequisite for model assessment in SEM analysis (Henseler, Ringe & Sarstedt, 2015). Discriminant validity refers to the extent in which the construct empirically differs from others. Discriminant validity ensures that a test does not “*correlate too highly with measures from which it is supposed to differ*” (Campbell, 1960, p. 548). In the absence of discriminant validity, “*researchers cannot be certain results confirming hypothesized structural paths are real or whether they are a result of statistical discrepancies*” (Farrell, 2010, p. 324). Fornell and Larcker criteria require that the square root of the average variance extracted for each latent construct exceeds the correlation it has with other constructs. Another criterion for discriminant validity requires average variance extracted (AVE) to be greater than maximum shared squared variance (MSV). The measurement model meets all the criteria and has no validity problems.

#### 6.3.1.2 Goodness of fit (GOF) assessment

After checking validity and reliability of the measurement model, fit of the model is assessed. Goodness of fit implies the discrepancy between observed data and expected values of the theoritized model. Literature suggests several GOF indices. GOF measures may be grouped into three, which are, absolute fit indices, incremental fit indices and parsimony fit indices. Hair et al. (2010) recommends checking at least one absolute and one incremental fit measure in addition to chi square statistics.

Chi square is the fundamental absolute fit measure in SEM. When chi square is used to assess fit, the researcher compares matrices and in order to support model

fit, chi square values need to be low. When chi square test produces insignificant results and cmin/df value is lower than three, model fit is achieved.

Although chi square test is typically the first step in model fit assessment, it has some important disadvantages. Hair et al. (2010) highlights two serious problems. First, chi square test is sensitive to sample size. Chi square statistic is a function of observed and estimated covariance matrices and sample size. Even if matrices remain the same, an increase in sample size leads to a decrease in chi square. Thus, it is very difficult to achieve model fit using chi square statistics when working with large samples. Second, when the number of variables rises, chi square test tends to be significant. To sum up, complex models with many observed and latent variables and large samples need to be assessed using different GOF measures.

Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) is introduced as an attempt to create a fit measure insensitive to sample size. Although sample size is not in the formula of GFI, sample size still has an impact on the index since it affects sample distribution (Hair et al., 2010). GFI is between zero and one, the closer it is to one, the better the fit. Most researchers accept GFI values over 0.9 as indicating good fit, however some argue that threshold value should be 0.95 (i.e. Hoelter, 1983). GFI has declined in popularity recently in favor of other GOF indices which are less sensitive to sample size and model complexity.

Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is one of the most widely used absolute fit indices. RMSEA is less sensitive to sample size and number of variables, thus it better represents how well data fits the population, not only a specific sample (Hair et al., 2010). Lower RMSEA values imply better fit, generally values under 0.8 are assumed acceptable.

Incremental fit indices compare model fit to an alternative baseline model, mostly a null model which assumes there is no correlation between variables.

Normed Fit Index (NFI) is the original incremental; however, the most widely used indices are Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) and its improved version Comparative Fit Index (CFI). Values over 0.9 indicate good fit for all incremental fit indices.

Parsimony fit indices use model complexity as an input while computing model fit since mostly complex models are expected to fit data better. Parsimony fit indices are recommended to be used while comparing competing models rather than using solely (Hair et al., 2010). Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) and Parsimony Normed Fit Index (PNFI) are two examples.

Influencer image measurement model is assessed using above mentioned fit indices. Table 8 illustrates estimates and cutoff values. Chi square, CFI, TLI and RMSEA threshold values are recommended for samples larger than 250 and models with thirty or more variables by Hair et. al (2010). Cmin/df value signals acceptable fit when lower than five (Marsh & Hocevar, 1985). All fit measures support that the model has a good fit.

Table 8. GOF Assessment of Influencer Image Measurement Model

| Measure    | Estimate    | Threshold                     |
|------------|-------------|-------------------------------|
| Chi square | Significant | Significant p values expected |
| Cmin/df    | 4.369       | 5 or lower                    |
| CFI        | 0.975       | Above 0.9                     |
| TLI        | 0.971       | Above 0.9                     |
| RMSEA      | 0.055       | 0.07 or lower                 |

### 6.3.2 Entire measurement model

CFA procedure supported validity, reliability and fit of measurement model we developed for a new construct, influencer image. The second step is testing the fit of

the model when other constructs we hypothesize that correlated with the influencer image. In order to test underlying dimensional structure and correlations among variables, CFA is conducted. Hair et al. (2010) warns that CFA should be run for the overall model simultaneously, not partially and separately for different constructs. The same procedure that was detailed in 6.3.1 was repeated. The measurement model is illustrated in Figure 3.

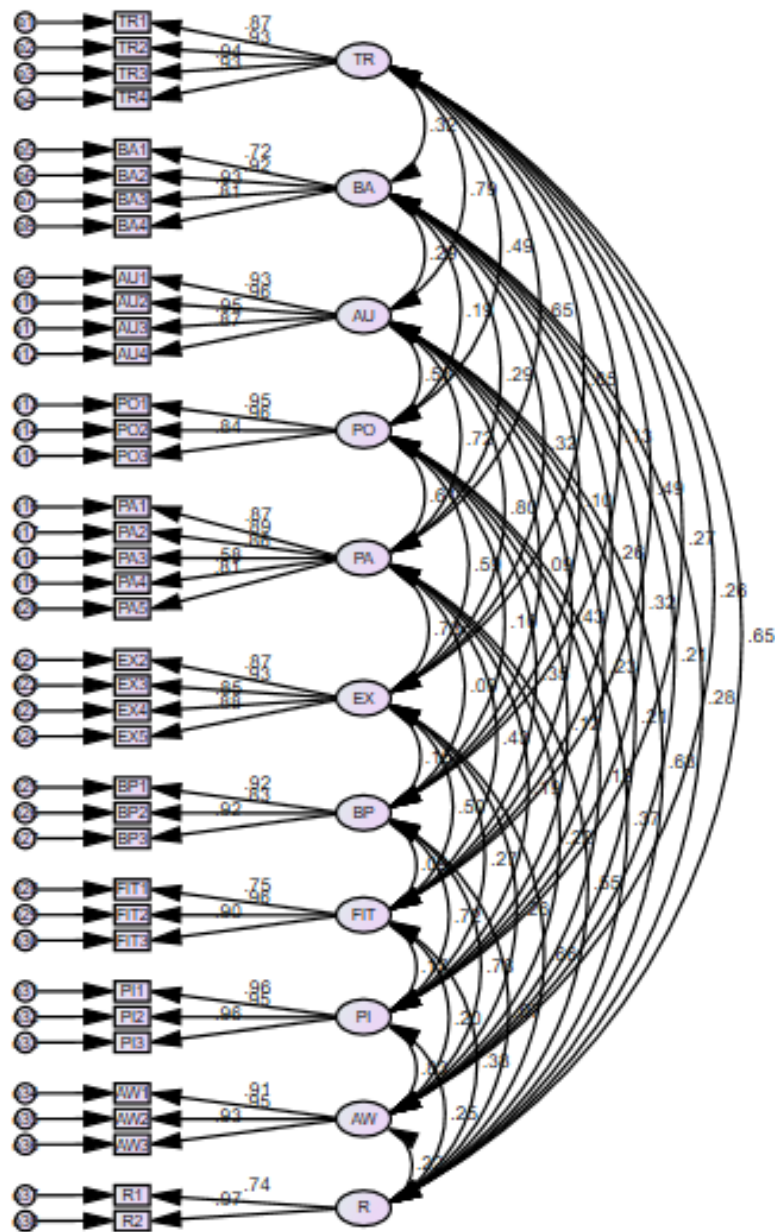


Figure 3 Entire measurement model

All correlations among variables are significant. CFA results proved that all items have high loading (threshold value is 0.5) on the latent variables and are all significant therefore unidimensionality is supported.

#### 6.3.2.1 Reliability and validity assessment

Validity and reliability of the entire measurement model is assessed computing Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) which are illustrated at Table 9.

Table 9. Reliability and Validity Assessment of the Measurement Model

|     | CR    | AVE   | MSV   | Max<br>R(H) | AW    | TR    | BA    | AU    | PO    | PA    | EX    | BP    | FIT   | PI    | R     |
|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| AW  | 0.948 | 0.860 | 0.684 | 0.950       | 0.927 |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| TR  | 0.954 | 0.839 | 0.714 | 0.958       | 0.259 | 0.916 |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| BA  | 0.912 | 0.723 | 0.105 | 0.938       | 0.207 | 0.317 | 0.850 |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| AU  | 0.962 | 0.863 | 0.642 | 0.969       | 0.214 | 0.793 | 0.294 | 0.929 |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| PO  | 0.942 | 0.845 | 0.377 | 0.962       | 0.124 | 0.490 | 0.187 | 0.577 | 0.919 |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| PA  | 0.906 | 0.662 | 0.534 | 0.926       | 0.219 | 0.652 | 0.287 | 0.722 | 0.614 | 0.813 |       |       |       |       |       |
| EX  | 0.933 | 0.778 | 0.714 | 0.938       | 0.262 | 0.845 | 0.320 | 0.801 | 0.594 | 0.731 | 0.882 |       |       |       |       |
| BP  | 0.919 | 0.791 | 0.615 | 0.928       | 0.784 | 0.131 | 0.103 | 0.094 | 0.101 | 0.086 | 0.149 | 0.889 |       |       |       |
| FIT | 0.905 | 0.762 | 0.252 | 0.944       | 0.200 | 0.495 | 0.255 | 0.427 | 0.348 | 0.428 | 0.502 | 0.086 | 0.873 |       |       |
| PI  | 0.970 | 0.914 | 0.684 | 0.970       | 0.827 | 0.267 | 0.324 | 0.234 | 0.123 | 0.194 | 0.269 | 0.724 | 0.172 | 0.956 |       |
| R   | 0.854 | 0.748 | 0.458 | 0.948       | 0.224 | 0.649 | 0.282 | 0.677 | 0.370 | 0.546 | 0.661 | 0.074 | 0.383 | 0.246 | 0.865 |

All CR scores are above 0.7 threshold value which support composite reliability. All AVE scores exceed 0.5 indicating convergent validity. MSV scores are lower than AVE for all constructs and the square root of the average variance extracted for each latent construct exceeds the correlation it has with other constructs therefore, meeting requirements of Fornell and Larcker (1981) for discriminant validity.

#### 6.3.2.2 Goodness of fit assessment

In order to test model fit, chi square, cmin/df, CFI, TLI, RMSEA estimates are calculated and illustrated at Table 10. As a result of using a large sample and complex model, chi square was significant as expected. Yet, all other fit measures indicated a good fit.

