Research on the Impact of Opinion Leaders on Social Media Consumption
Take the Public's Trust in Beauty Bloggers as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Due to the increasing proliferation of advertising on social media, people increasingly distrust opinion leaders on social media. This paper mainly discusses how consumers find reliable information and opinion leaders on social media platforms from the perspective of consumer behavior. This paper mainly adopts the research method of combining qualitative research and text analysis. The main point of this paper is that almost all respondents have common characteristics and obvious differences. They prefer accurate and professional introduction. Most people will be attracted by the image and role of the influencer. There are some differences between people with enough experience in using social media and newcomers. Although beginners lack the ability to identify the marketing skills of social media, they are usually a more cautious group. This paper mainly presents the consumer psychology that dominates mass consumption behavior on social media, which undoubtedly directly affects consumers' trust in opinion leaders. Limited to the limited interview samples, the conclusions of this paper need to be further supplemented and improved. However, this paper will still have a certain reference value for the study of new media consumption behavior.

Keywords: *Beauty influencer, Social media, Marketing*

1. INTRODUCTION

When we take it into a management perspective, YouTube videos continue to grow on consumer blogs, especially beauty [1]. This category is multiplying and has a huge market impact [2]. Therefore, companies and the whole industry have taken the lucrative advantage of influencer marketing which is a marketing strategy that uses the influence of key figures or influencers to promote consumer brand awareness and/or purchase decisions [3]. Most importantly, "The influencer's inherent characteristics play a vital role in enticing brands and marketers to pursue them closely" [4]. A report on social media trends in2018 shows that 94% of marketers who use influencer marketing activities find it effective and the return on investment (ROI) of influencer marketing is 11 times that of traditional advertising [5]. Sharma may have explained the success of beauty influencers as saying that trust is the most critical factor in the beauty market. When it comes to personal care and beauty products, buyers place their faith in friends and family instead of celebrities and socialites. They have also recognized that flaccid hair and strange eyelashes are more likely the effect of studio makeup and Photoshop than product claims [6]. In addition, social media bloggers campaign has always been considered more authentic than traditional ads. According to Sharma, influencer marketing embeds brand message into content in a more genuine way since well-crafted influencer content may be shared throughout marketing initiatives such as social and print campaigns. As a consequence, relying on an influencer community is far less costly than conventional marketing, especially if the community already meets the brand's intended audience [6].

While most of the results of the past 3 years strongly support the huge benefits and the success of influencer marketing, the whole market is nearly saturated ever since the Covid-19 pandemic started in the beginning of 2020. With the quarantine periods greatly contributed to the explosion of internet development, social media users and online consumers are getting increasingly accustomed to the influencer marketing strategy and be circumspect about the advertisements from the beauty bloggers. Martínez-López et al. also noticed the necessity to rethink about the influencer marketing strategy by pointing out that there is a need to learn not only

influencer marketing, but also what to do when engaging with a wary and disillusioned audience [7]. Brands and influencers must carefully negotiate the content to be developed and distributed, as according to quality standards while also delivering favorable commercial impacts for the business without jeopardizing the text's authenticity and trustworthiness [8][9][10]. On the other hand, we consumers must distinguish whether bloggers are sharing true feedback on the products or polishing the discourses to make fake promotions because the ads would not be clearly noted. Therefore, this phenomenon triggered my thinking of how do we trust a beauty influencer? Moreover, some age groups, particularly millennials and younger generations, have gotten accustomed to using social media [11]. As a result, their demand for knowledge from social media and fellow customers has grown more urgent than ever [4]. According to the 2021 Redbook User Portrait Trend Report, users between the ages of 18 and 24 account for the highest proportion of all users, at 46.07%.

Considering the accessibility of information and the trend, this paper has decided to discuss: what aspects make beauty bloggers credible to young people (usually between the ages of 18-24) in mainland China?

There are two fundamental keywords: beauty bloggers and young people. Beauty bloggers refer to social media influencers who would make profits by sharing information/ techniques about beauty (skin care & cosmetics) and advertising the affiliate products. Essentially, they should earn money by being a beauty blogger and relate to the beauty area instead of being a normal vlogger or people who share any something on the social media. In addition, social media influencers, in contrast to celebrities or public figures who are well-known through conventional media, are "ordinary individuals" who are already "online celebrities" by generating and publishing social media content [4]. Swant proposed in a study that customers may have the same degree of trust in social media influencers as they have in their friends [12]. Furthermore, this study took the circumstance in Mainland China. It would be my wishful thoughts that such a "influencer model" must be innovated, deriving from consumer needs and thinking mode, some original marketing strategies should be changed. We hope this research can inspire people to be critical when purchasing. At the same time, it could provide businesses with some innovative and error-avoidance ideas.

