CONCEPTUALIZATION AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF INFLUENCER IMAGE

gözde baycur kececi
Yeditepe University
Hüseyin Karaca
Boston University

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ABSTRACT

Influencer marketing has received growing scholarly attention recently; however, the understanding of the influencer characteristics that affect the success of influencer endorsement is limited. The main objective of this study is to conceptualize a new construct that we name "influencer image", and, to develop and validate a scale to measure it. An online survey is used to collect data from 1100 social media users and analyzed using SPSS AMOS. As a result, a six-dimensional scale containing 22 items was developed representing distinctive dimensions of influencer image: trustworthiness, authenticity, perceived expertise, physical attractiveness, popularity, and responsiveness. Future studies can use this scale to understand the relationship of influencer image with related marketing constructs.

1. Introduction

With the increasing use of digital communication channels, marketers' efforts have shifted from traditional channels to social networking sites (SNSs) (Lee and Kim, 2020). Consequently, brands started to collaborate with social media influencers who generate content on SNSs to endorse products. The shift from mainstream media to user generated content led to a new era in marketing, called "influencer marketing" (Brown & Hayes, 2007; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). More than 60 percent of marketers planned to allocate more resources to influencer marketing in 2024, and the budget is estimated to reach $24 billion by the end of 2024 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024)

In spite of the widespread interest in influencer marketing, theoretical and empirical study on the topic has lagged, leading to a limited knowledge of the notion and measurement of related concepts up to this date. An important step in making the foundations of a solid body of research in influencer marketing is to develop a measure of influencer image that defines the characteristics of the influencer. We define influencer image as the general impression, perception, and associations social media users have about an influencer. We conceptualized influencer image as a multidimensional construct to reflect factors shaping an influencer's image. While conceptualizing the influencer image, we built it on previous research on the spokesperson credibility concept. However, the credibility construct mostly adopted by celebrity endorsement research is inadequate to define the characteristics of social media influencers and neglects some critical differences such as the interactivity of the new media.

Influencer image scale developed in this paper will make significant contributions both for marketing theory and practice. First, we expect the future deployment of our scale to advance practical knowledge regarding the attainment of endorsement outcomes. Second, the proposed influencer image conceptualization and scale will provide valuable insights into the emerging influencer marketing literature.

2. Source Models and Celebrity Endorsement

A message's ability to persuade is dependent on the source from which it is received (Kelman, 1961; Meenaghan, 1995). The "Source Attractiveness Model" and "The Source Credibility Model" are the two basic sub-models of source models. These models were taken from communication literature and customized for the context of celebrity endorsement.

According to the source credibility model, the message receiver accepts messages from credible sources. The existing literature on celebrity endorsement effectiveness focuses on the endorser's credibility (Erdogan, 1999). Information disseminated by a credible source has the potential to alter opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and, ultimately, behavior. According to the source credibility model (Hovland, Jannis, and Kelley, 1953), celebrities are more effective than non-celebrities in opinion change and persuasion because they are perceived as more credible.

The conceptualization of credibility is ambivalent and there is no consensus about its dimensions (Erdogan, 1999). Perceived expertise and trustworthiness are two main dimensions of credibility that most scholars agree upon (Dholakia & Stemthal, 1977; Hovland et al. 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1991). Ohanian's (1991) seminal research on celebrity spokespersons' credibility conceptualizes credibility as a three-dimensional construct which is composed of trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise.

Trustworthiness causes consumers to accept product information shared by the endorser, while expertise increases respect for the endorser's product knowledge and increases the likelihood of making decisions based on that information (Shimp, 1997). Perceived similarity is a predictor of trustworthiness and credibility because people tend to trust others when they believe they are similar to them (Erdogan, 1999). Desphande and Stayman (1994) demonstrated that endorser ethnicity has a significant impact on endorser trustworthiness and brand attitudes, demonstrating that people prefer celebrities from their own ethnic group and find celebrities from a different ethnic group less trustworthy and endorsements less effective. According to McGuire (1985), the persuasive power of a message is determined by its similarity, familiarity, and liking for an endorser.

The endorser's expertise refers to its level of knowledge, skill, and experience in a specific topic (Hovland et al. 1953; Ohanian, 1991). The endorser's expertise influences consumer preferences because it reduces consumers' perceived risk and simplifies purchase decisions (Filieri, 2016; Langner, Hennings & Wiedmann, 2013). According to the source credibility model, celebrities' credibility is determined by their perceived expertise. Perceived expertise differs from objective expertise in that what is important is how knowledgeable the message receiver believes the endorser is, rather than the objective expertise (Erdogan, 1999). Sometimes two experts with the same skills and experience, such as two doctors with the same degree and experience, are perceived differently in their expertise, and one is likely to be preferred as a result of better communication of expertise.

