Effects of Parasocial Interaction with an *Instafamous* Influencer on Brand Attitudes and Purchase Intentions

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Social media influencers are often seen as independent third-party endorsers who can utilize their blogs, tweets and other type of social media tools to influence the attitudes of their readers and followers. This study tested a model that assesses the effectiveness of an Instafamous influencer in promoting a product and facilitating consumer decision-making. Study participants (N=364) responded to Instagram posts of a social media influencer and measurement items of source credibility, parasocial interaction (PSI) and brand attitudes. Results show that prior brand attitude was positively related to consumer evaluation of influencer credibility. While perceived influencer attractiveness and expertise positively predicted PSI with the influencer, a higher level of PSI significantly explained greater influencer trustworthiness. Perceived influencer attractiveness and trustworthiness also had a significant impact on post-exposure brand attitude. PSI and post-exposure brand attitude, in turn, were significantly related to purchase intention.

Keywords: Brand Attitude, Opinion Leadership, Parasocial Interaction, Source Attractiveness, Source Expertise, Source Trustworthiness

S ocial media platforms are the most influential online social networks, as billions of people access these outlets to learn and share information on a daily basis. As such, social media serve as one of the engines that enables "the continuing interactions between people and technologies that are changing societies" (Lin & Rauschnabel, 2016, p. 2144). As social media advertising made up over 20% of the advertising expenditure during the second quarter of 2020 (Mandese, 2020), this technology modality has also changed the way that advertisers promote their brand to a target market. Platforms such as Instagram allow anyone with a significant number of followers to spread their opinion about a product or brand. Individuals who have a large following of consumers on social media are known as social media influencers (De Veirman et al., 2017).

These social media influencers are seen as independent third-party endorsers who have the ability to utilize their blogs, tweets and other type of social media tools to influence the attitudes and behavior of their readers and followers (Freberg et al., 2011). From a theoretical perspective, successful social media influencers could be considered as opinion leaders who can influence others' attitude and behaviors on a certain brand or product (Godey et al., 2016). As utilizing opinion leaders to influence consumer decision-making has been a long-standing marketing practice (Chaney, 2001; Lyons & Henderson, 2005), influential opinion leaders tend to be seen with high source credibility and are liked by their followers. For example, past research has shown that the more trustworthy and likable the social media influencer, the more effective this influencer would be in shaping audience attitudes and behaviors toward a brand (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2020).

Influencer marketing is defined as a strategy that utilizes the personal influence of important opinion leaders to increase consumers' brand awareness and purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Specifically, social media influencers could increase consumer intention to share the recommendation suggested by them, through interacting with other social media users (Casaló et al., 2020) via an electronic-word-of mouth (eWOM) process quickly and efficiently. As many social media influencers are individuals who cultivate their own celebrity to achieve their opinion leader status, they are viewed as the more approachable "people's celebrities" (Schouten et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2019) than traditional celebrity opinion leaders (e.g., famous athletes, musicians or actors).

As suggested by the theoretical perspective of parasocial interaction, the desire for social media users to see a favorite influencer as their trusted friend or adviser could then lead them to engage in a pseudo-social interaction and develop a parasocial relationship with the influencer (Bond, 2016; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). By implication, social media users who have established a parasocial relationship through their parasocial interactions with a favorite influencer will also be more likely to trust the product-use and purchase recommendations made by that influencer (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

Preliminary research has shown that Instagram influencers with many followers could wield a lot of advertising power (De Veirman et al., 2017). Yet, limited research has focused on the fit between an influencer and a brand (Breves et al., 2019). To fill this

theoretical and empirical gap, the current study intends to gain a better understanding of whether a self-made racial minority social media "celebrity" could be regarded as an opinion leader with significant source credibility and an object for parasocial interaction. Specifically, this study aims to examine how a "product-expert" from a racial minority group on Instagram may impact consumer attitude and behavioral intention via a conceptual framework consisted of source credibility, opinion leadership, and parasocial interaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical research still needs to more fully examine the phenomenon of social media influencers as expert opinion leaders, as aforementioned. The discussion below presents a review of the opinion leadership construct and relevant literature as well as a conceptual framework that integrates these theoretical components to help guide the current research.

