The Impact of Influencer Marketing on Consumer Decision-Making: Social Identity and Imitative Consumption

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Abstract. With the rapid development of social media, influencer marketing has become a mainstream advertising approach. Its main function integrates social identity and imitative consumption. Firstly, this paper introduce three core concepts, which are influencer marketing, social identity, and imitative consumption. Based on their relationships, some consumers will resonate with influencers who have commonalities or same life experiences in a causal resonance. This sense of identity strengthens the influencers' credibility and consumers' trust in the products, thus prompting purchase behaviour. The paper discusses the dual impact of influencer marketing: It helps create an independent brand image and gain consumers' attention and trust, but it is also likely to reduce consumers' awareness of critical evaluations. False advertising may cause consumers to suffer economic losses and negative experiences in their purchases. This paper also explores how imitative consumption is promoted in fan groups through influencer marketing, approachable content and symbolic products. Finally, it suggests that social media influencers focus on building trust and carefully choose the products they recommend to achieve sustained success and stability. In addition, the government needs to enhance regulation and enforcement of regulations to curb the harm of false propaganda and promote the healthy development of influencer marketing.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Social Identity, Imitative Consumption

1 Introduction

With the quick development of social media and other online platforms, influencer marketing has become an essential way for brands to be close to consumers. In contrast to traditional celebrity endorsements, social media influencers can build more profound relationships with consumers and enterprises through their down-to-earth personas and greater interactivity, thus influencing consumers' behaviour and attitudes. According to social identity theory, people tend to believe those who are similar to themselves more readily [1]. As shown in previous studies, consumers may exhibit a certain sense of approval toward advertising information by observing others' responses or involvement; therefore, the consumers are more likely to develop positive attitudes and

© The Author(s) 2026
L. C. Yoong (ed.), *Proceedings of the 2026 2nd International Conference on Financial Innovation and Marketing Management (FIMM 2026)*, Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research 408,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6239-801-6_103

engage in imitation purchasing behaviors [2]. Currently, most of the research focuses solely on the positive aspects of influencer marketing; Therefore, there is a weak examination of problems such as false advertising and blind fandom. In view of the above situation, this paper discusses the definitions of the related concepts involved, that is, influencer marketing, social identity and imitative consumption, and then explores how consumers' behaviour patterns are influenced by social identity and give rise to imitative Consumption, as well as the two sides of this mechanism. Therefore, this paper offers some suggestions for influencers and regulators to provide reference for regulating the development of the industry and protecting consumers' rights.

2 Definition of Core Concepts

2.1 Influencer Marketing

A social media influencer is someone with a specific group of followers on Social Media. Previous studies have found that information spreads more effectively and products are promoted better through Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) [3]. Previous research has shown that there is a closer relationship between KOLs and consumers. Mostly because of its sense of authenticity, relatability, and daily-life self-presentation by influencers [4,5]. Relevance increases purchase intention through identification, that is, consumers absorb influencers' consumption preferences and imitate their behaviour, such as consumption and attitude towards life [6]. However, some of these influencers may fabricate false advertisements for profit to deceive consumers. No longer needs to have complete faith in the quality of goods; The authentication guarantee has been achieved. Therefore, it is necessary for the government to strengthen its oversight of advertising truthfulness [7].

2.2 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory posits that people gain a part of their self-concept through their membership in social groups [1]. When a KOL is regarded as a representative or symbol of a particular group, such as those who live in a certain way or have special interests and hobbies, consumers are likely to associate themselves with the social identity of this person. In-group identity can increase the trustworthiness of a KOL; consumers are more likely to like and believe in those who share their likeness [1]. The degree of influence on purchase intention under the effect of similarity is more significant. There may be some negative results of social identification as well. Consumers are likely to be more trusting of KOLs that are like themselves socially identified, due to heuristic processing and reduced likelihood of critical examination, thus ignoring possible flaws in the products or fraudulent marketing activities, which could result in an unpleasant shopping experience and economic damage [8]. Therefore, individuals must be able to determine whether an advertisement is genuine.

2.3 Imitative Consumption

When the image consistency between KOLs and consumers' features is relatively high, it usually helps to enhance individuals' trust in the ad's credibility and thereby significantly increase their willingness to buy that product [6]. The reason why the personality match between social media influencers and consumers is essential is that when there is a high degree of consistency, individuals will be more inclined to pay attention and increase the trust of the influencer, thereby making them more willing to accept the advertisement [6,9]. Also, based on the "similarity-attraction model", if people find that social media influencers have some similar characteristics with themselves, they may feel a kind of resonance with these similarities and be more inclined to like the advertisement. Therefore, such a phenomenon may have an adverse effect on people's judgments and consumption outcomes. KOLs may falsely claim about a product's functions and features to defraud some consumers of their money or leave them with an unsatisfactory purchasing experience. Therefore, people need to be careful in distinguishing the reality of advertisements on the Internet.

3 Influencer Marketing and Brand Image

In this digital era, under the impetus of social media, the birth and rise of KOLs have bridged consumers and brands; They make brand meanings integrate into consumer experiences or stories through personalisation. Compared with traditional brand endorsers like film and television stars and public figures, they have more realistic social images that are easier to approach, thus promoting the generation of social identity and a particular atmosphere, thereby increasing consumers' trust and purchase intentions [1]. The consumers are more likely to be persuaded by the close-attached advertisement, produce an intense emotional experience, thus making them eager to watch it and eventually leading to improved purchasing interest. In addition, this link can also affect the brand image through endorser symbolism being transferred to the brand or a particular product. Since social media influencers already have a specific image, their fans who are drawn to these features may also share some characteristics with them [2]. Therefore, if a company chooses a brand endorser that matches its own brand image to collaborate with, then the followers of the endorser will have a positive perception of that brand, and consumers are more likely to have a preference for that brand. According to the application of McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model, it helps strengthen the connection between consumers and the brand; And enable some changes or improvements to be carried out on the image of the brand.