Table 10. Goodness of Fit Assessment of the Measurement Model

| Measure    | Estimate    | Threshold                     |
|------------|-------------|-------------------------------|
| Chi square | Significant | Significant p values expected |
| Cmin/df    | 2.92        | 5 or lower                    |
| CFI        | 0.974       | Above 0.9                     |
| TLI        | 0.961       | Above 0.9                     |
| RMSEA      | 0.042       | 0.07 or lower                 |

#### 6.4 Structural model

The result of CFA supported that the measurement model is valid and reliable and the model it is good, further SEM analysis seems appropriate at this stage. In this section the basic structural model that we test the hypothesized relationships among variables will be assessed using IBM SPSS Amos 25 software package. All variables and hypothesized relationships among them are illustrated in Figure 4.

##### 6.4.1 Goodness of fit assessment

GOF estimates such as chi square, cmin/df, CFI, TLI, RMSEA are calculated to assess how well the model fits the data. Estimates are illustrated at Table 11. Due to a large sample and complex model, chi square was significant as expected. Except chi square significance, all other fit measures signaled a good fit.



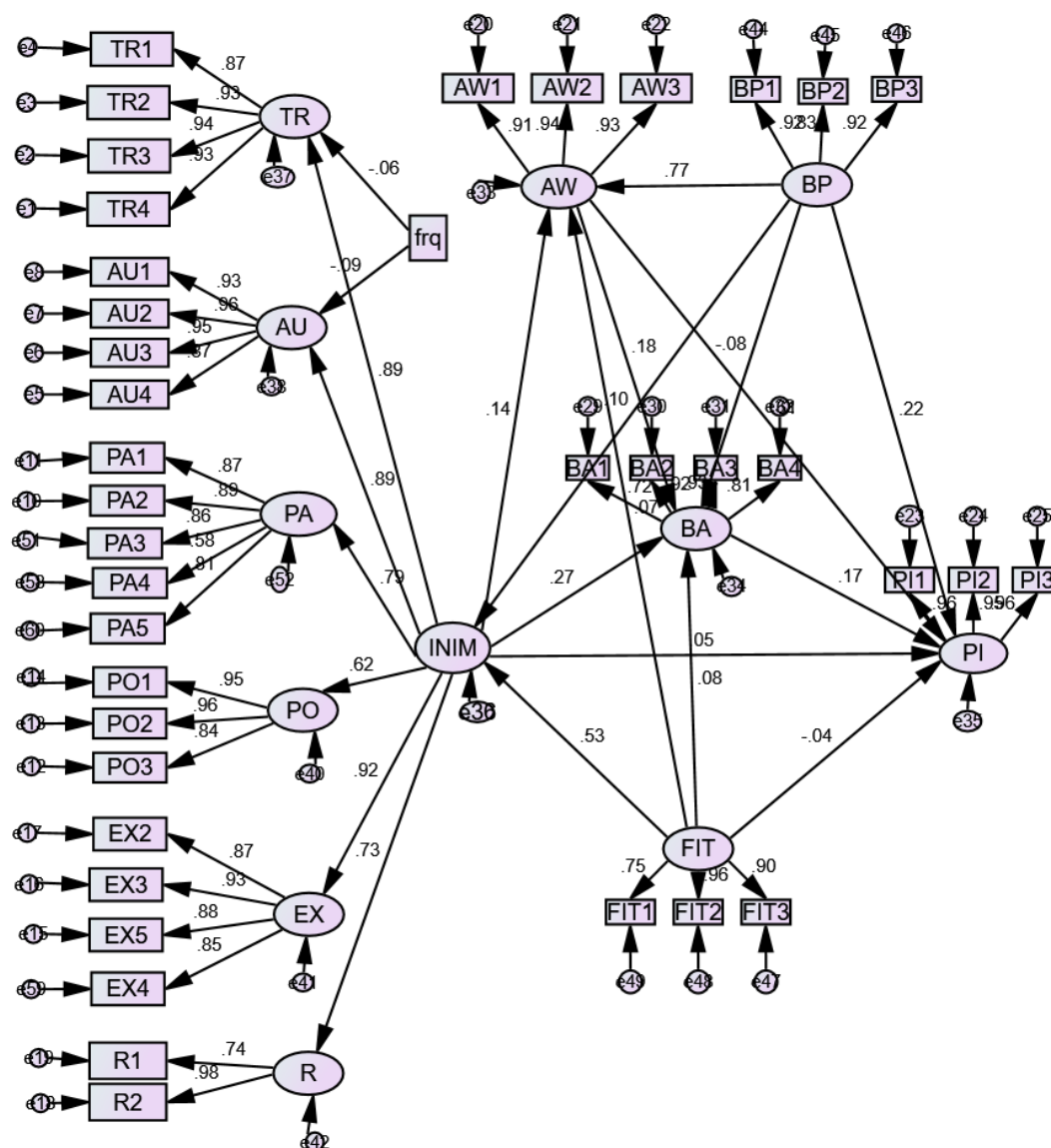


Figure 4 Structural model

Table 11. Goodness of Fit of the Structural Model

| Measure    | Estimate    | Threshold                     |
|------------|-------------|-------------------------------|
| Chi square | Significant | Significant p values expected |
| Cmin/df    | 3.17        | 5 or lower                    |
| CFI        | 0.967       | Above 0.9                     |
| TLI        | 0.964       | Above 0.9                     |
| RMSEA      | 0.044       | 0.07 or lower                 |

#### 6.4.2 Hypothesis testing

In this section, after supporting a good overall model fit, relationships among variables will be examined to check if they are significant and if their valence are as expected.

##### 6.4.2.1 Direct effects

Among 22 direct relationships, three paths are insignificant. Influencer image (INIM) construct has six underlying dimensions, trust (TR), authenticity (AU), perceived expertise (EX), physical attractiveness (PA), popularity (PO) and responsiveness (R), are significantly loaded on that construct. Frequency (frq) of branded posts has a statistically significant negative effect on TR and AU.

Influencer- brand fit (FIT) has a positive and strong impact on INIM. Brand prominence (BP) has a significant positive yet relatively smaller effect on INIM. INIM, BP and FIT have significant and positive impact on brand awareness (AW). AW and INIM have a positive, significant effect on brand attitude (BA); on the other hand, FIT and BP have no significant impact on BA.

BA, AW and BP significantly increase purchase intention (PI); yet INIM and FIT have marginally significant effect on purchase intention.

Table 12 illustrates hypothesized paths, their significance and regression weights.

##### 6.4.2.2 Mediation analysis

In the former section direct relationships among independent and outcome variables were investigated and hypotheses were tested. However, the model proposed more complex and indirect relationships, including not only an independent and outcome

variable but also mediator variables that may change the relationship between independent and outcome variables.

Table 12. Path Analysis

| Hypothesized Relationship |      |      | Unstandardized Estimate | Standardized Estimate | P Value | Significance           |
|---------------------------|------|------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------|------------------------|
| INIM                      | <--- | FIT  | 0.341                   | 0.021                 | ***     | Significant            |
| INIM                      | <--- | BP   | 0.054                   | 0.015                 | ***     | Significant            |
| AW                        | <--- | INIM | 0.247                   | 0.046                 | ***     | Significant            |
| AW                        | <--- | BP   | 0.743                   | 0.024                 | ***     | Significant            |
| AW                        | <--- | FIT  | 0.077                   | 0.029                 | 0.008   | Significant            |
| BA                        | <--- | FIT  | 0.045                   | 0.02                  | 0.027   | Significant            |
| BA                        | <--- | INIM | 0.233                   | 0.033                 | ***     | Significant            |
| BA                        | <--- | AW   | 0.086                   | 0.026                 | 0.001   | Significant            |
| BA                        | <--- | BP   | -0.039                  | 0.025                 | 0.124   | Insigificant           |
| PI                        | <--- | BA   | 0.35                    | 0.042                 | ***     | Significant            |
| TR                        | <--- | INIM | 1.082                   | 0.041                 | ***     | Significant            |
| AU                        | <--- | INIM | 1.075                   | 0.043                 | ***     | Significant            |
| PA                        | <--- | INIM | 0.888                   | 0.04                  | ***     | Significant            |
| PO                        | <--- | INIM | 0.629                   | 0.034                 | ***     | Significant            |
| EX                        | <--- | INIM | 1.062                   | 0.041                 | ***     | Significant            |
| PI                        | <--- | INIM | 0.08                    | 0.041                 | 0.051   | Marginally significant |
| TR                        | <--- | Frq  | -0.06                   | 0.017                 | ***     | Significant            |
| AU                        | <--- | Frq  | -0.09                   | 0.017                 | ***     | Significant            |
| PI                        | <--- | BP   | 0.216                   | 0.032                 | ***     | Significant            |
| PI                        | <--- | AW   | 0.615                   | 0.034                 | ***     | Significant            |
| PI                        | <--- | FIT  | -0.041                  | 0.025                 | 0.105   | Marginally significant |

AMOS implements the percentile bootstrap method for total indirect effects in simple and multiple mediator models (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). AMOS standard output estimates direct relationships in the structural model, however, does not test paths of indirect relationships unless the user defines them. In order to test indirect mediation effects, we made use of user defined estimands plugin that make use of percentile bootstrapping.

We ran custom defined estimands and via a bootstrapping procedure, tested if indirect effects are different from zero. 26 paths are defined and only three of them are marginally significant or insignificant.

Influencer image has a significant mediating effect for influencer-brand fit on brand awareness and brand attitude. The serial mediation of influencer image and brand awareness on the relationship between influencer brand fit and brand attitude is significant. Moreover, the serial mediation of influencer image, brand awareness and brand attitude between influencer image and purchase intention was tested and found to be significant. However, the mediation effect of influencer image for influencer brand fit on purchase intention is insignificant.

Brand awareness mediates the impact of influencer brand fit on brand attitude. Brand awareness and brand attitude mediate the relationship between influencer-brand fit and purchase intention both separately and serially.

Influencer image has a significant mediating effect for brand prominence on brand awareness and brand attitude. Influencer image and brand awareness serially mediate the relationship between brand prominence and brand attitude. The relationship between brand prominence and purchase intention is mediated serially by influencer image and brand awareness, or influencer image, brand awareness and brand attitude. Yet, the mediating effect of influencer image between brand prominence and purchase intention is insignificant.

Brand awareness has a significant mediating effect for brand prominence on brand attitude and purchase intention. Brand awareness and brand attitude also have a serial mediating effect for brand prominence on purchase intention. However, when brand awareness is eliminated, the mediating effect of brand attitude for brand prominence on purchase intention is not significant.