Previous research has already endeavored to explore the reasons why people would love to believe in some beauty bloggers or distrust them. The impact of the legitimacy of the influencer's messaging on attitudes and purchasing intentions have been studied [4][13][14]. Additionally, consumers' interest in the message that may prompt them to begin a product-related search procedure was studied by Martínez-López et al. [7]. Most of the previous research have made quantitative approach to research at a relatively more comprehensive stages, but few of those have taken a deep focus on one specific group in Chinese circumstances in the post Covid-19 period since all the three factors would substantially vary the results. Most importantly, from an exploratory approach, this research would explore deeply into personal experience and take efforts to excavate the potential and updated reasons due to the rapid changing in e-commerce in Mainland China.

2. METHODS

This study will mainly adopt the qualitative research method of interview. At the same time, it also made an in-depth analysis of relevant data and texts.

Interviews are a method of media and cultural research that allows us to understand people's thoughts, opinions and attitudes. Given that my question is about the attitudes and feeling of people, interviews should be appropriate method for my research. This study choose the personal interviews instead of focus group because we were worrying about the effect of the group discussion that will make opinions high consistent by influencing each other and eventually make the results quite biased. This study invited 5 people between ages 18- 24 and who view social media beauty bloggers frequently (more than once a week) over the past 3 years. After I made some preliminary analysis, I would ask 5 people who are just started to enter the beauty field, in other words, they could be the beginners to cosmetics and skin care.

This study also looked through the top 5 beauty bloggers with the most fans on 4 platforms: Tik Tok, Bilibili and Redbook about their most like posts and comments and gather the similarities of them.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Universal similarity

There are many common aspects of the answers this paper gathered, in this session, nearly all the 10 interviewers mentioned the following aspects or have similar experience.

Firstly, detailed presentation and professional discourse instead of one-sided compliment would be significantly trustworthy. Ruby, aged 21, university student in Xian, viewing beauty bloggers since 2016, "I bought a repair cream recommended by FQL. That was a skin care vlog, she is applying cream, while saying what ingredients, and pay attention to the research and development background (rare ingredients, patented) products, not a lot of subjective sense of use, but also talk about some of the shortcomings of the product."

Secondly, people hate nonsense. Catherine, aged 22, university student in Ningbo, viewing beauty bloggers

since 2018, "A very hot blogger, HDNH (vicious girl Money). I used to like her because she was talking coherently, not much nonsense, now she advertises too much, and keeps talking about irrelated stuff, so I began to resent."

Thirdly, they made the most regretting impulse purchase when they are beginners. Cindy, aged 24, working in the creative department in an automobile company, viewing beauty bloggers since 2016, "I was just entering college and started to learn makeup. At that time, many beauty bloggers were recommending a series of products of Perfect Diary, but none of them worked well. There was too much marketing of Perfect Diary, and I was young and naive, I do not believe in this brand any more after an awful experience of its make-up remover. Now, if some bloggers continue to recommend this brand, I will reduce the favor and preference of him/her."

Xiangyi, aged 22, intern in a photography studio, viewing beauty bloggers since 2017, "When I was 18 I followed Mao Dan'er MDE on Weibo, she was one of the first beauty bloggers to recommend national products, I bought a lipstick of VNK she recommended, at first I felt the brand was awesome because the products were cheap and there were many freebies, I did not have a full knowledge of my situation at the time, I did not know it actually looks so ugly on my mouth. I feel that the national product has too many gimmicks."

Finally, they will aspire to the images and personas presented by the bloggers. Jessi, aged 20, university student, viewing beauty bloggers since 2020, "I will tend to follow bloggers who have the image or identities that I want to be, so I would like to look at tomboy style bloggers, like Dangmei JZDDM on Bilibili. Conversely, I rarely follow the types I adore, or take their advice, like the kind of gentle beauties that are sexually attractive to me." I checked this aspect with every interviewee later, and all of them confirmed that at least one blogger they followed would fit into their dream type or has a decent and delicate lifestyle they would long for. Jade, aged 21, university student in Shanghai, viewing beauty bloggers since 2019, "When I first started watching Liu Zhen's videos, I thought she was beautiful, her life was exquisite, and her makeup was also very much to my liking, the kind of beauty that is more on the cold side, the kind of high style that I always wanted to try! Then she spoke in a very nice voice, and I bought a lot of eyeshadow trays and lipsticks that she recommended."

