Perceived Influencer Authenticity: Antecedents and Consequences

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is, firstly, to gain insights on how consumers´ perception of influencer authenticity can be positively affected and, secondly, to examine the mediating role of influencer authenticity. An online experiment with the typical Instagram user (n=296) is conducted, using a 2 x 2 between-subject design. We find that both the existence of verified badges as well as the influencer´s use of two-sided messages drive perceived influencer authenticity. The interaction effect of these two antecedents on perceived influencer authenticity depends on the influencer´s status. While two-sided messages do not affect perceived influencer authenticity when the influencer´s account has a verified badge, they lead to an increase in authenticity perception in the badge´s absence on the influencer´s account. The findings confirm that perceived influencer authenticity fully mediates the relationship between the two antecedents and advertising effectiveness.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the use of influencer marketing has become an important way for companies to advertise their products and brands. With a market volume of $1.7 billion in 2016 and an expected volume of $9.7 billion for 2020, this industry has continued to grow tremendously over just a few years (Influencer MarketingHub 2020).

Influencer marketing relates to a company´s identification with und use of specific persons who have managed to build up a community on social media platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook, and who, therefore, hold an influence over potential buyers of the company´s brand (Brown and Hayes, 2008). They can share information and give recommendations about a company´s offerings to their followers (Evans et al. 2017). In exchange for their engagement, influencers are remunerated by the company, either in monetary or non-monetary terms, e.g., by receiving specific product samples. By social media influencers, we refer to regular people who have gained fame as content creators and not to traditional celebrities (cf. Lou and Shupei 2019). The collaboration with this type of influencers has several benefits for companies. Consumers feel a deeper connectedness toward these persons, they identify with them (Tran and Strutton 2014) and perceive them as being more credible and authentic (Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen 2010) than the less approachable traditional celebrities. As a consequence, consumers rely on their advice concerning a company´s brand and try to imitate influencers which, in turn, increases their purchase intentions (Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu 2019).

Research also suggests that this positive impact depends on the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of the influencer. Aspects that reduce these perceptions impede the intended positive influence on consumers (Lou and Shupei 2019). For example, Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) found that consumers are very sensitive to an influencer´s follower/followee ratio, suggesting that a high number of followers, but a low number of followees, has negative effects on consumers.

The concepts of trustworthiness and credibility are closely related to the concept of authenticity. Yet, even though the relevance of perceived influencer authenticity is acknowledged (Kapitan and Silvera 2016), studies investigating the concept of authenticity in the context of influencer marketing are limited (Chapple and Cownie 2017). Our study aims to fill this research gap. The purpose of this paper is twofold: First, we aim to gain insights on how consumers´ perception of influencer authenticity can be positively affected. We focus on two characteristics

of an influencer´s post, verified badges on the influencer´s Instagram account, and two-sided messages of influencer posts. Second, we seek to examine the mediating role of influencer authenticity. In particular, we test whether the aforementioned characteristics directly influence consumers´ attitudes and purchase intention (here: advertising effectiveness), or whether there is an indirect impact via perceived influencer authenticity.

2. Model development and hypotheses

Despite some classification attempts (e.g., based on the number of followers), no universal conceptual definition of influencers can be found. The present study follows Brown and Hayes (2008) who define them as individuals who have a significant impact on the purchase decisions of consumers, without being exclusively responsible. Similar to word of mouth, communication by influencers is regarded as independent of the company, and thus, perceived as more reliable (Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold 2011).

Consumers´ underlying motivation can explain the persuasive effect of the influencer's communication on purchase decisions. One reason for the general media usage is the urge for advice and opinions on decision alternatives. Consumers hope for security and knowledge in decision-making in order to be socially accepted (Afrasiabi and Benyoucef 2011). By suggesting certain behaviors, e.g., buying specific brands, influencers fulfill this need and thus provide security. However, the influence of a(n) (initial) stranger is subject to some conditions. Key characteristics attributed to the influencer, include high media presence, perceived sympathy (Kolo and Haumer 2018), similarity and expertise, and perceived credibility and trustworthiness (Xiao, Wang, and Chan-Olmsted 2018). Accordingly, the latter factors promote the acceptance of the conveyed message and enables persuasive communication.