According to the source attractiveness model, the attractiveness of the endorser influences the likability of the endorser and the endorsed product/brand (Choi & Rifon, 2012). To emphasize the role of attractiveness in celebrity credibility, Ohanian (1991) quotes Aristoteles: "Beauty is a greater recommendation than any letter of introduction." Advertisements on various media platforms provide evidence that supports. Magazines, TV commercials, and billboards are filled with young, beautiful, and attractive people who endorse a product, and people buy these endorsed products in the hope of looking as good as the billboard girls and guys.

The attractiveness halo effect, which contends that attractive persons are more likely to be viewed as possessing better personality attributes, is well documented in the perception literature (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Lucker, Beane & Helmreich, 1981; Moore, Filippou, & Perrett, 2011). As a result, attractive celebrities can be seen as being more sincere, reliable, smart, and informed, and as an endorser, their persuasion power can be higher due to the halo effect.The attractiveness of the endorser could unintentionally backfire despite the anticipated beneficial benefits. According to Rossiter and Percy (1987), there is a chance that the celebrity will draw customers' attention while the product may be obscured. According to Cooper (1984), the endorsed item must be the star, not the endorser. If not, customers remember the celebrity they saw in commercials but forget the brand.

3. From Influencer Credibility to Influencer Image

The first query that arose when influencer marketing gained popularity among marketing practitioners was how to pick the best influencer to represent the business. The major question was "Who?" rather than "How?" since marketers believed that the effectiveness of an influencer endorsement was directly related to the attributes of the influencers. First attempts at influencer marketing research focused on traits of influencers that can contribute to targeted marketing objectives, like elevated sales, elevated brand recognition, and good brand attitude (Lee &

Watkins, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019, Trivedi, 2018). The majority of studies on influencer marketing still use this as their primary research theme (Vrontis et al, 2021).

The research stream on influencer characteristics has its roots in existing communication and celebrity endorsement literature. Most research that investigates the impact of influencer qualities and their consequences adjust source models to the context of the influencer. The Source Credibility Model and The Source Attractiveness Model assert that the features of the message's source influence its acceptance and effectiveness (Hovland, Jannis & Kelley, 1953). The stronger the credibility and attractiveness of the source (in this case, a social media influencer), the more likely the recipient would embrace the message.

Marketing academia borrowed source models to explain how celebrity endorsement helps to achieve desired marketing results (McCracken, 1989). The conceptualization of the credibility of the celebrity by Ohanian (1990) has been revisited for influencer marketing research. While some studies employed influencer credibility construct (i.e. Breves et al., 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2020) as Ohanian (1990) conceptualized, some researcher focused on one or two dimensions of credibility, such as expertise or trustworthiness and tested their consequences (Ki & Kim, 2019; Trivedi & Sama; 2020)

Most research supported a positive association between influencer credibility and related constructs and consumer outcomes. Purchase intention was used as the dependent variable in most hypothesized models. 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).

Although influencer credibility is a widely used construct, conceptualization of influencer credibility neglects domain specific characteristics. Most studies directly used source credibility measures (i.e. Dhun and Dangi, 2023; Lee and Kim, 2020). However, this study aimed to extend influencer credibility concept to conceptualize and operationalize a domain specific credibility construct. To discover the underlying dimensions, we conducted a qualitative study which will be presented in the following section.

4. Qualitative study

Following a thorough analysis of academic sources, press, and social media accounts of different companies and influencers, qualitative in-depth interviews are conducted to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of influencers.Five content consumers who are college students between the ages of 20 and 28 and are enrolled at a European university were interviewed, as well as two managers of global brands (one is a well-known cosmetic brand and the other is a leading technology company), five influencers from various content themes (one fashion, two lifestyle, and two entertainment bloggers/vloggers) were interviewed.
Drawing on the aforementioned literature, interview questions were developed separately for influencers, brands, and consumers. We asked all respondents to define an influencer and describe a successful influencer. Brand executives are asked their criteria to choose influencer endorsers and which qualities of influencers contribute most to the success of collaborations. While interviewing followers, we similarly asked why they follow influencers and which qualities of influencers are most important to them. We explored which influencers' recommendations they adopt and tried to explore the qualities that lead to it. While initially adopting an open-ended approach, we primed the respondents with terms related to the influencer

characteristics sourced from the literature review findings in; thus permitting a conservative assessment of whether participants shared conception of influencer image.

In summary, the qualitative study shows the conceptions of influencer image of influencers, followers and industry professionals are aligned with key findings addressing the influencer image concept in prior research.