Opinion Leadership

The construct of opinion leadership as applied in marketing research is rooted in the tradition of the diffusion of innovation paradigm (Cho et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2018). Opinion leadership is also related to the classic two-step flow theory, which explains the process of how opinion leaders share news and information with their followers (Burt, 1999). Prior research has shown that opinion leaders could influence consumer behavior in several different ways. For instance, Lyons and Henderson (2005) suggested that a given opinion leader could informally impact how an opinion follower seeks or purchases a product, or how the follower may use the product. For this reason, marketers often target active opinion leaders online with their promotional effort, with the hope that these opinion leaders would help diffuse new products, services and consumption ideas.

Opinion leadership in online marketing typically evolves around an electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) process. This eWOM process reflects a phenomenon where "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" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). When an eWOM source becomes popular and secures a large number of online followers, this source could be considered an "opinion leader" or "social influencer" in the online marketing universe. As explained in De

Veirman et al. (2017), "brands aim to encourage highly followed and admired influencers who are regarded as trustworthy, non-purposive opinion leaders, to talk about and recommend their products on social media platforms" (p. 801).

As opinion leaders are in the position to mediate the branding messages to enhance the brand's appeal to their followers, some of their mediated messages could often be disseminated quickly and widely through eWOM as well as reach the potential of going viral on the Internet (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Compared to the tried-and-true strategy of spreading product endorsement through employing traditional celebrities as opinion leaders, social influencers who are considered "people's celerity" could be equally or more effective in achieving the same promotional objective. Jin et al. (2019) maintained that due to a closer identification in self-identity and even physical appearance, some of the popular self-made and follower-driven opinion leaders could more effectively reach those consumers who prefer to engage with brands through these social media influencers. This finding is consistent with other research, which shows that consumers prefer the opinions of lower scale, *Instafamous* celebrities as opposed to traditional celebrities on social media (e.g., Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) defined the term *Instafamous* as "an individual who became famous via their profile on Instagram and is familiar to most users of this media" (pp. 1432-1433).

Even so, of the numerous individuals who strive to become *Instafamous*, only some of them are successful at cultivating a loyal following and/or have staying power. If these *Instafamous* individuals intend to monetize on their self-cultivated celebrity status as a brand endorser, they must embody a certain level of source credibility as an opinion leader. The following discussion will examine the source credibility factor of social media influencers, which is fundamental to the concept of opinion leadership.

Source Credibility

The construct of source credibility, first proposed by Hovland et al. (1953), presumes that individuals are more likely to be persuaded when they perceive an information source to be credible. Credibility of a marketing source is the degree to which a target audience evaluates an advertising message source, in order to determine the expertise and knowledge of the source who recommends a product or service (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Ohanian, 1990). As product endorser credibility helps shape advertising

effectiveness, a more credible advertising endorser (or message source) is also more effective in generating a more favorable attitude and purchase intention toward the product (Choi & Rifon, 2002).

Past research has shown that consumer perception of the brand information source is often evaluated based on three characteristics: attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Ohanian, 1990; Yoon et al., 1998). While "expertise" refers to consumer perception of the source's knowledge about the product/service promoted, "trustworthiness" reflects their confidence in accepting the promotional message and "attractiveness" describes how appealing the message source is judged (Teng et al., 2014). In the eWOM context, prior work has found that consumers feel that their purchase decision is less risky because they have seen Instagram reviews about a product posted by their admired and trusted influencer (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

In line with these findings, other studies also showed that consumer perception of an influencer's trustworthiness and attractiveness – as well as perceived similarity to the consumers themselves – have a positive influence on consumer trust in relation to the influencer's branded posts (Lin & Xu, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). These results are further supported by another experimental study. Specifically, Jin et al. (2019) suggested that relative to those who viewed a traditional celebrity's brand posts, consumers exposed to brand posts of an Instagram celebrity influencer perceived that influencer to be more trustworthy; these consumers also had a more positive attitude toward the endorsed brand due to a stronger perceived social presence of the influencer psychologically and benign envy of the influencer. Benign envy refers to one's desire to achieve the successful status of others' without harboring any "hateful" feelings (Van de Ven, 2016). When the feelings of envy arise from admiration and affinity with the envied source, then such feelings could motivate one to mirror the source (Lange & Crusius, 2015). By implication, social media users' benign envy of their admired influencer could be reflected in and further cement their trust and liking of the influencer.

However, an Instagram influencer that posts an advertisement or a review for a product without having demonstrated strong knowledge of the product features may not necessarily be considered a credible source for endorsing that product. For instance, a previous study reported that while influencers are considered *Instafamous* based on their

followership, social media users may not necessarily trust the authenticity of such followership; rather, users believe that effective "micro-celebrities" must be "attractive, inspirational, of relevance to and competent in the use of the product, responsive to the user, active, intelligent, original, and professional in their posts" (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019, p. 1442).

