



Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users



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ABSTRACT

The growth of Instagram continues, with the majority of its users being young women. This study investigates the impact of Instagram upon source credibility, consumer buying intention and social identification with different types of celebrities. In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 female Instagram users aged 18–30 to determine the extent to which Instagram influences their buying behaviour. The research findings show that celebrities on Instagram are influential in the purchase behaviour of young female users. However, non-traditional celebrities such as bloggers, YouTube personalities and 'Instafamous' profiles are more powerful, as participants regard them as more credible and are able to relate to these, rather than more traditional, celebrities. Female users are perceptively aware and prefer to follow Instagram profiles that intentionally portray positive images and provide encouraging reviews.

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1. Introduction

Instagram is one of the fastest-growing online photo social web services where users share their life images with other users, however the academic research related to this media is limited (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). It is a relevant channel upon which to focus due to the site's recent decision to expand its advertising platforms, in so doing, revenue generated from advertisements on Instagram is expected to reach \$2.81bn in 2017 - greater than both Twitter and Google in the US (Vizard, 2015a, 2015b). Individuals spend more time on Instagram than other similar sites, suggesting it is of importance to research this media type (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Instagram reported more than 400 million monthly active users (Statista, 2016).

Celebrities' profiles are at the top of the list of the most-followed pages on Instagram, frequently used to deliver marketing communication messages to their followers. Recently, one celebrity's profile with the highest number of followers, reached 92 million (Instagram, 2016). Consumers perceive individuals with a large number of subscribers as more attractive and trustworthy, this is in line with Source Credibility Theory and relates to

electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Jin & Phua, 2014). Source credibility refers to the consumer perception of the information source based on attractiveness, trustworthiness and knowledge in the area of the endorsed product (Ohanian, 1990). EWOM refers to any product information communicated by potential consumers via the Internet (Hennin-Thureau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, et al., 2004). The effectiveness of eWOM on consumers' attitudes and behavioural intentions is determined, to some degree, by the perceived credibility of eWOM communicators (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Reichelt, Sievert, & Jacob, 2014).

EWOM on Instagram has grown to become a persuasive and influential information source due to the emerging popularity of this social media and accessibility via smart phones and other devices (Thoumrungroje, 2014). Celebrity endorsements are considered credible sources in generating a positive eWOM regarding particular products and services (Spry, Pappu, & Bettina Cornwell, 2011). The impact of celebrity endorsements as marketing communication tools has been extensively researched previously, however there is a lack of academic research on the credibility of different types of celebrities within social networks (Jin & Phua, 2014; Spry et al., 2011). This is particularly the case for Instagram which is experiencing rapid growth and could, potentially, be of great importance to the marketer.

This study examines the effects of Instagram upon consumers, with a specific focus on the increasing relevance of celebrity

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endorsers and their influence on female users within the 18–30 age groups (Chua & Chang, 2016; Pittman & Reich, 2016). Previous research shows that half of Instagram users fall into this age category (Duggan, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Statista, 2016). In this research, we investigate the impact of Instagram upon source credibility, consumer buying intention and social identification with different types of celebrities. Particular attention is paid to non-traditional types of celebrities who become famous through online media usage.

2. Literature review

2.1. Self-esteem and self-control in buying behaviour in the context of celebrities on Instagram

Online information sharing is defined as a public phenomenon; a shared resource from which members of the public may benefit (Cheung & Lee, 2012) and often at the root of generating eWOM. Across social network sites an online friend becomes an effective medium for information dispersion, and eWOM generates a network of consumers connected to one another (Thoumrungrroje, 2014). Opinions formed from strong social connections on social media platforms such as Instagram are considered to be of significant importance by members/followers. Expectations of the individual who shares the information influence the content of their posts (Thoumrungrroje, 2014; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013).

There is a growing interest amongst marketers to use Instagram for advertising due to the large reach of this mobile platform worldwide, with 14 million users in the UK alone (Statista, 2016). This suggests an increasingly broad audience for brands and retailers, as well as providing more scale to brand-specific topics in which advertisers could be interested (Vizard, 2015a, 2015b).