The relationship between influencer image and purchase intention is mediated by brand awareness and brand attitude both separately and serially. Brand awareness mediates the relationship between influencer image and purchase intention. Lastly, the impact of brand awareness on purchase intention is mediated by brand attitude. All estimates are illustrated in Table 13.

Table 13. Mediation Analysis

| Path                              | Estimate | Lower  | Upper | P     | Significance           |
|-----------------------------------|----------|--------|-------|-------|------------------------|
| FIT --> INIM --> AW               | 0.084    | 0.056  | 0.112 | 0.001 | Significant            |
| FIT --> INIM --> AW --> BA        | 0.007    | 0.003  | 0.012 | 0.002 | Significant            |
| FIT --> INIM --> AW --> BA --> PI | 0.003    | 0.001  | 0.004 | 0.002 | Significant            |
| FIT --> INIM --> AW --> PI        | 0.052    | 0.032  | 0.073 | 0.001 | Significant            |
| FIT --> INIM --> BA               | 0.08     | 0.057  | 0.105 | 0.001 | Significant            |
| FIT --> INIM --> BA --> PI        | 0.028    | 0.018  | 0.039 | 0.001 | Significant            |
| FIT --> INIM --> PI               | 0.027    | 0.002  | 0.05  | 0.067 | Marginally significant |
| FIT --> AW --> BA                 | 0.007    | 0.002  | 0.013 | 0.013 | Significant            |
| FIT --> AW --> BA --> PI          | 0.002    | 0.001  | 0.005 | 0.013 | Significant            |
| FIT --> AW --> PI                 | 0.047    | 0.017  | 0.08  | 0.012 | Significant            |
| FIT --> BA --> PI                 | 0.016    | 0.003  | 0.029 | 0.049 | Significant            |
| BP --> INIM --> AW                | 0.013    | 0.007  | 0.02  | 0.001 | Significant            |
| BP --> INIM --> AW --> BA         | 0.001    | 0      | 0.002 | 0.002 | Significant            |
| BP --> INIM --> AW --> BA --> PI  | 0        | 0      | 0.001 | 0.002 | Significant            |
| BP --> INIM --> AW --> PI         | 0.008    | 0.004  | 0.013 | 0.001 | Significant            |
| BP --> INIM --> BA                | 0.012    | 0.006  | 0.02  | 0.001 | Significant            |
| BP --> INIM --> BA --> PI         | 0.004    | 0.002  | 0.007 | 0.001 | Significant            |
| BP --> INIM --> PI                | 0.004    | 0      | 0.009 | 0.067 | Marginally significant |
| BP --> AW --> BA                  | 0.064    | 0.033  | 0.097 | 0.002 | Significant            |
| BP --> AW --> BA --> PI           | 0.022    | 0.011  | 0.035 | 0.002 | Significant            |
| BP --> AW --> PI                  | 0.457    | 0.386  | 0.525 | 0.001 | Significant            |
| BP --> BA --> PI                  | -0.014   | -0.028 | 0     | 0.111 | Insignificant          |
| INIM --> AW --> BA                | 0.021    | 0.01   | 0.033 | 0.002 | Significant            |
| INIM --> AW --> BA --> PI         | 0.007    | 0.003  | 0.012 | 0.002 | Significant            |
| INIM --> AW --> PI                | 0.152    | 0.095  | 0.209 | 0.001 | Significant            |
| INIM --> BA --> PI                | 0.082    | 0.054  | 0.116 | 0.001 | Significant            |
| AW --> BA --> PI                  | 0.03     | 0.015  | 0.047 | 0.002 | Significant            |

#### 6.4.2.3 Multigroup analysis

SEM analysis of the basic model revealed the relationships among variables in the model. However, the interplay among influencer image and desired marketing outcomes such as brand awareness, attitude and purchase intention might be moderated by the extent an internet user is exposed to social media. When internet users heavily visit social media platforms, they see more branded content and their reaction to brand messages differ from less-frequent visitors. In order to explore how the hypothesized relationships differ for people with different levels of social media exposure time, a multigroup SEM analysis is conducted.

The survey included a question asking how many hours daily the respondent is using social media. 1% of respondents spend less than 15 minutes, 2% spend between 15-30 minutes, 8% spend 30-60 minutes, 26% spend 1-3 hours, 41% spend 3-6 hours and 22% spend more than six hours using social media. In order to better investigate the contrast between high social media and low social media groups, we excluded average social media users. Majority of the respondents reported that their daily social media usage is 3-6 hours. Thus, we labeled consumers who use social media less than three hours daily as “low social media group” and the users who use social media more than six hours daily as “high social media group”. The low social media group included 404 respondents and the high social media group consisted of 247 respondents.

First, the model is tested to understand if two groups significantly differ from each other. Chi square test supported that high and low social media groups are significantly different (df: 48, cmin: 97.842,  $p < 0.05$ ). Second, model fit is assessed. Table 14 shows GOF indices which indicate that the model has a good fit.

Table 14. Goodness of Fit Indices of Multigroup Model

| Measure    | Estimate    | Threshold                     |
|------------|-------------|-------------------------------|
| Chi square | Significant | Significant p values expected |
| Cmin/df    | 1.848       | 5 or lower                    |
| CFI        | 0.958       | Above 0.9                     |
| TLI        | 0.954       | Above 0.9                     |
| RMSEA      | 0.036       | 0.07 or lower                 |

Third, direct effects of independent variables on outcome variables are estimated and two groups are compared.

The impact of influencer brand fit on influencer image is significant and positive for both groups. Impact of brand prominence on influencer image is significant and positive for high social media group, however insignificant for low social media group.

Brand prominence has a direct significant positive impact on brand awareness for both groups. On the other hand, the impact of influencer-brand fit on brand awareness; is insignificant for both groups. Influencer image affects brand awareness positively for low social media group; yet has no effect for high social media group. Influencer image positively affects brand attitude for both groups. Brand prominence and influencer-brand fit do not have a significant impact on brand awareness. Influencer-brand fit has a positive significant impact on brand awareness for low social media group; yet no significant impact is found for high social media group. Brand awareness, brand attitude and brand prominence positively affect purchase intention for both groups. Influencer-brand fit and influencer image's impact on purchase intention is insignificant for both groups.

Frequency of branded posts have a negative significant impact on both trustworthiness and authenticity for low social media group; however, for high social

media group, frequency of branded posts does not significantly affect trustworthiness and authenticity.

Six underlying factors of influencer image are significant for both groups.

All direct effects are summarized in Table 15.

Table 15. Multigroup Direct Effects

|      |      |      | HIGH SM  |       | LOW SM   |       |
|------|------|------|----------|-------|----------|-------|
|      |      |      | Estimate | P     | Estimate | P     |
| INIM | <--- | FIT  | 0.328    | ***   | 0.327    | ***   |
| INIM | <--- | BP   | 0.105    | ***   | 0.024    | 0.348 |
| AW   | <--- | INIM | 0.163    | 0.06  | 0.266    | ***   |
| AW   | <--- | BP   | 0.878    | ***   | 0.703    | ***   |
| AW   | <--- | FIT  | 0.079    | 0.128 | 0.038    | 0.421 |
| BA   | <--- | FIT  | 0.021    | 0.596 | 0.111    | 0.001 |
| BA   | <--- | INIM | 0.217    | 0.002 | 0.219    | ***   |
| BA   | <--- | AW   | 0.131    | 0.078 | 0.069    | 0.116 |
| BA   | <--- | BP   | -0.092   | 0.212 | -0.022   | 0.585 |
| PI   | <--- | BA   | 0.281    | ***   | 0.325    | ***   |
| TR   | <--- | INIM | 1.149    | ***   | 1.1      | ***   |
| AU   | <--- | INIM | 1.198    | ***   | 1.015    | ***   |
| PA   | <--- | INIM | 1.012    | ***   | 0.831    | ***   |
| PO   | <--- | INIM | 0.584    | ***   | 0.628    | ***   |
| EX   | <--- | INIM | 1.128    | ***   | 1.063    | ***   |
| PI   | <--- | INIM | 0.099    | 0.183 | 0.06     | 0.399 |
| TR   | <--- | frq  | 0.047    | 0.19  | -0.116   | ***   |
| AU   | <--- | frq  | -0.048   | 0.192 | -0.106   | ***   |
| PI   | <--- | BP   | 0.309    | ***   | 0.183    | ***   |
| PI   | <--- | AW   | 0.581    | ***   | 0.618    | ***   |
| PI   | <--- | FIT  | 0.012    | 0.784 | -0.041   | 0.338 |

Paths of indirect relationships among constructs are also compared for low and high social media groups and all estimates are illustrated in Table 16.

Influencer image mediates the relationship between influencer- brand fit and brand awareness for both groups. However, the mediating effect of influencer image for influencer-brand fit on brand awareness is insignificant for high social media group whereas the impact is positive and significant for low social media group.



Serial mediating effect of influencer image and brand awareness for influencer-brand fit on brand attitude is insignificant for both groups. Influencer image and brand awareness significantly mediates the relationship between influencer-brand fit and purchase intention for both groups. However serial mediating effect of influencer image, brand awareness and brand attitude for influencer brand fit on purchase intention is not significant neither for low nor high social media groups.

Brand awareness does not have a significant mediating impact for influencer brand fit on brand attitude and purchase intention for both groups neither separately nor serially.

Brand attitude mediates the relationship between influencer-brand fit and purchase intention for low social media group; yet, the effect is insignificant for high social media group.

Influencer image has a significant mediating effect between brand prominence and brand attitude for high social media group, yet the effect is not significant for low social media group. Influencer image and brand attitude serially mediates the relationship between brand prominence and purchase intention for high social media group, however no significant mediation exists for low social media group. Mediating effect of influencer image or brand prominence on purchase intention is insignificant for both groups.

Brand awareness mediates the relationship between brand prominence and purchase intention for both groups but does not mediates the relationship between brand prominence and brand attitude. Brand awareness and brand attitude have no significant mediation impact for brand prominence on purchase intention.

The relationship between influencer image and purchase intention is mediated by brand attitude for both groups. Brand awareness has a mediating effect for

influencer image on purchase intention for low social media group; yet no significant mediation exists for high social media group. The serial mediating effect of brand awareness and brand attitude for influencer image on purchase intention is insignificant for both groups. The relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention is not mediated by brand attitude for both groups.

