

**Social Media Influencers Are a More ‘Organic’ Form of Advertising**

Andres Fabris

Department of Communications, University of Delaware  
COMM423: Communication, Advertising, and the Consumer

Dr. James Angelini

May 14, 2021

## Introduction

Over the past decade, influencers became a prominent emergence of social media culture. Freberg et al. (2011) explains social media influencers are "... a new type of endorser that shape the attitudes of their audiences through social media" (as cited in Luoma-aho et al., 2019 p. 325). With influencers catching the attention and trust of a more niche audience, it casts celebrity endorsements as a 'dated' advertising strategy. Gräve (2017) captures this difference by stating, "Celebrities might be more effective endorsers for broad, heterogeneous audiences with mixed levels of familiarity" (p. 4). Therefore, it suggests that although celebrities can reach a more generalized audience, the efficiency of the message may not be as well-perceived compared to the niche audience towards which influencers curate their content. Amongst these positive characteristics, another insight of influencer's success is through parasocial identification, which emphasizes its manifestation on "... the congruence between a celebrity endorser's image and consumers' self-concept..." (Choi and Rifon, 2007, as cited in Shan et al., 2019, p. 594).

Similarly, Kapitan and Silvera (2015) suggest that potential consumers make attributions on the influencer's identification with the endorsement, saying, "This framework suggests that correspondent inferences about an endorser's dispositional desire for and use of a product drive outcomes in many studies." (p.562). This quote mainstreams the balance between seeming more organic/authentic and the audience's parasocial identification of the influencer's endorsement that impacts consumer behavior. For example, a beauty influencer promoting a mascara would make more sense than promoting a new McDonald's special. The audience can understand how the influencer utilizes mascara in everyday life, which makes their opinion valuable to their audience's purchase habits, while eating food is not something an audience would associate with the beauty influencer's brand. My argument for this paper is through understanding the

relationship between authenticity and purchase intention, influencers are a more “organic” form of advertising.

## **Literature Review**

### **Endorsement Attributions**

In the past, traditional endorsements featured celebrities to sell a product. Kapitan and Silvera (2015) suggest that, through the identification process, if one were to see a familiar celebrity endorsing a shampoo, a consumer would purchase it because of their widespread recognition and attributed social trust, not necessarily because they are an expert (p. 555). Therefore, the audience lacks a certain degree of agency and choice in their purchase decision. The familiarity of a celebrity encourages product purchase rather than a deeper understanding of the endorsement message, which is a common problem of traditional, paid-by-brand endorsements (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015, p. 557). However, it is equally important to address how social media has reshaped these traditional marketing effectiveness strategies.

The emergence of influencers retrained product-endorser attribution from a familiar face that can sell the product to somebody who understands and uses the product. A pivotal aspect of a successful influencer is their ability to promote a product in an organic manner that sounds unforced and aligned with their lifestyle. The organic matter of influencer marketing can “... be cued by argument quality and good product-endorser fit” (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015, p. 566). Organic endorsements focus on a psychological aspect of influencer marketing that utilizes niche audiences and encourages their input and response. In addition, research links product-endorser attributions like expertise, honesty, and trust to impacting consumer buying habits (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015, p. 559-560). Product endorsements that fit influencers’ lifestyles appear more

organic because a consumer can identify the relationship between the product and the endorser's usage of it. Lastly, Kapitan and Silvera (2015) state, "Yet influencers who have developed homegrown audiences are more likely, we suggest, to be both attractive/likeable and also perceived as authentic and expert" (p. 557). The statement further supports the reworked product-endorser relationship that influencers adopted. They rely on a more organic/authentic approach that is personal to their audience and encourages their response to the product. This new approach builds more meaningful attributions and identification between product and consumer, product and endorser, and endorser and their identity.