Drawing on Moulard, Garrity and Rice (2015) the present paper defines the authenticity of an influencer as the subjective perception that an influencer acts according to his/her true self and demonstrates competence in his/her field. In contrast to authenticity, the concept of credibility, which is a facet of influencer authenticity (Morhart et al. 2015), has been extensively studied in marketing. It has been found, for example, that the perceived credibility of an ad influences consumers´ attitude towards an advertisement (AA), attitude towards a brand (AB) as well as their purchase intention (PI). Together, these variables form the higher order construct effectiveness of the advertisement (Hallahan 1999).

We argue that the use of verified badges and the use of two-sided messages increases influencer authenticity. Verified badges represent a label of a user profile, which is provided by the respective platform (e.g. Instagram) upon request. These badges positively influence the credibility of the user (Flanagin and Metzger 2007; Paul, Khattar, Kumaraguru, Gupta, & Chopra, 2019) and thus also positively affect the perception of her or his messages. Two-sided messages are characterized by addressing positive and negative characteristics of a product, service or brand. Kamins und Marks (1987) found a positive effect on the credibility of the advertiser as well as on the product attitude. This effect was also confirmed by the meta-analysis of Eisend (2006). Examining the effect of two-sided messages in online word-of-mouth communication on film reviews, Schlosser (2005) found that applying two-sided massages results in a higher degree of perceived credibility and a more positive attitude towards the film.

Research on brand authenticity has found that consumers´ perception of the authenticity of a brand is driven by various cues, such as the country of origin of a brand, its history or its age (Morhart et al. 2015). Verified badges on Instagram accounts inform people that a specific Instagram profile is the "authentic presence of a notable public figure, celebrity, or global brand" (Instagram 2019). Taken together with previous research on the role of cues for authenticity perception, we argue that verified badges on an influencer´s Instagram account represent a cue for a positive evaluation of the authenticity of an influencer. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: An influencer´s Instagram account shown with a verified badge leads to a higher degree of perceived influencer authenticity compared to an influencer´s Instagram account without a badge.

Previous studies on two-sides messages have found a positive influence on consumers perceptions and behaviors (e.g., Kamins and Marks 1987; Eisend 2007). Referring to attribution theory (Kelley 1973) and building on Eisend´s (2007) work on two-sided messages in marketing, it is suggested that one-sided positive messages are associated by consumers with the company´s desire to sell products. In contrast, by using two-sided messages consumers think the company is telling the truth about its offerings. As a consequence, they assign a higher degree of credibility to the company. This, together with credibility being a facet of perceived authenticity, leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Two-sided messages of an influencer´s Instagram post lead to a higher degree of perceived influencer authenticity compared to one-sided (positive) messages.

Cues are not only used to confer authenticity to an object or person; cues are also used by consumers to develop attitudes and arrive at the decision whether to purchase a product or not (Olsen et al. 2011). As mentioned before, we consider attitude towards the brands, attitude towards the influencer´s post and purchase intention of the advertised brand as being the dimensions of the variable of advertising effectiveness. Tying in to the above argumentation for H1, we derive the following hypothesis:

H3: An influencer´s Instagram account shown with a verified badge leads to a higher degree of advertising effectiveness compared to an influencer´s Instagram account without a badge.

Building on previous research that has found a positive influence of two-sided advertising messages on consumers´ attitudes and readiness to purchase a product (e.g. 1982; Kamins and Marks 1987), we hypothesize:

H4: Two-sided messages of an influencer´s Instagram post lead to a higher degree of advertising effectiveness compared to one-sided (positive) messages.

Several studies provide empirical evidence for the positive impact of authenticity perception on attitudes and behavioral intentions (e.g., Moulard et al. 2015; Fritz et al. 2017). Drawing on these studies, we argue that perceived influencer authenticity also functions as driver of advertising effectiveness. Together with our prior reasoning on the influence of verified badges and two-sided messages on influencer authenticity, we hypothesize:

H5: Perceived influencer authenticity mediates the effect of verified badges of an influencer´s Instagram account on advertising effectiveness.

H6: Perceived influencer authenticity mediates the effect of message sideness of an influencer´s Instagram post on advertising effectiveness.

Figure 1 provides an overview of our research model.