Table 16. Multigroup Mediation Analysis

| Parameter                         | HighSM   |       | LowSM    |       |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-------|----------|-------|
|                                   | Estimate | P     | Estimate | P     |
| FIT --> INIM --> AW               | 0.054    | 0.108 | 0.087    | 0.001 |
| FIT --> INIM --> AW --> BA        | 0.007    | 0.177 | 0.006    | 0.096 |
| FIT --> INIM --> AW --> BA --> PI | 0.002    | 0.184 | 0.002    | 0.096 |
| FIT --> INIM --> AW --> PI        | 0.031    | 0.108 | 0.054    | 0.001 |
| FIT --> INIM --> BA               | 0.071    | 0.005 | 0.071    | 0.001 |
| FIT --> INIM --> BA --> PI        | 0.02     | 0.011 | 0.023    | 0.001 |
| FIT --> INIM --> PI               | 0.033    | 0.3   | 0.02     | 0.474 |
| FIT --> AW --> BA                 | 0.01     | 0.201 | 0.003    | 0.58  |
| FIT --> AW --> BA --> PI          | 0.003    | 0.207 | 0.001    | 0.58  |
| FIT --> AW --> PI                 | 0.046    | 0.143 | 0.024    | 0.543 |
| FIT --> BA --> PI                 | 0.006    | 0.613 | 0.036    | 0.005 |
| BP --> INIM --> AW                | 0.017    | 0.108 | 0.006    | 0.395 |
| BP --> INIM --> AW --> BA         | 0.002    | 0.177 | 0        | 0.441 |
| BP --> INIM --> AW --> BA --> PI  | 0.001    | 0.184 | 0        | 0.441 |
| BP --> INIM --> AW --> PI         | 0.01     | 0.108 | 0.004    | 0.395 |
| BP --> INIM --> BA                | 0.023    | 0.005 | 0.005    | 0.395 |
| BP --> INIM --> BA --> PI         | 0.006    | 0.011 | 0.002    | 0.395 |
| BP --> INIM --> PI                | 0.01     | 0.3   | 0.001    | 0.696 |
| BP --> AW --> BA                  | 0.115    | 0.081 | 0.049    | 0.096 |
| BP --> AW --> BA --> PI           | 0.032    | 0.087 | 0.016    | 0.096 |
| BP --> AW --> PI                  | 0.51     | 0.001 | 0.434    | 0.001 |
| BP --> BA --> PI                  | -0.026   | 0.283 | -0.007   | 0.591 |
| INIM --> AW --> BA                | 0.021    | 0.177 | 0.018    | 0.096 |
| INIM --> AW --> BA --> PI         | 0.006    | 0.184 | 0.006    | 0.096 |
| INIM --> AW --> PI                | 0.095    | 0.108 | 0.165    | 0.001 |
| INIM --> BA --> PI                | 0.061    | 0.011 | 0.071    | 0.001 |
| AW --> BA --> PI                  | 0.037    | 0.087 | 0.023    | 0.096 |

## 6.5 Summary of hypotheses testing

Out of 35 hypotheses we tested, six of them not supported. The summary of the hypotheses is illustrated at Table 17.

Table 17. Results of Hypotheses Testing

| Hypothesis | Path                | Test Result   |
|------------|---------------------|---------------|
| H1a        | INIM->TR            | supported     |
| H1b        | INIM->AU            | supported     |
| H1c        | INIM->EX            | supported     |
| H1d        | INIM->PO            | supported     |
| H1e        | INIM->R             | supported     |
| H1f        | INIM->PA            | supported     |
| H2a        | INIM->AW            | Supported     |
| H2b        | INIM->BA            | Supported     |
| H2c        | INIM->PI            | not supported |
| H3a        | INIM->AW->PI        | Supported     |
| H3b        | INIM->AW->BA        | Supported     |
| H4         | INIM->BA->PI        | Supported     |
| H5a        | BP->INIM            | Supported     |
| H5b        | BP->AW              | Supported     |
| H5c        | BP->BA              | not supported |
| H5d        | BP->PI              | Supported     |
| H6a        | BP->INIM->AW        | Supported     |
| H6b        | BP->INIM->BA        | Supported     |
| H6c        | BP->INIM->PI        | not supported |
| H7a        | BP->AW->PI          | Supported     |
| H7b        | BP->AW->BA          | Supported     |
| H8         | BP->BA->PI          | not supported |
| H9a        | FIT->INIM           | Supported     |
| H9b        | FIT->AW             | Supported     |
| H9c        | FIT->BA             | Supported     |
| H9d        | FIT->PI             | not supported |
| H10a       | FIT->INIM->AW       | Supported     |
| H10b       | FIT->INIM->BA       | Supported     |
| H10c       | FIT->INIM->PI       | not supported |
| H11a       | FIT->AW->PI         | Supported     |
| H11b       | FIT->AW->BA         | Supported     |
| H12        | FIT->BA->PI         | Supported     |
| H13a       | frq->AU             | Supported     |
| H13b       | frq->TR             | Supported     |
| H14        | HIGHSM $\neq$ LOWSM | Supported     |

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

#### 7.1 Discussion of the findings

As brands' investment in influencer marketing is rising sharply, both marketing executives and marketing academia stress on the factors that affect the success of influencer endorsement. Marketers have seen heaven and hell in influencer marketing. While some brands enjoyed skyrocketed sales and high reputation with only a limited influencer marketing budget, others fired thousands of dollars for useless swipe-ups, PR crisis and hateful Instagram comments. How can brands engage in very similar practices yet get such different outcomes? What was defining the best practice in influencer marketing? Numerous studies, including the current one, were motivated to find an answer to these tough questions.

The first attempt to understand the antecedents of influencer endorsement success was to define characteristics of a successful influencer (De Veirman et al., 2017; Trivedi & Sema, 2020). The common logic was suggesting that if a marketer knows who is a successful influencer and collaborates with them, then the endorsement becomes successful as a result. However, real life examples in influencer marketing proved that the success of an influencer is not enough to make an endorsement successful. Furthermore, when an influencer is very successful at endorsing a product/brand, the outcomes can be unexpectedly negative when the same influencer endorses another. Thus, endorsement effectiveness models should have included factors other than influencer credibility.

The first two goals of the current research were revisiting influencer credibility construct and revise it to a more comprehensive construct that better defines the qualities of the influencer and developing a comprehensive model using

this construct to better understand how influencers shape customer decision making journey. In order to achieve these objectives, the present research has used a triangulation approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

The first step of the research was a deep literature review. Academic studies, popular press, social media accounts of influencers were extensively examined for five years to discover pain points and research gaps. Influencer marketing literature is at infancy stage and a recent review paper (Vrontis et. al, 2021) posited that the oldest paper they reviewed was published in 2007 and 80% of the pool of selected articles were published between 2018 and 2020. The literature review of the current study started in 2016 and there were scarce academic resources then. In order to have a strong theoretical background, we examined extant opinion leadership, WOM and celebrity endorsement literature since influencer marketing has its roots there.

Since influencer marketing is an infant research area, qualitative techniques were strongly recommended to better capture perception, attitude and behavior of social media users, marketers and influencers (McCracken, 1988; Wengraf, 2001). We conducted twelve in-depth interviews, five of them with influencers, five of them were with social media users and two of them were with brand executives who engage in influencer marketing activities.

The interviews and celebrity endorsement literature contributed to development of influencer image construct. While marketers, influencers and social media users were defining influencer concept, they referred to trustworthiness, authenticity, expertness, attractiveness, popularity and communication with the audience (responsiveness). Consequently, we developed a six-dimensional scale and tested its validity and reliability. Exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor

analysis supported six-dimensional structure and reliability and validity tests proved that the scale has no reliability or validity problems.

After confirmatory factor analysis, a structural model that illustrates the interplay among influencer image, brand awareness, brand attitude, purchase intention, influencer-brand fit, brand prominence and frequency of sponsored content is developed and assessed. First, the goodness of fit indices showed that the data fits well with the structural model. After that, path estimates were checked and hypotheses were tested.

Influencer image directly contributes to brand awareness and brand attitude; however, the impact on purchase intention is indirect through brand awareness and brand attitude. The direct effect on purchase intention was marginally significant and it is understandable, since it is the ultimate point on customers' decision making journey. Before an intentional and behavioral change, such as intent to purchase a product, the customer first must be aware of it and form a positive attitude towards it (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). The findings of the current study suggest that the more positive the image of influencers, the more effective they are in creating awareness and leading to a positive attitude towards the endorsed brand. After a certain level of awareness and an attitudinal change or formation, the consumer can intend to buy from the endorsed brand. The results are parallel to findings of previous research regarding the influence of endorser credibility on brand outcomes (De Veirman et al., 2017; Schouten et al. 2020).

Though influencer image has a positive effect on brand awareness, this effect is insignificant for high social media usage intensity group. We suppose that this stems from the fact that heavy social media users generally see too many influencer

posts every day and after exposure to numerous brands in influencers' posts, brand awareness is hard to raise even if the influencer has a very positive image.

The match up hypothesis is frequently visited in celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing literature (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Kamins, 1990). The results of the current study supported the positive effect of influencer-brand fit on influencer image, brand awareness and brand attitude as in previous studies (Breves et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021). The effect of influencer-brand fit on purchase intention was indirect through brand awareness and brand attitude, similar to influencer image. Torres et al. (2019) and Breves et al. (2019) provided similar results, claiming that the impact of influencer-brand fit on behavioral intentions is mediated by brand attitude.

When comparing the effect of influencer brand fit in low and high social media usage intensity groups, the findings suggested that two groups differ. For both groups, influencer brand fit positively affects influencer image, brand awareness and purchase intention; however, for high social media intensity group, there is no significant change in brand attitude. It can be concluded that low intensity users of social media expect both influencers and brands to find good matches. Yet, heavy users who are exposed to various influencer content, think that it is influencers' responsibility to endorse congruent brands and reject offers for mismatching endorsements; therefore, although influencer image is affected from fit, attitude towards the brand remains unchanged.

Beside influencer characteristics and influencer-brand congruence, the model hypothesized in the current study included content characteristics positing that brand prominence in a sponsored content positively affect brand awareness, influencer image, brand attitude and purchase intention. The findings supported that when the

brand is prominent in a branded content, brand awareness and purchase intention are higher. Brand prominence also contributes to influencer image; probably because when a branded post explicitly and prominently shows the brand, rather than implicitly and sneaky, it is considered a more honest and authentic manner. Brand prominence has no significant effect on brand attitude, on the contrary to what we expected. The explanation that sounds more logical is consumers need more information about a brand to form either a positive or negative attitude, a visible and prominent product placement in an influencer photo is not sufficient to have an attitude. The mediation effects of influencer image and brand attitude on purchase intention are not significant either. The only mediator variable between brand prominence and purchase intention is awareness. These results suggest that the desired impact on purchase intention can be achieved if awareness is above a certain threshold.