Instafamous celebrities are ordinary individuals who became influencers, due to increased following of their relatable, lifestyle-focused social media presence (on Instagram, YouTube channels and the like). As empirical research addressing social media influencers and their branding influence is still evolving, preliminary studies have suggested that perceived influencer credibility could further brand liking (e.g., Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Kim et al., 2015). Based on the literature presented on opinion leadership and source credibility above, a set of hypotheses is proposed below to test the relationship between perceived influencer credibility and brand attitude derived from exposure to brand endorsement from the influencer.

H1a-c: Perception of an influencer's a) trustworthiness, b) expertise and c) attractiveness will be positively related to attitude toward the brand (as endorsed by the influencer).

The extant literature has yet to examine the relationship between prior brand attitude and consumer perception of influencer credibility. In other words, whether consumer liking of a brand could have a direct impact on whether they deem the social influencer who endorses the brand more or less credible is unclear. As the three dimensions of source credibility theory have not been consistently examined for their relationship with prior brand attitude in conjunction with a social media influencer, a set of research questions is posed below to explore this empirical research gap.

RQ1a-c: Will prior brand attitude be positively related to perception of an influencer's a) trustworthiness, b) expertise, and c) attractiveness?

An important contributor to a social media influencer's trustworthiness could be engendered through a process known as parasocial interaction (Chung & Cho, 2017), which is a form of pseudo-social interaction between the audience and a media personality. Social media users who engage in parasocial interaction with the influencer whom they

respect and/or like could further result in trust in the influencer. The relationship between the source credibility factor and parasocial interaction is elaborated below.

Parasocial Interaction

The concept of parasocial interaction, proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956), depicts a media user's one-sided pseudo-interpersonal relationship with media characters (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Compared to traditional media, for example, the internet platform allows for a two-way parasocial interactive communication between fans and media figures such as famous athletes (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). However, when followers of YouTube vloggers form a parasocial relationship with their favorite vloggers, they could mistake that parasocial interaction for an imagined intimate two-sided social exchange (Dibble et al., 2016).

In the marketing context, past work related to PSI has addressed how it enhances consumer satisfaction (Lim & Kim, 2011) and enjoyment from their shopping experiences (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Labrecque (2014) describes parasocial interaction as "…an illusionary experience, such that consumers interact with personas (i.e., mediated representations of presenters, celebrities, or characters) as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship" (p. 135). Another study likewise indicated that it is PSI with a media character that affects brand attitudes, as PSI could deepen the media character's representation of the brand (Knoll et al., 2015). By implication, a good match between a media character and a brand may evoke a stronger level of PSI between consumers and perceived media character's representation of the brand.

Addressing consumer evaluation of a social media influencer in relation to PSI, Sokolova and Kefi's (2020) findings indicated that perceived homophily toward the influence has a stronger effect on PSI than social attractiveness. Another study revealed that PSI via social media influencers could enhance perceived influencer credibility as a brand spokesperson, which in turn extends the social media marketing value in increased brand credibility and consumer purchase intentions (Chung & Cho, 2017). Additional research also found that greater PSI could advance influencer credibility, which could further brand liking and purchase intention (e.g., Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Kim et al., 2015). A study on beauty bloggers (Wright, 2017) suggested that influencer credibility could be evaluated based on whether there is perceived realism of the product use

scenarios – and whether the bloggers are seen as genuine – as exclaimed by one study participant "it's almost like you're sat doing your make-up with your friend" (p. 314).

Still, theory-driven empirical research addressing the relationships – between the source credibility factor and PSI with a social media influencer – remains preliminary in nature. Based on the available research evidence on PSI (reviewed above) and the source credibility factor related to social media influencer in the digital marketing context (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lin & Xu, 2017), the following conceptual assumptions are proposed. First, social media users may be driven to engage in PSI with a more attractive influencer (socially and/or physically), who possesses a higher level of product expertise. It is further anticipated that a greater level of PSI between consumers and an influencer may result in more consumer trust in the influencer. To verify these propositions, the following hypotheses are advanced.

> **H2a-b:** An influencer's a) attractiveness and b) expertise will be positively related to PSI.

> **H3:** PSI will be positively related to perception of an influencer's trustworthiness.