The larger the number of followers an individual has, the greater their perceived social influence (Jin & Phua, 2014). This is due to images being broadcasted to every follower who could, potentially, re-post the images on their own pages, thus expanding the visibility to an even wider audience (Scott, 2011). Studies on social media advertising and online advertising also state that consumers' attitudes towards social media advertising is an essential determinant of its effectiveness (Chen, Fay, & Wang, 2011). It is important that an individual has a significant interest in the life of a certain celebrity and a level of attraction and respect in order for them to be influenced by the celebrity's endorsements (Ohanian, 1990). The opinion of others, in this case a celebrity, is often an important influence upon human behaviour (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989).

Social media usage is bestowed with a certain level of control regarding the specific posts an individual shares with his/her online following. This encourages Instagram users to focus upon sharing only positive images (Thoumrungrroje, 2014). The positive perception an individual creates on Instagram is likely to generate positive feedback from their followers in relation to those profiles (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013). Gonzales and Hancock (2011), in their study on Facebook, state that using social networks positively affects individuals' self-esteem. Furthermore, positive online feedback can enhance one's social self-esteem (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). According to several authors (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Thoumrungrroje, 2014; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013), higher self-esteem among individuals online lowers personal self-control, which can often lead to increased impulse purchasing and excessive spending. Wilcox, Kramer, and Sen (2011) support this theory, arguing that when self-esteem levels are high and individuals are feeling positive they are more likely to lose rationality and act upon indulgent urges. Irrational and impulse purchases are believed to satisfy one's need for social

acceptance and prestige, and are considered as more hedonic purchase decisions (Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012; Thoumrungrroje, 2014).

Other researchers (Bearden et al., 1989; Bither & Wright, 1973; Kropp, Lavack, & Silvera, 2005; Rhodes & Wood, 1992) explain that individuals with low self-esteem are more susceptible to the opinions of others as they are seeking social approval and acceptance. Highly confident people are more capable of developing counterarguments than those with low self-confidence (Bither & Wright, 1973). Low self-confidence can also motivate consumers to seek more assistance when making buying decisions (Bearden, Hardesty, & Rose, 2001). Users with low self-esteem are more likely to 'give up' trying to comprehend a message if it is unclear, while those with high self-esteem tend to further search for information (Rhodes & Wood, 1992). Often, low self-esteem demonstrates impulse buying behaviour (Kropp, 2006). These arguments would suggest that consumers with low self-confidence are more easily influenced by celebrity endorsements on social media.

The degree to which social media enhances one's self-esteem depends upon whom users follow on their social network (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). An individual is likely to mimic the success of their favourite celebrities and obtain a similar degree of positive feedback to that which the celebrities receive on their Instagram accounts. Women are more susceptible to social influence than men (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1990). Female users are likely to copy similar types of social media posts and be more inclined to purchase goods that become known to them via, or are used personally by, their favourite celebrities (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013; Wilcox et al., 2011). The use of social media can lead people to make impulse purchases and buy celebrity-endorsed products (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013).

2.2. Traditional and non-traditional celebrities' endorsement in online platforms

Celebrities are impactful when it comes to advertising products and services (Van Norel, Kommers, Van Hoof & Verhoeven, et al., 2014). Celebrity endorsement is currently prevalent in online platforms. More traditional celebrities include film stars, musicians, sporting icons, TV personalities, writers and others. In recent years there has been a rise in new types of 'digital' celebrity groups such as bloggers, vloggers and 'Instafamous' personalities (Chahal, 2016).

Celebrities appeal to a common reference group. 'Reference group' is defined as a person/group of people who serve as a reference to an individual in forming values and attitudes, and in so doing provide consumers with a reference in their purchasing decisions (Schiffman, Hansen, & Kanuk, 2012). This can also include celebrities or Instagram profiles belonging to non-traditional celebrities who could be considered famous online or 'Instafamous' (Scott, 2015). These individuals are known to the public and their identification is based upon elements such as admiration, association, aspiration or recognition (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013).

Celebrity endorsements are considered credible sources in generating a positive eWOM regarding particular products and services (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013; Spry et al., 2011). Celebrities are able to transform an unknown product into a well-known product through persuasion techniques and generating positive associations via advertisements.

The purpose of a celebrity endorsement is to add value to a brand name, product or service offering. It could also be argued that advertising through a celebrity is useful in building brand equity (Keller, 2005). The credibility of a celebrity endorser positively impacts the credibility of the endorsed brand (Elberse & Verleun,

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