The impact of brand prominence on brand awareness is insignificant for low intensity social media users whereas it is significant for high intensity users. When the amount of exposed sponsored content increases, it is very difficult to attract the consumers' attention and create brand awareness. After seeing tons of influencer content, high intensity users only become aware of the brand if it is highly prominent, thus the effect is significant. For low intensity social media users, on the other hand, the effect of prominence is not significant since they do not need a brand to be extremely visible to be attracted.

The frequency of sponsored content significantly diminishes the authenticity and trustworthiness of the influencer as this study hypothesizes. However, this effect differs for high intensity social media users and low intensity social media users. For low intensity social media users, frequency of sponsored content has a negative



significant impact on authenticity and trustworthiness of the influencers whereas there is no significant effect for high social media intensity group. We predict that when time spent on social media increases, social media users “normalize” sponsored content since they are exposed to hundreds of branded posts and get used to it. After seeing sponsored content in many influencers' pages, they understand that “this is how things work in the influencers' world”. However, if a social media user has little experience with influencer posts, they will probably find it irritating and perceive influencers who frequently post sponsored content as untrustworthy, inauthentic fortune hunters.

## 7.2 Implications

### 7.2.1 Theoretical implications

The current study contributes to the ongoing debate concerning the impact of social media influencers on customer decision journey. The key theoretical contribution of the present study is understanding the interplay of influencer characteristics (influencer image), influencer-brand fit, content characteristics (brand prominence, frequency of sponsored content), and brand outcomes (brand awareness, brand attitude, and purchase intention). In spite of separate and fragmented models testing the impact of influencer characteristics or content characteristics, this study creates a broader research framework including potential influencer-related, content-related and matching (brand congruence) related factors to better explain customer decision journey.

Development of influencer image construct and validating its scale is one of the most important contributions of the current study to influencer marketing literature. Although the majority of influencer marketing studies stress on measuring and conceptualizing influencer' characteristics or credibility, there was no consensus

on dimensions of influencer characteristics. Influencer image construct is more comprehensive than similar constructs, and it better explains which qualities of the influencer are more crucial to measure the effectiveness of the endorsements. Influencer image scale that we developed can be used in future studies and validated in different cultural contexts.

We extended previous literature of influencer marketing by focusing on the role of social media usage intensity as a moderator. Increased exposure to influencer content effects the response of consumers to branded posts and as a result, different strategies can be necessary to increase their purchase intention. To the best of our knowledge this is the first empirical study which compares the response of high and low level of social media users to influencer image.

#### 7.2.2 Practical implications

The findings of the present study are of high relevance for marketers and social media influencers. This study contributed to the understanding of factors leading to influencer endorsement effectiveness and results will hopefully help marketers to increase ROI on influencer marketing activities. In addition to marketing executives, social media influencers may utilize these findings to learn strategies to build a better influencer image and optimize content strategies to be a more desirable partner for brands and sustain a strong relationship with their followers.

This study conceptualized influencer image and defined trustworthiness, authenticity, perceived expertise, popularity, physical attractiveness and responsiveness as significant underlying factors. The influencer image measure has the potential to be used in the influencer marketing industry as well as marketing academia. Influencer agencies and marketers may rate influencers using this measure

and it can be a very useful tool to select from an endless influencer pool. Brands may use these dimensions and prioritize some of them to choose influencer partners. Until now, metrics used to “measure” influencers were limited to number of followers and engagement metrics. Surprisingly, the image of influencer in the eyes of social media users were neglected for a long time although it tells much more than the number of followers. Influencers may also keep up with this metric in order to see how their image evolves in time. This metric can help influencers to understand which collaborations decrease their trustworthiness or after posting a sincere video, how much their authenticity rises. We recommend market research companies specialized in social media influencers make use of our scale and send this survey to the poll and share these metrics with stakeholders.

The current study supported previous research suggesting that endorser brand fit predicted brand outcomes. This finding is a gentle reminder for both influencers and brands. Influencers may have a temptation to accept high budget endorsement proposals and brands may be attracted by millions of followers of star influencers; however, when there is no congruence, no desired outcomes can be achieved and it has consequences for both brands (low brand awareness, negative attitude and decreased purchase intention) and the influencer (distorted influencer image). The extant celebrity endorsement literature and match up hypothesis cannot be wrong, influencer-brand fit must be prioritized when planning influencer marketing activities.

Finding the optimal frequency of branded posts is a real challenge for influencers. The findings of the study reveal that it negatively affects the authenticity and trustworthiness of the influencer, therefore, it is better to be pickier to preserve a positive influencer image. Brands may also check if an endorser candidate posts too

much sponsored content, if endorsement posts are too frequent, brand will benefit less as a result of decreased authenticity and trustworthiness of the influencer.

Another valuable insight of the current study was the distinction between high and low social media usage intensity groups and their different responses to influencer endorsement. High social media intensity group does not become aware of the brand even if the influencer has a positive image. It signals a risk for all social media influencers and brands since daily social media time is increasing all over the world, which can result in low brand awareness overall. Although this study did not include content creativity, influencers and brands may overcome this low awareness problem generating more creative contents.

Brand prominence level in product placement has been an important decision for advertisers. When product placement has moved from movies and TV shows to influencer content, the problem reemerged. Research focusing on the brand prominence in influencer content was rare; therefore, decisions of content creators and marketing executives were not data-based. Some content creators were skeptical about prominent product/brand placements as it might backfire their image. They think that when the brand is prominent, their content will look like a traditional ad and effectiveness will be lower. However, the current research proved the opposite. In an era of endless brand messages and hundreds of swipe ups, when the brand is not prominent, the effectiveness of the branded content is low. Awareness cannot be raised when brand is extremely subtle therefore other desired brand outcomes such as positive brand attitude and purchase intention are hard to achieve. Endorsing the brand prominently in the content not only works for endorsed brands, but it also contributes to influencer image, probably as a result of honestly showing the brand rather than giving “hidden” brand messages implicitly.

We believe that the findings of the present study will be fruitful for brand executives, influencers, influencer agencies and social media users who demand higher value from influencer marketing.

### 7.3 Influencer marketing in Covid-19 era

Since the current study was completed in 2021 when Covid-19 pandemic reached its third peak worldwide, its effect on the research topic could not be neglected. The pandemic has had a huge impact on behavior, consideration, emotions of people, social relationships and economies. Social media influencers were not an exception and pandemic also had an impact on interactions with influencers, reacting to influencer marketing attempts and motivations to engage with influencers (Lee & Blasco-Arcas, 2020).

Most experts agree that the pandemic caused more psychological harm than physiologic (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). The feeling of loneliness was one of the overlooked emotional consequences of social distancing due to pandemic. Lockdown at homes, isolation, online education and remote working weakened social support from friends, colleagues, and family. Cafes, bars, gyms, and parks were places where people socialize with friends and make new friends. Lockdowns made face-to-face socializing impossible. People who live alone deeply suffered from the obstacles preventing socializing; yet many couples and families were not luckier than singles since they experienced another type of loneliness if there is no strong communication among the household. To sum up, nearly everyone has experienced loneliness in one way or another and has strived for new ways to socialize. Thanks to the digital age, social media was here to make people “socialize” as its name suggests.

During the pandemic, social media was not used solely to communicate with friends and family but to communicate with people in the outer circle.

Communicating with online friends is not limited to online dating apps, influencers were our cool online friends that we rediscovered in this era. Influencers who are equipped with strong communication skills benefited from the psychological need of followers and perfectly filled the emotional gap.

Dissemination of fake news has become a popular discussion topic as never before since in times of crisis, the desperate need for information decreases perceptual filtering of information and raises the desire to share this unfiltered, unchecked information (Aral, 2020; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). In the age of fake news, the need for credible, reliable gatekeepers have mounted. Opinion leaders, who serve as trustworthy gatekeepers by receiving, filtering, interpreting and distributing information increased in popularity (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). During the pandemic, the most popular fake news was about the COVID-19 vaccines. The misinformation about COVID-19 vaccine was a serious problem policy makers dealt with. As a solution, some governments, such as the British government, collaborated with influencers to change misperceptions about vaccines (Washingtonpost, 2020). The concept of “influencer as a gatekeeper” will preserve its importance even after the pandemic era. The epidemic of fake news will surely take longer to overcome compared to the pandemic. We do not buy only outfits of influencers. We also buy their knowledge and opinion. Thus, influencers are a fundamental element of the solution for fake news.

Online shopping was among a handful of winners in the pandemic era since offline shopping was no longer an option in lock-down days. In 2020, over two billion customers shopped online, and total sales rose from 3.4 trillion dollars in 2019 to 4.3 trillion dollars worldwide (Statista, 2021). Millions of people shopped online for the first time in the pandemic era. Influencers’ expertise in online shopping

and their recommendations were of great value for inexperienced online shoppers. People who do not know where to shop online, size charts, return conditions seek help from influencers. Moreover, a knowledgeable and tasteful assortment was necessary since online shops offer endless varieties and it is much more challenging to find the suitable option among millions of products. Influencers who know the taste and needs of their followers are appreciated for their affiliate links, create a win-win situation and transform mostly irritating swipe ups to life savers for followers. Increasing share of online sales will be beneficial for influencers on the condition that their primary motivation is to create value for followers, not maximizing their commissions from affiliate links.

COVID-19 has transformed many industries forever and the effects on influencer marketing seem to be sustaining. The next part of the study will discuss other factors that we expect to shape the future of influencer marketing.

#### 7.4 Future of influencer marketing

The change in social media platforms is too unpredictable and fast to get prepared. When it comes to social media, it is very difficult to foresee how social media will evolve in one year, let alone a decade (Dwivedi, Kapoor, & Chen, 2015, Kapoor et al., 2018; Vrontis et al., 2021). However, due to its fast-changing nature, planning and preparing for the future cannot be quitted.

After a comprehensive review of the academic literature and industry reports, interviewing brands and influencers, we will try to depict a picture of what kind of challenges and changes are expected. The topics that we predict to be debated heavily in near future may not be an exact picture of the future, however, we believe that these topics will lead to new academic studies that will contribute to marketing, sociology and psychology literature. Moreover, these topics will provide valuable

insights for marketing practitioners and content creators to revisit their marketing or content plans, revise their business goals and adapt to the changing environment.