Lee and Watkins (2016) found that consumers were more likely to develop parasocial relationships with a vlogger seen as relatable to them and similar to themselves. Their finding further described how consumers were also likely to develop similarly positive brand evaluations as promoted by the vlogger, who was deemed as socially approachable. Other work further validated the positive impact of PSI between digital celebrities (influencers) and followers on purchase intentions (e.g., Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Kim et al., 2015). Addressing consumer evaluation of a social media influencer in relation to PSI, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) suggested that opinion followers cognitively and affectively internalize their preferred social media influencer's messages, which leads to increased purchase intention. Their findings further indicated that PSI has a much stronger effect on purchase intention than influencer credibility.

To validate the theoretical assumptions about how PSI may influence consumer evaluation of a brand – as endorsed by the influencer – and their purchase intention toward the brand, the following hypotheses are tested.

> **H4a-b:** PSI will be positively related to a) consumer attitude toward the brand and b) purchase intention.

In addition, a hypothesis is also proposed below to assess the relationship between consumer attitude toward the brand – stemming from brand endorsement from the influencer – and their intention to purchase the brand.

H5: Consumer attitude toward the brand will be positively related to purchase intention.

Lastly, Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual model that integrates the interrelationships between the constructs drawn from the three theories. The model specifies that prior brand attitude could impact the three aspects of perceived influencer credibility. While source expertise and attractiveness are positively linked to parasocial interaction, the same is true between parasocial interaction and source credibility. As source credibility and parasocial interaction are positively related to brand attitude, the latter are both favorably linked to purchase intention of the brand.
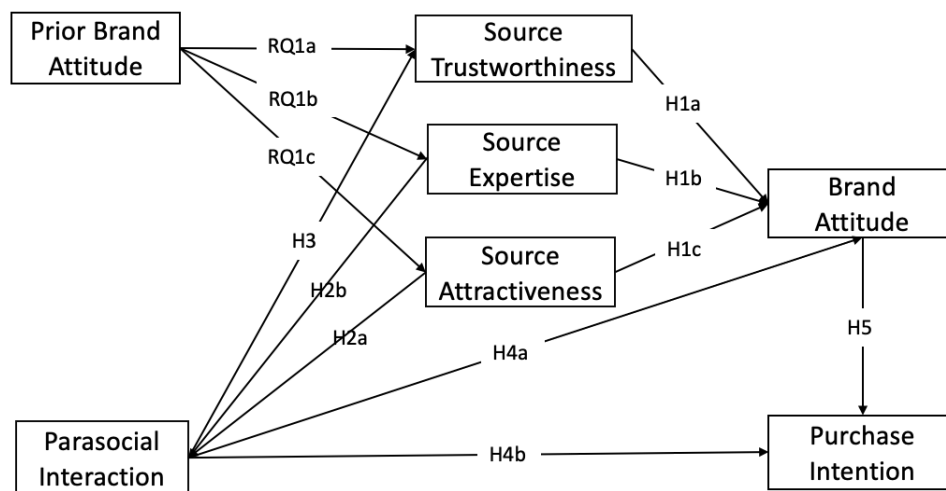

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model.

METHODS

The study sample was recruited from a large northeastern university in the U.S. Students enrolled in an undergraduate general education course, who came from different majors across campus, were offered course credit to participate in the study. With advance protocol approval from the IRB, a sample of female students was recruited. The reason for only recruiting female participants was because the social media influencer under study, Massy Arias (or Massiel "Massy" Indhira Arias), only promotes women's workout apparel and accessories on Instagram and YouTube.

In total, study sample netted 414 cases. After removing those cases that contained incomplete responses or posed potential measurement errors (e.g., straightlining for selected survey items), the final sample yielded 364 valid cases. The average age of study participants was 19.4 in years and their average annual family/household income was about $95,290. In terms of racial and ethnic characteristics of the sample, 64.6% were White, 7.1% African American, 10.7% Hispanic and 14% Asian, with another 2.5% identifying themselves with the "other" category. Study participants are considered part of the generation Z's cohort, who grew up with social media and the culture of social media influencers.

In order to study a well-suited "everyday product" purchased by young adults, the brand Fabletics was selected. Fabletics markets affordable women and men's workout clothes and accessories both online and in selected retail stores across the country. To ascertain an influencer who is a product expert and from a racial minority group, Massiel "Massy" Indhira Arias, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, was chosen for the study. Arias is a content-generator who became popular because of her authenticity and fitness vlogs (Petit, 2019). She is a self-made *Instafamous* social media influencer and hence could be considered a "people's celebrity."