5. Influencer Image Conceptual Development

Further, analogous to the literature review and insights from the in-depth interviews, we propose six influencer image dimensions that correspond to trustworthiness, authenticity, perceived expertness, physical attractiveness, popularity, and responsiveness. Some of the items used in the scale development phase were adapted from previous research on source credibility and celebrity endorsers. Five additional items were developed for this study based on a literature survey and qualitative study. Table 1 shows the underlying dimensions, items and the sources they are adapted.

Table 1. Influencer Image Scale

Dimension	Source	Items
Trustworthiness	Ohanian (1990)	dependable-undependable, honest-dishonest reliable-unreliable sincere-insincere trustworthy-untrustworthy
Authenticity	Moulard et al. (2015)	genuine-not genuine, authentic-inauthentic, seems real-does not seem real
Physical Attractiveness	Ohanian (1990)	attractive-unattractive classy–not classy beautiful/handsome-ugly elegant-plain sexy–not sexy
Perceived Expertise	Ohanian (1990)	expert-not an expert experienced-inexperienced knowledgeable-unknowledgeable qualified-unqualified, qualified-unqualified,
Popularity	In-depth Interviews	popular-unpopular, have too many followers- do not have too many followers well-known- not well known.
Responsiveness	In-depth Interviews	Always helps her followers- never helps her followers Always responds followers' comments- never responds to followers' comments

The survey employed in this study first asked respondents their social media usage habits and users who do not follow any influencers were eliminated. Later, respondents were asked to look at their Instagram feed and choose an influencer. The following questions were responded to

by thinking of that chosen influencer.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.

Data collection procedure is outsourced to an unbiased market research firm. 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.

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). The final sample size reached 1100. The sample is dominated by young (66% under age 30), highly educated (75% have university/master's degree or student) female (67%) social media users.

6. Data Analysis

6.1. Scale purification

Next, the initial items were subject to the scale purification process in order to reduce items and assess the scale's dimensionality and reliability. Scale purification was based on an exploratory analysis with the survey data. First, exploratory factor analyses (EFAs) were used to examine the basic structure of the scale to explore underlying dimensionality of a construct and to check internal reliability. The measures were examined based on their communalities, EFA factor loadings, and inter item total correlations. 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. We 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. The results of the analysis showed that one item (EX1: expert-not an expert) from expertness 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.

6.2.*Scale Confirmation*

Given that EFA results showed a strong factor structure of the influencer image scale as well as its high reliability, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted as a further step to confirm if the theorized dimensionality is present or not.
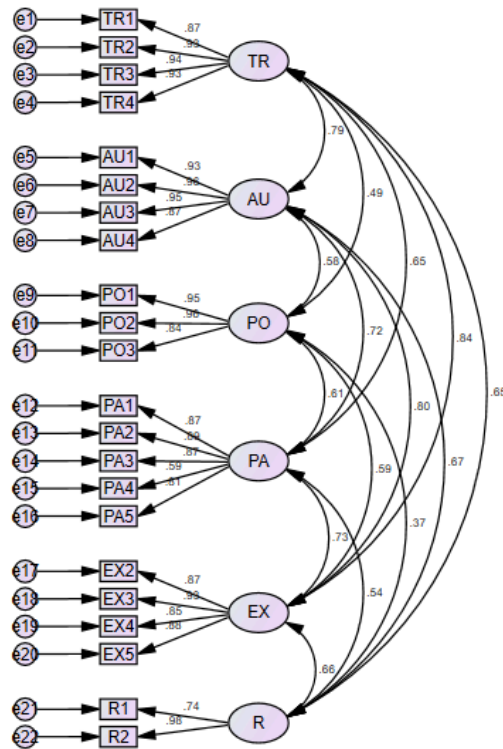

Figure 1: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

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. *Scale validation*

After assessing unidimensionality, validity and reliability of the model is 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 5.

Table 5. 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, composite reliability is assessed. 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. AVE score over 0.5 indicates an adequate level of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Discriminant validity check is a widely accepted prerequisite for model assessment in SEM analysis. 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.

After checking validity and reliability of the measurement model, fit of the model is assessed. All fit measures (Chi square is significant, Cmin/df is 4.37, CFI=0.975, TLI=0.971 and RMSEA=0.055) support that the model has a good fit.

7. Implications and Discussion

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.

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 the number of followers and engagement metrics. Surprisingly, the image of influencer in the eyes of social media users was 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 outcome of this research is a reliable and valid measure of influencer image that includes six items. Future research using this measure should be conducted in different content themes (such as fashion influencers, game influencers or make up influencers) or in different

SNSs (such as YouTube, TikTok and Instagram comparison) to examine the stability of the measure across the platforms and content themes.

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