#### 7.4.1 Ethical Issues

Ethical concerns about endorsement of products by celebrities or social media influencers have been discussed by stakeholders for decades. However, these concerns got more intense when endorsement enlarged its reach and impact when moved from mainstream media channels to SNSs. When media consumers are exposed to a commercial ad on TV, radio, or print ad, they clearly comprehend that there are financial purposes. The consumers filter the message the ad gives or may not respond to the ad at all. Yet, when a product or brand is endorsed in social media, the distinction between an honest review and a brand collaboration is not as clear as in traditional media channels. Vulnerable consumers who are receiving a brand message through an influencer may not filter the information since they perceive the brand message as a friendly recommendation.

Disclosure of sponsorship and its impact on perceptions on the brand and influencer is heavily examined in influencer marketing literature (Campbell, Mohr & Verlegh, 2013; Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Kay, Mulcahy, Parkinson, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2020). However, the research is inconclusive since some studies provided evidence that sponsorship should be openly disclosed to protect authenticity and credibility of the influencer; yet another research stream claimed that when consumers know that the influencer endorses a sponsored brand, the effectiveness of the endorsement is lower. Whether disclosure of paid partnership has an impact on marketing outcomes or not, it is not deniable that disclosing openly paid partnerships is the responsibility of the influencer. Beside influencers, recent regulations shared the responsibility



among brands and influencers, making it compulsory for brands to warn their content creator partners to disclose their sponsorship. Most governments attempt to regulate influencer-brand partnerships to protect vulnerable consumers. Nevertheless, the author of the current study suggests that there is still need for improvement in this field since controlling partnerships in practice is much more difficult than making laws.

The rising number of children and adolescents who use social media lead to deeper concerns (apa.org, 2011). Empirical studies proved that children and adolescents are influenced by social media content more deeply and easily (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). A recent study investigated the bonds of children between age 10-13 and vloggers. The research showed that children are affected by endorsement in vlogs (Folkvord et al., 2019). Another study used a sample of adolescents whose age between 13-18 and provided evidence that adolescents are not aware that sponsored content is a form of advertising (De Jans et al., 2020). Since they are unaware of the commercial interests of influencers and have strong emotional bonds with their favorite influencers, the filtering mechanism is weak. Covid-19 pandemic has led to an increase of daily screen times of children since in most countries schools opted for online education over face to face education. Yet, increased screen time has also led to a rise in social media exposure. As a result, children's and adolescents' response to social media influencers' content is expected to remain a hot topic and calls for both qualitative and quantitative studies.

Another ethical concern about influencers is their impact on unrealistic body images. Influencers, especially female fashion and beauty bloggers have been accused of distorted body perceptions. Many studies supported that exposure to skinny bodies, flawless skin and abdominal muscles of influencers on social media

lead to a lack of self esteem of social media users (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019). A fall in self esteem and negative self image may lead to many psychological disorders, including the most fatal psychological disorder Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia. In addition to perfect bodies of influencers, a rising so-called “healthy“ diet obsession, thinspiration and fitspiration trend in social media may contribute to eating disorders as well (Griffiths et al., 2018) . Social media users not only buy shoes or dresses of influencers, they also buy their lifestyle, diet or bad habits. Adolescents who are more prone to body image distortions are even more vulnerable (Lonergan et al., 2020).

Instagram filters are other usual suspects whose negative impact on beauty standards is discussed. Influencers’ filtered photos cause a negative impact on self perceptions of followers who compare their no makeup, no-filter selves to photoshopped, filtered perfect selfies with professional makeup and plastic surgery (Kleemans et al., 2018). Since the current research and many studies in literature proved that authenticity is one of the most important dimensions of influencer image/credibility, it is surprising how influencers risk their authenticity in exchange with a fake-perfect physical appearance. If the luminous skin and long legs of influencers are partly unreal, how can they persuade followers that their product recommendations are real?

Despite filtered faces and bodies distorting beauty perception, some opponents of this fake perfection on social media raised their voice and supported the body positivity movement. Plus size influencers who inspire followers to love their bodies as they are, such as Rochelle Johnson, Denise Mercedes and Katie Strurino, have already been under the radar of fashion brands. Katie Sturino embarrasses clothing brands who ignore plus size woman using hashtag #makemysize. She has

already launched her own brand, Megababe, especially focusing on plus-size womens' problems and her followers are obsessed with it (Shacknai, 2021). A research examining body-positivity influencers' influential power would provide very interesting and valuable insights.

Ethical issues in influencer marketing context includes endorsement of controversial products. Meaning Transfer Model (McCracken, 1989) stated that symbolic values that the celebrity represents transfer to the endorsed brand or product; yet, the opposite is also possible, brands' symbolic meaning transfers to the endorser and if the meaning includes negative associations, the credibility of the endorser is destroyed.

The match up hypothesis (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990) warned brands to carefully choose celebrities that fit well with brands' values, personality and product qualities. Although brands' endorser choice is more highlighted in literature, the endorsers' brand choice is vital as well. The findings of the present study illustrated that social media users who are not "heavy users" perceive influencer image less positive when endorsement is a bad match; however, brand attitude is unchanged. This result supports that consumers perceive choosing a good match is the responsibility of the influencer. Thus, it can be concluded that choosing products that are ethically produced and marketed to endorse is the responsibility of influencers and if they fail to do so, all negative associations of the brand might transfer to the influencer. Therefore, influencers should consider if the brand is respectful to labor rights, animal rights, sensitive to child labors, environmental issues and a healthy and peaceful work environment.

"Save Ralph" has become a viral video in 2021 spring when the dark side of animal testing is revealed (hsi.org, 2021). Millions of social media users watched and

shared the video, including social media influencers with millions of followers.

However, some of the influencers who shared the video were continuing to endorse beauty products who do not have “cruelty free” certificates. Many make up/ beauty vloggers received harsh comments and dislikes for this reason.

Social media is a tool to market not only products and brands but also social causes; therefore, sensitivity of users and their awareness about social causes are expected to rise. Social media influencers should not ignore the rising sensitivity so as not to lose their credibility. Business ethics research may focus more on social media influencer marketing practices in near future.

#### 7.4.2 Changing platforms

In the late 90s and early 2000s, we were socializing in Myspace and ICQ, after that, Facebook came to stay and changed social media completely. Those who assume that Facebook will dominate social media forever were surprised by the challenge newcomers such as Snapchat, Tiktok or ClubHouse brought. Although after the integration of Whatsapp and Instagram, Facebook has strengthened its dominance over social media, along with Twitter and Alphabet’s YouTube for a long time, after the TikTok example, the sustainability of its dominance became questionable.

Platforms, their user experience and users’ motivation to visit them change at a mind-blowing pace. We used to make photo albums and socialize with primary school friends using Facebook in 2008, later we moved all our photos to Instagram and unfriended all boring childhood friends. Since the invention of televisions, we have been watching videos on a horizontal screen and good old friend YouTube has provided videos in the same form for us to watch on the screen of our laptops.

However, it has been only a couple of years and we got used to vertical and mobile

friendly videos of IGTV. In the early 2010s, we used to log into Foursquare to check in the coolest bar in the town and post short videos on Snapchat to show how much fun we had. Recently, we all have deleted the app but continue to add place tags to Instastories to remind our friends we still rock the coolest bars (of course, I mention good old pre-Covid days). After all cool bars are locked down in 2020, we either broadcasted dance videos on TikTok or "what I would wear if Covid was over" themed Reels videos on Instagram. When we got sick of homemade bread recipes on YouTube and couple challenges on Tiktok, we jumped to the ClubHouse bandwagon to discuss some serious stuff. Only half a year after its launch, Clubhouse buzz is already fading and no one knows what will be the next big thing (Russell, 2021).

Social media always brings surprises when we least expect them; nevertheless, the author may share some future predictions. Live streaming was the biggest social media in 2020 due to isolation in pandemic and kind of filled the gap of face to face, realtime socialization experiences (Hallanan, 2020). In the very beginning of the lockdown, live stream watching hours increased by 45% , 99% growth is achieved year-over-year in terms of hours watched, increasing from 1.971 billion in April 2019 to 3.934 billion in April 2020 (Easton, 2020). Live streams do not seem like a fad and are expected to continue to dominate social media platforms; experts say that we are seeing the beginning of the big game (Hallanan, 2020). Amazon's Twitch is the market leader in this highly competitive industry in terms of hours watched. YouTube Gaming and Facebook Gaming are fast growing rivals.

The impressive rise of live streaming attracted marketers' appetite since there is a huge potential to skyrocket sales. Amazon was the earliest bird who caught the warm launching Amazon Live. Chinese counterpart Alibaba was one of the early adopters who discovered the fertile and virgin lands of live stream shopping and

pioneered shoppable videos. Live platform of Alibaba, named TaoBao, achieved six billion dollars in sales on 11.11 shopping day. 33 live stream channels sold over 15 million dollars, 500 channels reached 1.5 million dollars (Hallanan, 2020). While nearly all SNSs and electronic commerce businesses are investing heavily in live streaming, it is predictable that influencer marketing will shift their focus here in the immediate future. It brings many challenges to influencers since live streams have little forgiveness and when a mistake is done or an unwanted guest popped-up, it cannot be redone or edited. Influencers should concentrate on improving their agility, flexibility and speech and body language skills to adapt to the new rules of social media.

Audio has been the rising content type of the recent years. A recent survey-based study by Edison research supported that podcast listenership is continuing its rise in 2021 (Quah, 2021). The research suggested that approximately 80 million U.S. residents (28% of the U.S. population over age 12) weekly listen to podcasts, with a 17% increase over 2020 (Edison Research, 2021).

The steady rise of podcasts increased the appetite of SNSs to provide audio content. It was a revolutionary shift since nearly all SNSs were dominated by visual content, mostly in video or image form. Whether it is because of Zoom overdose eyes or lack of a friendly voice in the lonely houses in the pandemic era, most social media giants have seen the potential and invested in audio. Although Clubhouse is not attracting as many users as during its glorious entry in February 2021, Spaces of Twitter, Facebook's planned audio products such as Hotline and live audio rooms, Reddit Talk are still putting their bets on the rise of audio (Dishman, 2021).

A shift from visuals to audio will probably be challenging for many influencers who have invested in their physical appearance, photograph or video

editing skills. Audio based platforms require a brand new skill set such as a fluent speech, expertise in specific domains to give a speech, active listening. Influencers who invested in self improvement will finally collect the fruits.