The research procedure began with having participants log in to the study online via a dedicated hyperlink. After expressing informed consent, they were invited to respond to an online survey. The first set of items asked about their attitude toward the Fabletics brand, after reviewing a description about the brand that included screenshots of sample product offerings. This was followed by reading a brief introduction about the fitness trainer, Arias, and then viewing her four different Instagram posts. These posts depicted Arias in Fabletics workout clothing from four different angles – from the left, right, front and back – with her head turning toward the camera and showcasing her muscled physique. Each post also contained a message promoting the Fabletics workout clothing in a conversational style to engage her followers.

Measures

Source Credibility. This variable was measured by adapting Ohanian's (1990) fifteen-item measure on a semantic differential scale. A principal component factor analysis yielded the following three factors: attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise.

The measurement items that make up these three separate factors include: (1) attractiveness: unattractive/attractive; not classy/classy; ugly/beautiful; plain/elegant; not sexy/sexy (α = .93); (2) trustworthiness: undependable/dependable; dishonest/honest; unreliable/reliable; insincere/sincere; untrustworthy/trustworthy (α = .96); and (3) expertise: non-expert/expert; inexperienced/experienced; unqualified/qualified; unskilled/skilled and unknowledgeable/knowledgeable (α = .96).

Parasocial Interaction. Participants were asked to assess seven items adapted from Lee and Watkins (2016), via a 7-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree). Examples of these items are: "When I'm viewing Massy Arias's posts, I feel as if I am a part of her group;" "I feel that Massy Arias is kind of like an old friend;" "I would like to meet Massy Arias in person;" and "Massy Arias makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends." These seven items were combined to generate a composite variable (α = .95).

Attitude toward Brand. This construct was gauged with five measurement items adapted from Spears and Singh (2004), utilizing a semantic differential scale. Participants responded to these items prior to and after viewing the influencer's posts about the brand. The five adjective pairs used for this scale include: unappealing/appealing; bad/good; unpleasant/pleasant; unfavorable/favorable and unlikeable/likeable. These five items were merged to construct the variables of prior brand attitude (α = .98) and post-exposure brand attitude (α = .97).

Purchase Intention. Participants' purchase intention was reflected by having them evaluate five different statements adapted from two previous studies (Evans et al., 2017; Lee & Watkins, 2016), via a 7-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree). Examples of these items include: "I would like to try Fabletics promoted by Massy Arias," "I would buy Fabletics fitness products promoted by Massy Arias, if I happen to see the products in a store" and "I would actively seek out Fabletics in a store in order to purchase it." These five items were collapsed to form a composite variable (α = .95).

To validate the convergent and discriminant validity, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted with all the variables in a measurement model. Results revealed a relatively good model fit ($x2$ = 1,360.84, p < .001, CMIN/DF = 2.30, IFI = .96, CFI= .96, RMSEA= .06).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the variables tested in the study and the correlation between them are reported in Table 1. Influencer expertise has the highest mean value (M = 5.30, SD = 1.17), followed by post-exposure brand attitude (M = 5.24, SD = 1.26), influencer attractiveness (M = 5.1, SD = 1.21) and influencer trustworthiness M = 5.04, SD = 1.19). The variables with mean values below 5 include: prior brand attitude (M = 4.94, SD = 1.28), purchase intention (M = 3.48, SD = 1.71) and parasocial interaction (M = 3.08, SD = 1.45). Moreover, all variables are significantly correlated with each other. Several variables have a correlation higher than .50, the confirmatory factor analysis (as reported above) indicated discriminant validity between all factors (< .78) and did not indicate any collinearity concern (Kenny, 2016).

Table 1
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Prior Brand Attitude	--						
2 Parasocial Interaction	.26***	--					
3 Influencer Attractiveness	.46***	.38**	--				
4 Influencer Trustworthiness	.43***	.39**	.49**	--			
5 Influencer Expertise	.39***	.30***	.45***	.76***	--		
6 Post-Exposure Brand Attitude	.73***	.33**	.56***	.56**	.51***	--	
7 Purchase Intention	.55**	.69**	.45**	.48**	.39***	.60**	--
M	4.94	3.08	5.10	5.04	5.30	5.24	3.48
SD	1,28	1.45	1.19	1.21	1.17	1.26	1.71