### **Wishful Identification, Similarity, and Trust**

Three factors contribute to the relationship between the endorser and advertising effectiveness: similarity (to endorser), wishful identification, and trust. Schouten et al. (2020) signal that while we feel more similar or relatable to influencers, wishful identification is more commonly associated with celebrity endorsers (p. 261). This provides a helpful differentiation to observe these factors. The premise of this study is to "... measure advertising effectiveness in terms of attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the advertised product, and purchase intention..." (Schouten et al., 2020, p. 261). The study gives more strength to the attributions and factors previously discussed but elaborates on how their effectiveness fluctuates between celebrity endorser and influencer. For example, endorser-product fit finds credibility to be more pronounced in influencers since they typically identify within niche interests and share such product information with aligned followers (Schouten et al., 2020, p. 263). In their results, Schouten et al. (2020) summarize that "... participants identify more with influencers than with celebrities, feel more similar to influencers than celebrities, and trust influencers more than celebrities" (p. 274). Therefore, these findings lean towards influencers having more influencer

effectiveness than celebrity endorsers, advocating for previous arguments in the literature review. While this research (Schouten et al., 2020) studies factors that contribute to advertising effectiveness, the attributions of similarity, credibility, and endorser-product fit echo the same aspects of how new influencer marketing utilizes a more organic and authentic approach to advertise products (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015).

### **Authenticity**

Brand authenticity is defined as “the perceived consistency of a brand’s behavior that reflects its core values and norms, according to which it is perceived as being true to itself” (Fritz et al., 2017, as cited in Luoma-aho et al., 2019, p. 355). The definition strikes a parallel to both the research of Schouten et al. (2020) and Kapitan and Silvera (2015), where they place the importance of advertising effectiveness and positive consumer attributions, like honesty and trust, on aligned endorser-product fits. In contrast, Luoma-aho et al. (2019) describes inauthenticity as “externally motivated behavior and inconsistency” (p. 355), insinuating that beyond the norm of the influencer’s niche interest, a product endorsement may be inauthentic if it does not fit the influencer’s identity.

The concept of priming refers to “providing contextual cues to a non-conscious information process that activates certain patterns in memory and leaves out others” (Carroll & Einwiller, 2014, as cited in Luoma-aho et al., 2019, p. 355). Luoma-aho et al. (2019, p. 356) explain its importance because there is an increased desire for authenticity in a culture of sponsored content. This puts influencers, like vloggers, in a difficult decision because vloggers often talk directly to the camera, which boosts authenticity; however, inauthentic attributions may arise in followers if influencers post sponsored content because it seems inconsistent with the influencer's identity and described as ‘opportunistic.’ The study's findings found positive

priming beneficial to authenticity perception, yet the concept of vloggers posting sponsored advertisements remains relatively negative (Luoma-aho et al., 2019, p. 362). This summary signifies the role of the audience attribution and the importance of authenticity concerning endorser-product fits and the influencer's brand identity. Therefore, influencers should be mindful of the content or products they promote and its alignment with their niche because their audience may find it inconsistent with the influencer's brand.

### **Advertising Effectiveness**

Concerning advertising effectiveness, the factors of similarity, wishful identification, and trust play into attitudes about products and purchase intentions (Schouten et al., 2019). However, Pöyry et al. (2019) show the advertising effectiveness of sponsored and non-sponsored ads between celebrity endorsements and social media influencers. Pöyry et al. (2019) states, "...social media celebrity endorsements are a prime example of a novel mechanism to promote products, worldviews and ideologies in contexts that were originally considered and promoted as spaces for genuine peer communication and empowerment..." (p. 347-348). This quote recognizes the power of influencers and the merit of their similarity towards their audience, further commenting on the social media landscape. This suggestion of similarity has been a building concept within the Literature Review. For example, similarity means that the audience can identify themselves with the influencers. The significance of influencers as "social media celebrities" showcases an overlapping phenomenon that advertising is experiencing currently, where influencers have celebrity status in a digital world.

The role of celebrity endorsements and influencers is undergoing revision to accommodate the ever-changing digital landscape. In addition, Pöyry et al. (2019) further support previous notions of similarity by stating, "Followers may regard social media

influencers' sponsored endorsements as more like peer endorsements, which increases their effectiveness" (p. 347). The word choice of "peer endorsement" indicates a perspective of similarity that the influencer is "part of the team," like a friend's advisement; so rather than the advice of an intangible celebrity, consumers identify more with influencers who are representative of their niche and interest(s), which can accumulate trust. Factors of similarity, wishful identification, and trust are all factors in advertising effectiveness and purchase intention.