3.2. Main differences

In addition, there are also differences between the 2 groups of interviewers.

Firstly, the people in group 1 who have sufficient experience with the influencers are all circumspect with the marketing strategy, while the beginners in group2 have less attention about that. Jade, aged 21, university

student in Shanghai, viewing beauty bloggers since 2019, "I will search and learn stuff, browse widely and integrate information. If a product is very hot recently which that a lot of people say it is good, then it will certainly feel like marketing, so I will not make my decision until the trends are gone." Vivian, aged 20, university student in Shanghai, viewing beauty bloggers since 2021, "I bought a foundation recently and it is awful. I made impulse purchase because nearly everyone in RedBook says it is good."

However, when comparing the consumption habits of the beginners in group 2 and the purchasing experiences of group 1 in their preliminary stages, people in group 2 seems to be more circumspect about the marketing strategy as beginners.

Weiling, aged 17, a university student major in arts in Sichuan province, viewing beauty bloggers since 2021, "I would be cautious about ads, I would read the comments of the audience at the bottom and then search for product feedback in Redbook and Zhihu. At the same time, I would prefer to trust bloggers who clearly label their ads and non-ads. In this way, even if they say the video is a commercial, I will be happy to watch it, because they make a lot of ads very interesting. Also, I would completely believe them when they say the video doesn't contain any ads." In addition, beginners who have strong interest in cosmetics (3 of 5) are much more discreet than those who merely take cosmetics as obligations for women.

Secondly, surprisingly, people in group 1 are all indifferent to top bloggers, while 80% in group 2 frequently viewed them. Xiangyi, aged 22, intern in a photography studio, viewing beauty bloggers since 2017, "The top bloggers have too many ads, also they are very close-related to the companies. Admittedly, many of them are very professional so that I could learn plenty of knowledges from them, but I would not trust their recommendations."

3.3. Individualization

Some aspects are quite controversy and vary from person to person.

3.3.1. Style

6 interviewers assert that a fine quality of the lightning, coloring and lens would show that the blogger is professional and diligent in their attitudes, while the rest of them would not care about style and techniques in video processing and focus on the content instead.
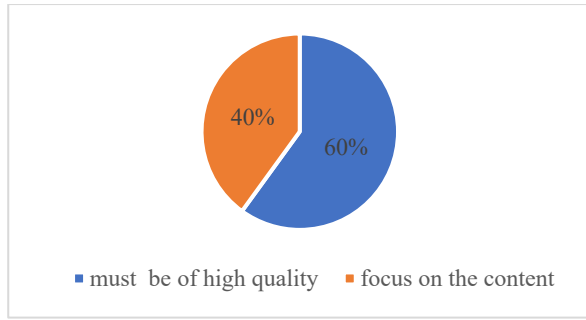
Figure 1 Differences in style

3.3.2. Appearance

Some of them would appreciate good-looking bloggers because they are more animable and provide pleasure visually whereas others find that good-looking would affect the judgements of the product effectiveness in that they are still pretty without the beauty product.
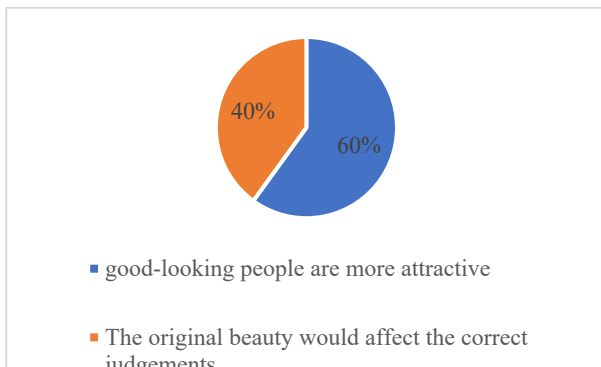

Figure 2 Differences in appearance

3.3.3. Credit history

Most of the interviewers would not blame on the beauty blogger after they experience an awful purchasing.