*p*** < .001

A path analysis was utilized to test the research questions and hypotheses (see Figure 1). The model did not generate an ideal fit (x2 = 26.15, df = 5, p < .001, CMIN/DF = 5.23, CFI= .98, RMSEA= 1.08). Two of the hypothesized paths failed to produce a statistically significant beta weight; these two paths included the link from expertise to post-exposure attitude as well as the link from PSI to post-exposure attitude. By removing these two paths, the revised model produced acceptable fit indices as follows: x2 = 7.8, p < .257, CMIN/DF = 1.29, CFI= .99, RMSEA= .03). These path analysis results are reported in Figure 2 below.
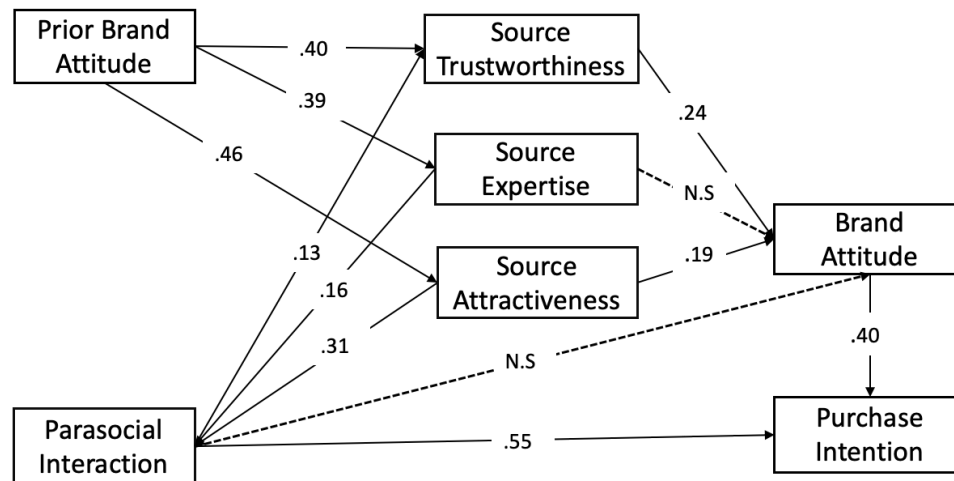

Figure 2. Path Analysis Results.
Notes. Standardized beta values are reported above; ***p < .001

RQ1a-c ask whether prior brand attitude will influence how consumer evaluate the source credibility of the influencer. Based on the path analysis results, findings indicated that prior brand attitude was significantly related to consumer perception of an influencer's trustworthiness (ß = .40, p < .001), expertise (ß = .39, p < .001), and attractiveness (ß = .46, p < .001). In essence, the more a consumer likes the brand, the more likely he/she will trust (trustworthy) the influencer to a greater extent as well as find the influencer more knowledgeable (expertise) and likable (attractive).

H1a-c assert that if the influencer is deemed more credible, then such perception will lead to a more favorable attitude toward the brand (as endorsed by the influencer). Of the three source credibility measures, perceived source trustworthiness (ß = .24, p < .001) and attractiveness (ß = .19, p < .001) were both significant predictors of post-exposure brand attitude, but not perceived source expertise. This suggests that when consumers

trust and like the influencer more, their attitude toward the brand could also be favorably enhanced, regardless whether the influencer is considered an endorser with high product expertise. Based on these findings, H1a and H1c were supported but not H1b.

As for H2a-b, both perceived influencer expertise (β = .16, p < .001) and attractiveness (β = .31, p < .001) were found to be positively related to PSI, as proposed. These results thus confirmed both hypotheses. H3 assumes that PSI will positively influence perceived influencer trustworthiness; this hypothesis was also validated by the result (β = .13, p < .001). Hence, PSI is positively influenced by perceived influencer's product knowledge and attractiveness. In turn, PSI, also enhances perceived trust in the influencer.

Turning to H4a-b, which anticipates that PSI will have a positive influence on post-exposure brand attitude and purchase intention. Findings show that PSI was a significant predictor of the latter (β = .55, p < .001) but not the former; thus, H4b was supported instead of H4a. Lastly, post-exposure brand attitude was found to be significantly related to purchase intention (β = .40, p < .001), validating H5.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the relationships between PSI with a social influencer's credibility, brand attitude, and purchase intention. Overall, the results indicate that both PSI and source credibility play an important role in directly and/or indirectly impacting brand attitude and purchase intention in the context of digital marketing, as driven by social media influencers. Equally significant is the finding that shows prior brand attitude could have a strong and positive influence on how a consumer evaluates an influencer's credibility. As empirical literature affirming these interrelationships are still emerging, current study findings have furthered our understanding of the factors that could drive PSI and how PSI may serve as a valuable mediator to help boost consumer relationship with a brand.