FIGURE 1: RESEARCH MODEL
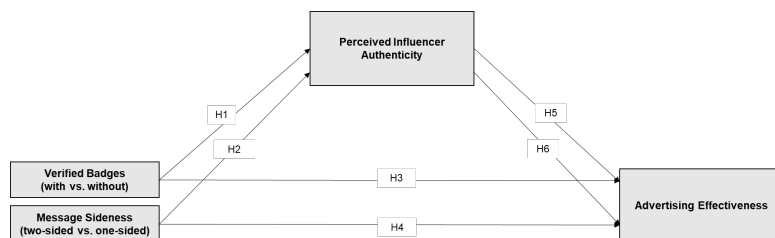
3. Empirical study: design, sample & results

To test the hypotheses, we conducted an online experiment that was shared via the social media platform Facebook and via platforms of German schools and universities. We explicitly addressed the typical Instagram user who is female and aged between 14 and 30 years (Statista 2019). After eliminating participants not in this target group, the sample consisted of data from 296 participants (all female; age: 15 – 19 years: 39%, 20 – 24 years: 50%, 25 – 29 years: 11%). We used a 2 (an Instagram account with a verified badge vs. without a badge) x 2 (an Instagram post with positive and negative product information vs. a post with only positive product information) between-subject design.

In each scenario, an Instagram account of a German female lifestyle influencer who advertised a body lotion was presented. We used this product type, as the beauty industry often engages influencers to advertise their products. The Instagram account was either shown with a verified badge or without a badge. The influencer´s post about the body lotion either contained positive and negative product information (message sideness) or only positive product information. The negative product information referred to the body scent, which did not exactly meet the personal preference of the influencer. To avoid a possible bias due to strong brand and influencer images, we considered a beauty brand that was relatively new on the German consumer market and an influencer who was relatively unknown in Germany.

All measures were based on seven-point Likert scales anchored "1 = strongly disagree" and "7 = strongly agree". We drew on existing scales to measure the constructs. Perceived influencer authenticity was measured with four dimensions (integrity, credibility, professionalism, and naturalness) based on Morhart et al. (2015), Moulard, Gerry, and Rice (2015), Fritz, Schoenmueller, and Bruhn (2017). Referring to Hallahan (1999), advertising effectiveness was measured with three dimensions (attitude towards the brand, attitude towards the Instagram post, and purchase intention). The items were based on MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch (1986), Hallahan (1999), Putrevu (2005). The questionnaire ended with demographics (gender, age and job status).

Measurement results. Measurement reliability and validity was assessed using exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach's α. Contrary to the literature, an exploratory factor analysis revealed a two-factor solution for the construct perceived influencer authenticity (factor 1: integrity, credibility, and naturalness; factor 2: professionalism). Furthermore, items for both

factors were parceled. For the three dimensions of advertising effectiveness, we again used item parceling. Overall, our measurement scales show sufficient levels for Cronbach´s α (perceived authenticity: .618; advertising effectiveness: .755).

Manipulation check and test of hypotheses. Two-sample t-tests for equal means confirmed the efficacy of our manipulations (verified badge vb: M_{with_VB} = 6.72, SD = .634 vs. $M_{without\_VB}$ = 3.84, SD = 1.819; t(192.384) = -18.430, p < .001; message sideness ms: M_{with_ms} = 6.55, SD = .708 vs. $M_{without\_ms}$ = 1.24, SD = .561; t(236.218) = -69.767, p < .001)

We performed several two-sample t-tests and a series of ANOVAs to test our hypotheses. The results support most of the hypotheses. Perceived influencer authenticity is higher in the verified badge condition than in the no badge condition which led to the support of H1 (M_{with_VB} = 4.675, SD = .871 vs. $M_{without\_VB}$ = 4.465, SD = .921; t(294) = -2.010, p < .05). Similarly, message sideness in influencer posts is shown to lead to a higher degree of perceived influencer authenticity than no message sideness, supporting H2 (M_{with_ms} = 4.712, SD = .935 vs. $M_{without\_ms}$ = 4.454, SD = .862; t(294) = -2.460, p < .05). We further tested for interaction effects of the two factors on perceived influencer authenticity; the results revealed to be significant (F(1,292) = 3.861, p < .05). There is an ordinal interaction between the existence of badges on an Instagram account and message sideness on perceived influencer authenticity. In particular, the three conditions (verified badge / one-sided; verified badge / two-sided; no badge / two-sided) lead to a higher level of perceived influencer authenticity compared to the condition no badge / one-sided.