### **Parasocial Identification**

Horton and Wohl (1956) define parasocial identification as "the seeming face-to-face and one-sided quasi-interactions between a media viewer and a media character" (as cited in Shan et al., 2019, p. 594). The study indicates that a degree of similarity and authenticity influence purchase intention through parasocial identification. For example, Shan et al. (2019) state, "When a social media influencer's image is congruent with a consumer's ideal self-image, consumers are more likely to develop favorable brand attitude and be influenced in purchase decisions" (p. 605). The term 'congruent' hints at a similarity factor, meaning when a consumer sees themselves as the influencer or identifies with the influencer, they develop purchase intentions. Shan et al. (2019) detail when a consumer becomes a self-influencer by stating, "When consumers find an influencer's image desirable and resonant, they may aspire to be like the influencer and enhance their ideal self-image through purchasing and using the product endorsed by the influencer" (p. 606). Although having great purchase intentions, the reality of a self-influencer contributes to an oftentimes negative aspect of parasocial identification. This is because the relationship is no longer how the consumer sees themselves in an imaginary relationship with the consumer and the product, but this is a consumer trying to become an influencer through purchasing the influencer's advertised products.

Shan et al. (2019) also suggested, through their results, that "... consumers' assessment specifically of an influencer's self-serving motive functions as a crucial moderator in the relationships between self-influencer congruence and endorsement outcomes through parasocial identification." (p. 606). This finding complements the importance of a more organic/authentic approach with endorser-product advertising because superficial or inconsistent messaging promotes negative attributions, like distrust and doubt, amongst consumers. Consistent marketing of endorser-product niche fits will effectively garner positive attributions amongst followers and build loyalty (Luoma-aho, 2019).

### **eWOM (electronic Word Of Mouth)**

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) defines eWOM as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (as cited in De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 801). The concept of eWOM is congruent to the emergence and success of social media influencers. As influencers garnered a reputation of truth and credibility through endorser-product fit and brand authenticity, marketers have encouraged those to promote their products, aware of influencers' advertising effectiveness. Still, a single influencer cannot promote all products, only those that align with the influencer's niche, or they risk becoming 'inauthentic' (Luoma-aho et al., 2019).

Platforms like Instagram are well-known for utilizing eWOM via captions to input product and brand names (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 799). De Veirman et al. (2017) comment on the influencers' advertising strategy, stating that "...influencers' endorsements are highly personal and interwoven into the constant stream of textual and visual narration of their personal lives, they will likely be perceived as the influencer's unbiased opinions and may have relevant



persuasive power” (p. 801). This insight showcases how influencers effectively advertise products through eWOM messaging. Factors like similarity, usage disposition, honesty, and authenticity are crucial assets to endorsement messages since influencers craft these in the perspective of an unbiased portrayal of their lives. If influencers contextualize posts that demonstrate how they utilize a product in everyday life, they build a personal relationship with their audience. This concept allows consumers/followers a closer look into their life. This further generates the audience to question if the influencer is honest and authentic in their message. If the eWOM endorsed product is unbiased and relative to the influencer, these attributions will remain positive, ensuring effective advertising.

### **Conclusion**

Through the Literature Review, the first study (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015) explained how endorsement attributions transitioned from a traditional, paid-by-brand framework to a social media landscape. The most prominent trade-off was acquiring a more knowledgeable endorser with a niche audience, making their product endorsements of specialized interest, thus becoming more organic and authentic to their brand. Then, the second study (Schouten et al., 2020) described how wishful identification, similarity, and trust influence advertising effectiveness. Similarity plays a significant role in identifying the influencer as a regular person like the consumer, indicating relatability as a driving force that influences trust. This exploration reaffirmed how new influencer marketing utilizes a more organic approach to connect with consumers/followers.