Specifically, prior brand attitude is a significant predictor of all three dimensions of influencer credibility measures: trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. These results suggest that if consumers already have a favorable opinion about a brand, then they may find the brand's designated social media brand ambassador to be more trustworthy, knowledgeable and attractive. As for the relationships between influencer

credibility and PSI, findings suggest that when the influencer is considered an expert for the product, consumers are more interested in engaging the influencer through pseudo-social interaction.

The same is true, when the influencer is regarded as an attractive spokesperson for the brand. These results confirm past study findings, which describe that PSI is predicted by influencer attractiveness (Gong & Li, 2017; Lee &Watkins, 2016; Lou & Kim, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020) and expertise (Lou & Kim, 2019). PSI was also found to be a significant predictor of perceived influencer trustworthiness, confirming past work (Chung & Cho, 2017; Gong & Li, 2017). It should be noted that some researchers have treated influencer trustworthiness as an antecedent variable to PSI and found a significant relationship between them as well (De Jans et al., 2018; Lou & Kim, 2019; Yuan et al., 2016).

Consistent with previous research, our study supported the assumption that different dimensions of perceived social media influencer credibility – as reflected by follower trust in the influencer (Jin et al., 2019) and influencer's physical attractiveness (Trivedi & Sama, 2020) – are significant predictors of brand attitude (Jin et al., 2019; Trivedi & Sama, 2020). By contrast, the current study did not find consumer perception of influencer expertise to be directly relevant to post-exposure brand attitude, even though influencer expertise had an indirect effect on brand attitude through PSI and perceived influencer trustworthiness. These findings are also similar to that of a YouTube study by Xiao et al., (2018). Specifically, this study reported that when the source and platform factors were considered together, perceived influencer expertise has a direct impact on perceived brand information credibility; as the latter had a direct effect on attitude toward the brand and the video, perceived expertise then had an indirect effect on consumer attitude toward the brand.

Turning to the potential effect of PSI on attitude toward the brand, the study finding indicates a non-significant direct effect. This finding is consistent with those reported by Knoll et al. (2015), who found that cognitive or behavioral PSI was not a significant mediator between positive media character representation and brand attitudes; the only significant meditator was affective PSI (not measured in the current study). Hence, it is plausible that if consumer attitude toward the product is already relatively

positive, as is the case here, the pseudo-social interaction with their social media opinion leader may not further improve their attitude toward the brand. This is an important finding in that the role of the influencer then may not be to directly improve already positive consumer attitude toward the brand. Instead, the presence of the influencer may have a more holistic effect on the relationship between the consumer and the brand through PSI, which could include helping to maintain consumer loyalty to the brand.

In terms of the relationship between PSI and purchase intention, the former has a direct and positive effect on the latter. The direct effect reported here then validates previous work, which has documented a positive relationship between PSI and purchase intention (Gong & Li, 2017; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Kim et al., 2015; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). This result suggests that consumers' pseudo-social interaction with a social media opinion leader who models and recommends a product can facilitate their purchase intention toward the product. Considering the product under study here, since the consumers found the social media influencer as a credible and attractive opinion leader from whom they could learn to develop their own physical fitness, it is logical to reason that PSI could play a positive role in furthering consumer intention to purchase the product. Similarly, brand attitude was also found to be a significant predictor of purchase intention. It is especially worth noting that the standardized beta value for PSI contributing to explain the total variance in purchase intention is nearly 1.4 times greater than that of brand attitude. By implication, PSI is a stronger predictor of purchase intention than post-exposure brand attitude in the current study.

As the current study tested the effects of the relationship between PSI and a social media influencer with selected unique attributes on consumer behavior, it makes a substantive contribution to the literature by offering new insights on how a non-traditional *Instafamous* opinion leader could leverage her social media presence to be a successful marketing force. The influencer, Massy Arias is not as well-known as the Fabletics brand creator, actress Kate Hudson, who has more than 12 million Instagram followers. By choosing a lesser known and non-traditional social media influencer, the current study was able to explore the potential effectiveness of an opinion leader who is a fitness trainer and hence a workout clothing expert (a non-glamour related product). As this opinion leader is an individual with a physique characterized by her muscles and

strength, she does not exemplify the thin-ideal body image. In addition, the fact that Arias is a non-white immigrant, her ethnic and country origin then adds a diversity dimension – to further the spectrum of social media influencers – in terms of racial representation and non-stereotypical celebrity body type.