When the evolution of social media is examined, we can conclude that social media platforms are just like bars where people meet and have fun. One year, people are obsessed with the new bar opened at the end of the street, next year some of the popular guys start to hang out in the new bar next door and others follow them. After a few months, both lose their popularity and close their doors, but there is always a new fascinating bar to entertain. What really matters is not the bar or drinks they serve, but people who make the place entertaining and cool. SNSs are not different, some of them become outdated, some attract the crowd but they are not more than “tools” that enable communication. Since it is impossible to foresee which platform will be the star of the next year, let alone five years later, what content creators can do is to be as flexible as possible and focus on the value they offer, rather than the platform or content type.

#### 7.4.3 The future is micro

In the early era of influencer marketing, the number of followers of the influencer seems to be what matters the most. However, as each of the influencers enlarge, their reachability has decreased resulting in poorer communication with followers. In recent years, brands discovered that micro influencers and nano influencers can be as effective as star influencers; furthermore, they may outperform popular influencers due to their high authenticity, relatability and one-to-one communication chance (Wissman, 2018).

One claim of the current study was that popularity is a significant dimension of influencer image, therefore popularity of an influencer is effective in creating desirable marketing outcomes, however, the study also suggests that responsiveness is an integral part of influencer image, too. Therefore, micro and nano influencers can compensate for their lack of popularity with responsiveness. Moreover, since they have closer relationships with their audience, they are more likely to be perceived as more authentic (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Micro influencers are claimed to help brands to achieve the best ROI in influencer marketing campaigns (Wissman, 2018). “The State of Influencer Marketing” report of Linqia (2021) stated that 90% of marketers plan to work with micro influencers in 2021. In spite of the mounting interest of brands in micro and nano influencers, academic studies comparing credibility and effectiveness of macro, micro or nano influencers are rare. Further studies exploring this research area will be very helpful for marketers who have difficulty in allocating their influencer market efforts and budget among macro, micro and nano influencers.

#### 7.4.4 AI, AR, VR... Is it the age of nonhuman influencers?

“Artificial intelligence (AI) will cause unemployment since the robots will do all the work” is an old cliché though it is true that AI will cause revolutionary changes in many industries. A decade ago, AI was mostly associated with automated work and the unemployment problem was assumed to be limited to jobs requiring manual routine tasks such as labors in factories. However, in recent years AI proved to be more capable than assumed, doing many jobs as good as human employees (Harari, 2016). Many people face the danger of losing their job which was assumed to require a human touch and influencers were not an exception.



Influencers are usually more knowledgeable and involved in specific areas such as fashion, makeup, travel or cooking compared to an average user. Using their competency, influencers find the best products and recommend followers who seek advice and help them to choose among endless options. When assortment and search tasks of influencers are considered, AI is a strong competitor (Floridi et al., 2018). AI uses personal data of an opinion seeker, such as shopping history and location and gives personalized recommendations whereas influencers give “one size fits all” kind of recommendations. People’s attitude towards recommendation of AI versus recommendation of other people is a rich research stream exceeding the limits of this chapter; however, we can conclude that influencers are no longer a monopoly in product recommendation.

In order to survive that competition, influencers need to add a human touch that AI lacks. Storytelling, strong communication with followers, creative writing and content are some ways to differentiate themselves from both AI and human counterparts. AI brings many new opportunities into influencer marketing beside its challenges. AI has been started to use for choosing best matching collaborations, optimizing content, sharing frequency and timing. Moreover, AI will help influencers to better know their target audience and customize their content accordingly.

Virtual influencers might be the most exciting phenomena in the influencer marketing context (Shieber, 2019). Lil Miquela, the first virtual influencer, has been followed by more than three millions of people and estimated to make about \$11.7 million in 2020 (Ong, 2020). In 2018, Time magazine included Lil into the 25 most influential people list (Time, 2018). When her influence is considered, it is an unimportant detail that she is not a human. When social media users discuss if

influencers are fake or real, the easy acceptance of virtual influencers is surprising. People might accept them easily since they already know they are “unreal”, in contrast to inauthentic human influencers. Although it is in the infancy stage, in near future virtual influencers might communicate as good as a human without any PR risk on a very low budget. COVID-19 era increased the attention to virtual influencers since they were ready to serve brands whereas human influencers are locked down in their homes (Ong, 2020). Virtual influencers should be on the agenda of both marketing practitioners since it will bring a brand new perspective to the industry and for academicians since this research area is fruitful and untapped.

Augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) have already started to affect social media. Investments in these technologies prove that their impact will be much more than puppy face or eye color changing filters. AR based apps allow users to test products real time, which is a revolution in marketing. AR decreased the risk in online shopping that photos of a product do not reflect reality completely. IKEA launched an app which uses AR technology to feature realistically-rendered, true-to-scale 3D products (White, 2021). This app solves the biggest trouble in furniture shopping, that is the difficulty of imagining a new piece of furniture in your room. Many beauty brands such as Ulta, Sephora, Target’s cosmetics section and L’oreal utilized AI technology to make cosmetic shopping, which is very difficult without try-on. YouTube has just added an AR feature to virtually try on cosmetics while watching makeup videos (Perez, 2019, 2020). Users can touch the try on button and split the screen to see how the lipstick the vlogger uses will look on them. Clothing brands are also eager to use AR to make online shopping more comfortable and return rates lower. Gucci and Nike enabled shoppers to try on sneakers virtually (Gorman, 2021).

AR technology may bring both challenges and opportunities to influencers. Bad news first: Online shoppers' reliance on influencers may decrease since AR will do better what influencers are doing: Try on new products and show them to shoppers! In order to minimize this impact, influencers should upgrade their product try-ons by adding stories, details about the product beyond visual aspects, such as the softness of the fabric or smell of a powder, creative usage ideas such as using an eyeshadow as a blush or combining clothes of different brands. Fortunately, AR cannot compete in creativity with influencers yet, for now. Good news: AR and VR technologies promise to make social media a more entertaining and experiential place; thus, influencers will probably be creating much more entertaining, realistic and creative contents, leading to a flow state in their audience.

#### 7.4.5 Further studies and limitations

The present study is not without its limitations. We believe that findings of the study contribute to the understanding of the mechanism underlying success of influencer endorsement. Although our proposed model is more comprehensive than previous research models and included different factors related to influencer, content and social media users' characteristics, there are other factors that affect the mechanism yet not included in our model. Creative, entertaining and informative value of the content, the cross relationship among different endorsed brands by the same influencer in the same time period are only a few among many potential antecedents to endorsement outcomes. Moreover, different moderating variables can be tested such as category of the endorsed brand, hedonic-utilitarian value of the endorsed product, content theme of the influencer (fashion, travel, lifestyle etc.) or category of influencer (micro, nano, macro, celebrity).

The survey used in the current study asked respondents to choose an influencer and a branded content the influencer shares, later responding to survey questions thinking that influencer and brand. Respondents' free choice of influencer was opted since we want the respondents to know the influencers as much as to measure their image dimensions such as authenticity and expertness which is very difficult to understand if the respondent does not know the influencer. However, in addition to its benefits, choice of this method brought some disadvantages. When a respondent is asked to choose an influencer and visit their Instagram profile, respondents choose whether influencers they admire, influencers they hate or influencers who are very popular and frequently collaborate with brands. The same study can be replicated by using a fabricated influencer social media account. The respondents who have no prior knowledge about the influencer (since she does not exist) may spend 15-20 minutes to check out the page and try to assess the influencer image and brand outcomes related to an endorsement post chosen. The comparison of findings may contribute to our understanding of the mechanism and assess the impact of familiarity with the influencer.

The present study has chosen Instagram as the context since Instagram is the most popular social media platform for influencer marketing. Nevertheless, many new social media platforms emerged in recent years and the mechanism that explains the effectiveness of the endorsement may be different. Replicating the research on a different social media channel, such as TikTok which is the rising star of social media, will contribute to the understanding of the moderating impact of the channel.

Lastly, the present study employed a Turkish sample for model testing. Different cultural contexts may influence the underlying mechanism; thus, the

replication of the study in different cultures will be helpful to understand if the findings are limited to a certain culture and generalizable.

The future of influencer marketing discussion presented in the current study may also inspire researchers to explore new fruitful research areas. The impact of AI and AR on influencers endorsements, the changes in the influencer-follower relationship in COVID-19 era, the role of influencers in the dissemination of fake news, the effectiveness of influencer endorsements on emerging social media channels, comparison of the effectiveness of image, video and audio content, the effectiveness of live streams on consumer response lead to many unanswered research questions.

APPENDIX A  
TRANSLATED SURVEY (IN ENGLISH)

The Impact of Influencer Marketing On Consumers' Attitude and Behavior

Influencers or social media icons are content creators who have the power to influence the ideas and behavior of their followers by sharing content on different themes such as fashion, beauty, gaming, travel, food and entertainment on social media channels such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. This survey has been prepared to measure the effects of influencer marketing on the consumer and the results will be used in the PhD thesis carried out in Boğaziçi University Institute of Social Sciences and will not be shared with third parties. The study is conducted for academic purposes only and is not for commercial purposes. It is of great importance for the reliability of the results of the study that you carefully read and answer the questions. Thank you very much for supporting my study by participating in the survey, which will take about 10 minutes.

1. How frequently do you use social media?

Very Rare 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Frequently

2. How much time do you spend daily on social media?

☐ 15 minutes or less

☐ 15-30 minutes

☐ 30-60 minutes

☐ 1-3 hours

☐ 3-6 hours

☐ 6 hours or more

3. Which social media channels do you actively use? (You can choose more than one option)

☐ Facebook

☐ Twitter

☐ Instagram

☐ YouTube

☐ Snapchat

☐ Tiktok

☐ None

☐ Other.....

4. Which social media channel do you spend the most time on?

☐ Facebook

☐ Twitter

☐ Instagram

☐ YouTube

☐ Snapchat

☐ Tiktok

☐ None

☐ Other.....