In contrast to our reasoning, the findings reveal that the advertising effectiveness is not stronger in the verified badge condition than in the no badge condition (M_{with_VB} = 3.327, SD = .945 vs. $M_{without\_VB}$ = 3.148, SD = .912; t(294) = -1.655, p = .099). This leads to a rejection of H3. H4 also has to be rejected. The results show that the level of advertising effectiveness does not depend on an influencer post´s valence (M_{with_ms} = 3.294, SD = .999 vs. $M_{without\_ms}$ = 3.188, SD = .875; t(294) = -.967, p = .334). Furthermore, the interaction effect between verified badge and message sideness on advertising effectiveness was not revealed to be significant either.

To test the mediating role of perceived influencer authenticity, we followed the procedure proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008). We performed two mediation analyses (Mediation Model 4) using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples. In a first mediation analysis, we considered verified badge (0 = Instagram account without a badge, 1 = Instagram account with a verified badge) as the independent variable, perceived influencer authenticity as the mediator, and

advertising effectiveness as the dependent variable. The result supports hypothesis H5: The perception of influencer authenticity mediates the effect of an Instagram account with a verified badge on advertising effectiveness (indirect effect = .126; 95% confidence interval [CI] = [.004, .255]). As there is no direct effect of the independent variable on advertising effectiveness, perceived influencer authenticity exerts a full mediating effect on this relationship.

In a second mediation analysis, message sideness of the influencer´s Instagram post (0 = Instagram post without message sideness, 1 = Instagram account with message sideness) was considered as an independent variable, the mediator and dependent variable remained unchanged. Again, the results reveal a full mediation effect and, thus, confirm the role of perceived influencer authenticity as a mediator (indirect effect = .157; 95% confidence interval [CI] = [.029, .295]). Thus, H6 is supported.

4. Discussion, implications and future research

The aim of this paper was to examine the influence of verified badges and message sideness of an influencer´s Instagram account on perceived influencer authenticity. In addition, the purpose was to explore the role of perceived influencer authenticity for advertising effectiveness. The analysis revealed that both the existence of verified badges as well as the influencer´s use of two-sided messages drive perceived influencer authenticity. Furthermore, the aforementioned interaction effect of the two antecedents on perceived influencer authenticity shows that the influencer´s status (account with or without a verified badge) is decisive, i.e. whether he/she should use two-sided messages in his/her Instagram posts. While two-sided messages do not affect perceived influencer authenticity when the influencer´s account has a verified badge, they lead to an increase in authenticity perception in the badge´s absence on the influencer´s account. Furthermore, the findings confirmed that perceived influencer authenticity fully mediates the relationship between the two antecedents and advertising effectiveness. The latter consists of the dimensions 'attitude towards the brand', 'attitude towards the post' and 'purchase intention' and has been considered as a consequence of perceived influencer authenticity.

Taken together, the results clearly show that perceived influencer authenticity is a key factor for successful influencer marketing. Managers are therefore well advised to encourage the influencers they cooperate with to express their own opinion about the products of a company, including the explicit mention of negative aspects. The latter is particularly relevant for the

cooperation with influencers whose Instagram account does not have a badge. It goes without saying, however, that the mention of negative aspects should be to a moderate degree and that it should not predominate in influencers´ postings about the product or company. In addition, given the importance of influencer authenticity, companies that are looking for new influencer partnerships are well advised to select influencers who already enjoy an authentic image in their social media community.

As with any study, this one is not free of limitations and consequently presents opportunities for future research. First, we assessed only two antecedents of perceived influencer authenticity. We therefore encourage research to consider other possible authenticity drivers. Second, in our study, the negative product information referred to the scent of the body lotion and, hence, to a rather subjective product feature. It is recommended to test whether the results also hold when instead objective product features (e.g., the quality of the body lotion´s ingredients) are negatively evaluated by the influencer. Third, we tested our hypotheses using only one influencer, one specific product and a female sample. To validate the results, we encourage research to extend our findings by considering other influencers, products and by integrating men into the sample. Finally, we did not include individual characteristics as possible influencing factors in our research model. However, there is reason to believe that these characteristics (e.g., product involvement or the general attitude towards Instagram and influencers) are able to strengthen or weaken our tested relationships.

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