Several study limitations should be stated here. First, participants were exposed to four static Instagram posts instead of a greater stream of posts that is accessible in real-time social media use. Preferably, participants could interact with these Instagram posts in a more naturalist setting to increase the study's generalizability, if adequate control could be exerted in the study procedure. Second, participants represented a homogenous young adult population that resembles the consumer target of the influencer and product selected for the study. Even so, the study sample did not represent the general young female adult population. Third, the study design deployed did not include a "control" group. This is because if a large number of participants from the control group is unfamiliar with this lesser-known social media influencer, it could potentially undermine the measurement validity to render the comparison between the "experimental" groups and "control" group unreliable. Lastly, even though the study intentionally selected a Latina figure as the influencer, the study sample did not attain a sufficiently large number of participants with racial/ethnic diversity. A sample with greater racial diversity may provide differential evaluations to influencer credibility and PSI engagement as well as how such evaluations might impact their brand attitude and purchase intention.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study is among the first to provide an alternative way to seek new insights into the relations between a social media influencer and consumer decision-making process. The research makes a substantive contribution to the literature by confirming as well as disconfirming selected aspects related to the dynamics of *Instafamous* influencers in successful social media marketing. A particularly noteworthy aspect of the current study is that it investigated consumer response to a foreign-born non-white influencer or an *Instafamous* individual. This influencer, in particular, is a people's celebrity, due to her product/domain expertise, instead of a traditional celebrity (e.g., popular actors, musicians, TV personalities, fashion models and athletes).

In other words, this influencer possesses the attributes of being more easily relatable to the consumer – in terms of social identity and physical appearance (promoting a healthy body image instead of thin-ideal body image) – regardless of her ethnic and national origin. By implication, if consumers perceive themselves as sharing a similar social membership with the influencer – such as a passion for physical fitness – then such social identity may help forge a perceived social bond, which could lead to a perception of the influencer as a friend or trusted opinion leader for parasocial interaction.

Hence, future studies could examine the role of perceive social identity in shaping influencer credibility and PSI more closely; these studies could consider applying the social identity theory, which asserts that people choose to identify themselves as a member of a social group and such identity is a source for establishing their self-esteem and maintaining their social belongingness (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As the influencer in the current study is a foreign-born racial minority, the findings here also implies that the consumer trust in this influencer has transcended racial and cultural differences. This type of cross-cultural trust is similar to the findings from a prior eWOM study, which tested the social distance theory (Bogardus, 1925; Allen, 1975). Specifically, this study found that even though White consumers perceived a greater social distance toward an African American consumer reviewer than a White consumer reviewer, they reported greater trust in the former more than the latter for their online product review (Lin & Xu, 2017).

Additional research could also focus on comparing the effects of influencer credibility and PSI on consumers' purchase decision-making and behavior across different social media platforms. Similar research could also be conducted in conjunction with other marketing channels to compare the strengths and weaknesses of each modality across diverse audience segments. By the same token, it would also be important to gain a better understanding of how an eWOM strategy via social media influencers may diverge across different types of hedonic (e.g., beauty and fashion) and/or utilitarian (e.g., auto insurance and home appliances) products and consumption contexts.

Current study findings also contribute to industry practice, in terms of how advertisers might best utilize social media influencers as opinion leaders and brand ambassadors. In particular, self-made "people's celebrities" on social media could

organically grow into their opinion leader role to attract loyal followers and become a credible brand spokesperson. While there are no set criteria for these individuals to become social media influencers, those who have a likable persona and possess the product knowledge (as product users themselves) will be regarded as more authentic and hence more credible. More likable and credible influencers are more impactful on motivating consumers to purchase the brand.

The most interesting finding of the current study, which established the viability of an influencer from a racial minority group, opens up yet another "people's celebrity" venue for marketers who are vying to target younger consumers. According to a national study, 58% of the future generation-Z homebuyers preferred to purchase a home in a racially/ethnically heterogenous community (Cision PR Newswire, 2019). Hence, marketers who are able to be affiliated with likable *Instafamous* brand spokespersons that represent a multiracial/multiethnic cultural background will likely benefit from them as social influencers.

Amidst this highly competitive social media marketing environment, emerging platforms including TikTok are continuing to evolve and challenge the more established platforms – such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat – for user preference and advertising revenues. In this rapidly changing digital media landscape, utilizing *Instafamous* influencers as opinion leaders/brand ambassadors would continue to be a highly cost-effective and logistically efficient strategy to build brand awareness, liking and loyalty among target consumers.

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Funding and Acknowledgements