5. Do you follow one or more influencers who produce content on social media?

☐ Yes

☐ No

6. Please take a brief look at the branded content\* by browsing the Instagram page of an influencer you know/follow, considering the influencer definition at the beginning of the survey. Select a branded content (post/story) you want, take a screenshot of this image and upload the photo here. In the rest of the survey, questions about this chosen collaboration will be moderated.  
(\*Branded content: Contents shared by content producers on social media channels in different formats, such as video, photo text, etc., which highlight a certain brand. These contents are organically (without any commercial return of the content creator from the brand) or as part of a sponsorship agreement between a brand-content producer.)
7. Please indicate the name or Instagram account of the influencer you have chosen.
8. Please indicate the name of the brand you have chosen.
9. How frequently does this influencer share branded posts?  
Very Rare 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Frequent
10. Is this post a sponsored\* content? (\*Shared for an incentive received by the brand such as a fee or free product)  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ I have no idea.
11. Has the influencer indicated that this post is a sponsored content using a branded content tag or hashtag (#)?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No



12. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. \* (1: Strongly Disagree, 7: Strongly Agree)

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The brand is very prominent in this post.                             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| In this post, brand outshines the content.                            |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| In this post the first thing that catches the eye is brand.           |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| This post helped me to recognize that brand.                          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| I can recognize X among other competing brands.                       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Thanks to this post, I know this brand better.                        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| It is very likely that I will buy this brand.                         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| I will purchase this brand the next time I need this type of product. |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| I will definitely try this brand.                                     |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

13. Please evaluate your attitudes towards the brand in the post you have chosen.

|                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |                                    |
|------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|------------------------------------|
| I dislike this brand.              |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | I like this brand.                 |
| I react unfavorably to this brand. |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | I react favorably to this brand.   |
| I feel negative toward this brand. |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | I feel positive toward this brand. |
| This brand is bad.                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | This brand is good.                |

14. Please evaluate the influencer-brand collaboration in the post you have chosen.

|                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |                            |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------------------|
| Inappropriate            |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Appropriate                |
| Fits well with the brand |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Fits poorly with the brand |
| Matches the brand        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Does not match the brand   |

15. How do you describe this influencer?

|                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |                 |
|---------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----------------|
| Trustworthy         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | untrustworthy   |
| Reliable            |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Unreliable      |
| Dependable          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Undependable    |
| Honest              |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Dishonest       |
| Expert              |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Not an expert   |
| Experienced         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Inexperienced   |
| Knowledgeable       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Unknowledgeable |
| Qualified           |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Unqualified     |
| Skilled             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Unskilled       |
| Attractive          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Unattractive    |
| Classy              |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Not classy      |
| Beautiful/ Handsome |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Ugly            |
| Sexy                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Not sexy        |
| Elegant             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Not elegant     |

|                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |                                    |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|------------------------------------|
| Popular                             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Unpopular                          |
| Well-known                          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Not well-known                     |
| Has too many followers              |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Does not have too many followers   |
| Authentic                           |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Inauthentic                        |
| Sincere                             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Insincere                          |
| Genuine                             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Ingenuine                          |
| Seems real                          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Does not seem real                 |
| Always responds followers' comments |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Never responds followers' comments |
| Always helps her/his followers.     |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Always helps her/his followers.    |

16. How many influencers do you follow on social media approximately?

17. Gender?

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Other/ Do not want to indicate

18. Age?

19. Level of education?

- ☐ High school student
- ☐ College student
- ☐ Master/ PhD student
- ☐ High school graduate
- ☐ College graduate
- ☐ Master/ PhD graduate

20. Net monthly income?

- ☐ 2000 TL or less
- ☐ 2001-4000 TL
- ☐ 4001-6000 TL
- ☐ 6001-8000 TL
- ☐ 8001-10000 TL
- ☐ 10001 TL or more

21. Employment status?

- ☐ Student
- ☐ Working
- ☐ Unemployed/retired/ housewife

Thank you for your participation.

## APPENDIX B

### ORIGINAL SURVEY (IN TURKISH)

#### Influencer Pazarlamasının Tüketici Tutum ve Davranışlarına Etkisi

Influencer ya da sosyal medya ikonları, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube gibi sosyal medya kanallarında moda, güzellik, oyun, seyahat, yemek ve eğlence gibi farklı temalarda içerik yayınlayarak oluşturduğu takipçi kitlesinin fikir ve davranışlarını etkileyebilme gücüne sahip içerik üreticileridir. Bu anket, influencer pazarlamasının tüketici üzerindeki etkilerini ölçümlemek üzere hazırlanmış olup, sonuçları Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü'ne bağlı yürütülen doktora tezinde kullanılacak ve 3. kişilerle paylaşılmayacaktır. Çalışma sadece akademik amaçlı yürütülmekte ve ticari amaç gütmemektedir. Soruları dikkatle okuyup cevaplamanız çalışmanın sonuçlarının güvenilirliği için büyük önem taşımaktadır. Yaklaşık 10 dakika sürecek olan ankete katılarak çalışmama destek olduğunuz için çok teşekkür ederim.

1. Sosyal medyayı ne sıklıkla kullanıyorsunuz?

Çok nadir 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Çok sık

2. Sosyal medyada günlük ne kadar zaman harcıyorsunuz?

( )Günde 15 dakika veya daha az

( )15-30 dakika

( )30-60 dakika

- ☐ 1-3 saat
- ☐ 3-6 saat
- ☐ 6 saat ve üstü

3. Hangi sosyal medya kanallarını aktif olarak kullanıyorsunuz? (Birden fazla seçenek işaretleyebilirsiniz)

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Tiktok
- ☐ Hiçbiri
- ☐ Diğer.....

4. En çok vakit geçirdiğiniz sosyal medya kanalı hangisidir?

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Tiktok
- ☐ Hiçbiri
- ☐ Diğer.....

5. Sosyal medyada içerik üreten bir ya da daha fazla influencer takip ediyor musunuz?

☐Evet

☐Hayır

6. Lütfen anketin başındaki influencer tanımını düşünerek bildiğiniz/takip ettiğiniz bir influencerın Instagram sayfasında gezinerek markalı içeriklere\* kısaca göz atın. Dilediğiniz markalı bir içeriği (post/hikaye) seçerek bu görselin ekran görüntüsünü alarak fotoğrafı buraya yükleyin. Anketin devamında bu seçilen işbirliği hakkında sorular yönetilecektir. (\*Markalı içerik: Sosyal medya kanallarındaki içerik üreticilerinin paylaştıkları video, fotoğraf yazı gibi farklı formatlarda, belli bir markayı öne çıkaran içeriklerdir. Bu içerikler organik olarak (içerik üreticisinin markadan herhangi bir ticari getirisi olmadan, sadece bilgilendirme amaçlı) ya da bir marka-içerik üreticisi arasında bir sponsorluk anlaşması kapsamında paylaşılabilir.)

7. Seçtiğiniz influencerın ismini ya da instagram hesabını lütfen aşağıda belirtiniz.

8. Paylaşımındaki markayı lütfen aşağıda belirtiniz.

9. Bu influencerın markalı paylaşım sıklığı hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz?

Çok nadir 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Çok sık

10. Bu paylaşım sponsorlu\* bir içerik mi? (\*Markanın ücret ya da ürün karşılığı yaptırdığı paylaşım)

☐Evet

☐Hayır

☐Fikrim Yok



11. Influencer bu paylaşımın sponsorlu bir içerik olduğunu markalı içerik etiketi

ya da hashtag (#) kullanarak belirtmiş mi?

( )Evet

( )Hayır

12. Lütfen aşağıdaki ifadelere katılım derecenizi belirtiniz. \* (1: Kesinlikle Katılmıyorum, 7: Kesinlikle Katılıyorum)

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bu paylaşımında marka çok belirgin.                                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Bu paylaşımında marka içeriğin önüne geçiyor.                       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Bu paylaşımında ilk olarak marka göze çarpıyor.                     |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Bu paylaşım bu markadan haberdar olmama yardımcı oldu.              |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Bu paylaşım ile bu markayı daha yakından tanıdım.                   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Bu paylaşımından sonra bu markayı benzerlerinden ayırt edebilirim.  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Bu markadan bir ürün satın alma ihtimalim çok yüksek.               |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Bu tip bir ürüne ihtiyacım olduğunda, bu markadan almayı düşünürüm. |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Bu markayı kesinlikle deneyeceğim.                                  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

13. Lütfen seçmiş olduğunuz paylaşımındaki markaya yönelik tutumlarınızı değerlendiriniz.

|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| Bu markayı hiç beğenmiyorum               |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Bu markayı çok beğeniyorum               |
| Bu markaya karşı tepkim çok olumsuzdur.   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Bu markaya karşı tepkim çok olumludur.   |
| Bu markaya karşı hislerim çok olumsuzdur. |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Bu markaya karşı hislerim çok olumludur. |
| Bu marka çok kötüdür.                     |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Bu marka çok iyidir.                     |

14. Lütfen seçmiş olduğunuz paylaşımındaki influencer- marka birlikteliğini değerlendiriniz.

|           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |                |
|-----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|
| Uygun     |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Uygun<br>değil |
| Uyumlu    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Uyumsuz        |
| Örtüşüyor |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Örtüşmüyor     |

15. Bu influencerı nasıl tanımlarsınız?

|                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |                     |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---------------------|
| Güvenilir       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Güvenilmez          |
| Sözüne inanılır |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Sözüne<br>inanılmaz |
| İtimat edilir   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | İtimat<br>edilmez   |

|                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |                      |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------------|
| Dürüst          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Dürüst değil         |
| Alanında uzman  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Alanında uzman değil |
| Deneyimli       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Deneyimsiz           |
| Bilgili         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Bilgisiz             |
| Kalifiye        |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Kalifiye değil       |
| Yetenekli       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Yeteneksiz           |
| Çekici          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Çekici değil         |
| Şık             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Şık değil            |
| Güzel/yakışıklı |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Çirkin               |
| Seksi           |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Seksi değil          |
| Zarif           |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Zarif değil          |
| Popüler         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Popüler değil        |
| Tanınıyor       |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Tanınmıyor           |

|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Takipçisi çok                          |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Takipçisi az                            |
| Samimi                                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Samimiyetsiz                            |
| İçten                                  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | İçten değil                             |
| Candan                                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Candan değil                            |
| Olduğu gibi<br>görünüyor.              |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Olduğu gibi<br>görünmüyor.              |
| Yorumları hep<br>cevaplar.             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Yorumları hiç<br>cevaplamaz.            |
| Takipçilerine<br>hep yardımcı<br>olur. |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | Takipçilerine<br>hiç yardımcı<br>olmaz. |

16. Sosyal medyada tahmini kaç influencer takip ediyorsunuz?

17. Cinsiyetiniz?

☐ Kadın

☐ Erkek

☐ Diğer/Belirtmek istemiyor

18. Yaşınız?

19. Eğitim durumunuz?

☐ Lise öğrencisi

☐Üniversite öğrencisi

☐Lisansüstü öğrencisi

☐Lise mezunu

☐Üniversite mezunu

☐Lisansüstü mezunu

20. Aylık net geliriniz?

☐2000 TL ve altı

☐2001-4000 TL

☐4001-6000 TL

☐6001-8000 TL

☐8001-10000 TL

☐10001 TL ve üstü

21. Çalışma durumunuz?

☐Öğrenci

☐Çalışıyor

☐Çalışmıyor/Emekli /Ev hanımı

Ankete katılımınız için çok teşekkürler.

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