Luoma-aho et al. (2019) discussed how authenticity is pivotal to new influencer marketing, which makes effective advertising organic in nature. An important aspect of authenticity is the consistency of content and endorser-product fit. Endorser messages that do not

align with the influencer's niche or personal brand risk bad attributions, like untrustworthiness and dishonesty. Potentially, this can affect future purchasing habits and as well as reputation. Regarding the fourth article (Pöyry et al., 2019), there was more depth to advertising effectiveness concerning sponsored and non-sponsored postings, where there may be a hurdle for influencers to overcome. However, reinforcing factors like similarity, authenticity, and trust, influencers can adjust their strategic communications and still promote advertising effectiveness and purchase intention.

The concept of parasocial identification (Shan et al., 2019) indicated the sub-role of consumers becoming self-influencers; therefore, endorsement messaging needs to reflect influencers' beliefs correctly. Failure to do so risks inconsistencies between influencer identity and niche audiences, further promoting negative attributions, like distrust and doubt, damaging the influencer-consumer relationship. Lastly, electronic word-of-mouth messages (De Veirman, 2017) promote a clear structure of how influencers effectively advertise niche products. Factors of similarity, usage disposition, and honesty contribute to the contextualized endorsement. By generating visualizing an intimate approach to carry the message within a post, there is an organic sense of authenticity established. All these points and ideas contribute to my argument: through understanding the relationship between authenticity and purchase intention, influencers are a more "organic" form of advertising. In the next section, I will discuss the implications of my research in society today.

### **The Reviewed**

This research adds light on how endorsement attributions relate to the effectiveness of influencer marketing, focusing on what aspects of endorser-product relationships proved to be most beneficial in encouraging an organic purchase intention. With new social media platforms

emerging, such as TikTok, the state of influencer marketing is constantly being readjusted to “fit in.” However, contributing factors like authenticity and expertise are guiding principles that attract niche audiences on any platform.

De Veirman (2017) makes a compelling indication that persuasive devices used in social media endorsements are useful because of consumer’s inexperience with influential marketing strategies (p. 802). The implication of consumer inexperience allows for more attributions towards influencer endorsements and advertisements. Through this effort, the consumer or follower will become accustomed to influencer marketing. Therefore, influencers will have to evolve their strategies to acquire and unlock more new experiences for consumer culture. The suggestion of this advantage in advertising contrasts with the constant feedback loop where consumers adjust to product endorsements, and influencers become challenged with expanding upon or reinterpreting their brand identity. Failure to reinvent has possible implications of not being able to reach new consumers/followers. For example, beauty influencers often launch their own beauty line or collaboration to entice new fans while promoting products for their existing audience (e.g., Jeffree Star Cosmetics). Rebranding has lasting implications on consumer attribution of the influencer, authenticity, and purchase intention. In sum, influencers have to mind their preexisting audience while advertising for new followers; the rebranding has to make sense with the influencer’s expertise, so messages appear more consistent and organic to their identity.

## References

- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 1–31.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035>
- Gräve, J. (2017). Exploring the perception of influencers vs. traditional celebrities. *Proceedings of the 8th international conference on social media & society*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3097286.3097322>
- Kapitan, S., & Silvera, D. H. (2015). From digital media influencers to celebrity endorsers: Attributions drive endorser effectiveness. *Marketing Letters*, 27(3), 553–567.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-015-9363-0>
- Luoma-aho, V., Pirttimäki, T., Maity, D., Munnukka, J., & Reinikainen, H. (2019). Primed authenticity: How priming impacts authenticity perception of social media influencers. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(4), 352–365.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2019.1617716>
- Pöyry, E., Pelkonen, M., Naumanen, E., & Laaksonen, S. (2019). A call for authenticity: Audience responses to social media influencer endorsements in Strategic Communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(4), 336–351.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2019.1609965>
- Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2019). Celebrity vs. influencer endorsements in advertising: The role of identification, credibility, and Product-Endorser fit. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(2), 258–281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1634898>

Shan, Y., Chen, K., & Lin, J. (2019). When social media influencers endorse brands: The effects of self-influencer congruence, parasocial identification, and perceived endorser motive.

*International Journal of Advertising*, 39(5), 590–610.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1678322>