Cindy, aged 24, working in the creative department in an automobile company, viewing beauty bloggers since 2016, "Perhaps the face cream is good, and the blogger is not lying about that. I could understand about the ads because, after all, bloggers have to make money, maybe it is me that is not suitable for that product."
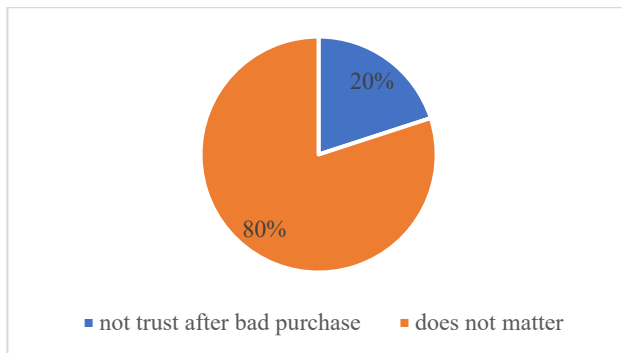

Figure 3 Differences in credit history

4. DISCUSSION

An essential finding in the study so far is that most of the interviewers showed the agency in the process, that is the decision mainly depends on themselves. In other words, they could hardly be swayed by the recommendations and rethink about their personal conditions instead.

The possible reason why they all love detailed discourse is that they could find more similarities between the blogger and themselves. In this way, they would be more likely to put themselves in the condition that the blogger described and have more empathy on them. For example, a blogger would create an identity that he is a dry skin and have a lot of troubles with moisture and repair and detailly conveyed the problems, or he likes the atmosphere of cozy home laying. Therefore, viewers would relate themselves to that identity because they have the same problems and lust for that cozy life. In this sense, the theory of identity could be articulated to the results. Barker asserts that exploring identity requires two perspectives from self and society: how do we regard ourselves, and how do other people regard us? In this sense, when we relate ourselves to or lust for the identity that the blogger creates, we would consider that the blogger is trustworthy [15][216]. Also, that trigger an imagined community, the blogger established a community between the viewers so that they have a sense of belonging. For example, bloggers would call their fans "babes, families, dears, sis" or have special nick names for them such as "my ladies" or "my sparks", thus tightening the relationships between the blogger and her fans in a way that they are just friends chatting and sharing their feedbacks about the products. Obviously, a friend is far more trustworthy than a stranger who will make profits from you. Luo and Yuan emphasized that influencers seem to be "regular people" contrasted to celebrities [4]. Half of my interviewees mentioned that they tend to trust the bloggers who frequently share their personal lives in vlogs and plog posts, which makes bloggers close and tangible to the audience.

Moreover, the successful image setting and representation that influencers displayed would significantly contributes to the "sense of belonging". After all, too many efforts to interact with the audience would be recognized as adulation or intended actions for more attention. Although the results of the interviews showed that the preference of styles varies from person to person, or a person could follow many influencers with diverse style, a blogger should be stick to specific styles or establish her own persona such as a cool girl or a sweet bunny rather than change their taste hastily. In addition, many of the interviewees confessed that they were usually attracted to stylish bloggers. Like the stars and celebrities, special personas and personal images could easily revoke empathy from the audience, letting them attach to such identity and sense of belongings. In this

sense, with the increasingly fierce competition of beauty bloggers in the post-covid period, personal charisma and unique style would easily stand out among the systematic procedures arranged by MCNs.

5. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, this article shows the process of getting and thinking about the question: how young consumers between ages of 18 and 24 find the beauty bloggers credible or not in Mainland China? This paper has designed the research base on the text analysis and interviews and have some findings. First, the respondents showed some similarities. They all accept detailed and professional introductions and hate nonsense. Most people have impulse and regretful buying experiences, especially when they are beginners. Most people will pay attention to the appearance and identity of the influencer. In addition, there are some differences between the people who have sufficient experience and beginners: Although the beginners would have less awareness of marketing strategy, they have more discretion about the purchasing than the sophisticated people in their beginner periods. Finally, people from 2 groups have different attitudes and preferences towards the style, credit history and appearances. The results have triggered discussions and thoughts about the identity and representation theory because credibility also embedded in the influencers' persona settings and styles. The sense of belongings and imagined communities would be created in this process to establish empathy and make the discourses seem trustworthy. However, there are plenty of limitations in this research since it is just a qualitative study, and the sample of 10 people could be limited to represent the whole group in China. Furthermore, the research did not reveal the frequency or the prevalence of all the resulting opinions so that further survey covering much larger sample could be conveyed to make quantitative models about influencer trustworthiness. Moreover, the credibility not only embodied within the interactions between one specific viewer, but also strengthened in the fan group, which is the audience group. Sometimes the community is not simply imagined but exist in the social media platforms, which requires more concern about. This research still has a long way to go so that more interviews and more samples should be expected into next step.

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