In addition, by means of social media influencer marketing promotion, consumers' desire to meet these expectations will be stimulated more effectively; Therefore, the purchase Intention of consumers for this brand has also increased [10]. On the contrary, if there is no sense of identity between a brand and its endorser, the credibility and impact power of its advertisement will be weakened, and high identity is more likely to help a brand's advertising and promotion be more successful [11,12]. From the consistency of Brand Image and Endorser's Image, based on a study mentioned above,

when there is greater alignment in perception between them, consumers tend to feel more confident about purchasing and show stronger approval [13].

Influencer marketing on social media can help a brand spread in a positive manner. Positive word-of-mouth has strong persuasiveness for consumers' choice behaviour [14]. Since many people online are regarded as true experiences of a product or service, social media influencers play a role in releasing positive information more easily. In terms of Word-of-Mouth, social media influencers act as consumers' consultant [15]. This role can help promote the positive feedback of consumers towards products or services, and because these ordinary people are not professional actors, their remarks appear more genuine to others. Influencers will share their own experiences with the brand on social media, expand the influence of the brand, enhance consumers' attention to and understanding of it [10,16]. Many companies these days often employ this approach to enhance credibility and promote themselves.

That is to say, the social identity of an influencer can prompt trust and purchase behaviour, but this should be reasonably judged to prevent irrational imitation. For businesses, finding the most suitable endorser is a helpful way to build trust and promote purchasing behaviour by leveraging social identity construction.

4 Social Identity and Imitative Consumption

Social identity, on the one hand, generates trust; On the other hand, it directly triggers imitative consumption by affecting consumers' behaviour in various ways, such as Psychology and Social Mechanisms. According to social identity theory, people often want their way of life to be consistent with the influencer group they admire in order to maintain a positive self-image [1]. When individuals have a sense of identification with the social images of social media influencers, such as resonance with their life patterns or values, they often imitate to enhance the sense of belonging and self-presentation. Therefore, consumers' purchase of identical products or services can be regarded as a way to express their sense of identity by obtaining a feeling of belonging to the group, conveying their own images in the community and aligning their consumption behaviour with the communities they hope to join or have.

Identity is both individual identity and social identity; it provides some sources of cognitive norms that guide imitative consumer behaviour. Influential power due to the public's belief in the individual. Since influencers are perceived as having a sense of authenticity and reliability, many users tend to trust them when making purchasing decisions in an excess of goods. Normative influence motivates consumers to follow popular Influencers to obtain a sense of belonging, social proof, and to avoid exclusion [17]. The two kinds of influence are interesting: the stronger the identity with an influencer, the greater the trust in his or her recommendations and suggestions, which is necessary for maintaining one's own identity; Only by doing so can individuals be more confident about emulating such behaviour to protect their sense of identity and gain social recognition.

In addition, there is a body of research indicating that when the similarities and identifications between social media influencers and their fans are high, it is more likely

to influence the fans' imitation purchase behaviour of the influencer [2]. Unlike the remote and insincere depictions of traditional celebrities in television and film advertisements, social media influencers have a down-to-earth quality and can easily relate to ordinary people because they often share their own lives and genuine feelings online. Closest to the atmosphere that consumers want to create, so they are more likely to believe that their purchase is an act of self-realisation rather than following others. Gradually forming a brand's influence and habits through repeated imitation, the products thus become indispensable parts of people's lives [17]. Substantial effects of imitative behaviour propagate via social networks, and over time help develop overall consumption trends in society; thus strengthening the influence of social proof effects among these agents and making purchase decisions relatively stable.

Therefore, social identity serves as the basis for influencer Marketing. By building relatable, authentic, and unique social identities, influencers can foster strong identification and trust among their followers, thereby motivating imitative consumption behaviour through normative and informational influences. Thus, in addition to promoting the formation of brand recognition among consumers and enhancing product image through Online channels. Therefore, to understand how social identity drives imitation can help enterprises Design effective influence Strategy and Explain the basic reasons for its success.

5 Discussion and Suggestion

5.1 Discussion

Recently, influencer marketing has become one of the more popular advertising ways because of the fast growth of social media; it affects us daily [18,19]. Primarily, it triggers imitative behaviour out of a sense of social identity, thus helping to achieve sales and profit targets.

On the other hand, social identity is people's desire to belong to a specific group or community and interact with others. As influencers have a large number of fans, these people can aggregate to form groups with the same interests and preferences. Therefore, when a social media influencer recommends a product, his or her followers may purchase it because they often believe that buying the product will allow them to be part of the same group, or to present themselves as similar to the influencer after purchasing the product [2]. Users in another group, such as tourists who have visited a particular scenic spot, also record their travelling experiences for other visitors to refer to and follow later on.

On the other hand, the content that social media influencers share is generally more approachable and relatable than that of traditional celebrities. Therefore, the recommendations made appear more credible. Compared with sophisticated and polished advertisements, content such as unboxing videos, makeup tutorials, or vlogs is often more attractive because it appears to be part of the creator's daily life, making it more relatable and fostering a sense of identity through imitation [15,20]. This will make the followers feel as if they are part of the same group as the influencers, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will imitate the consumption behaviour of the

influencers. In addition, there will also be an interaction with other users on social media such as Instagram and TikTok. When many people in a specific group or community are discussing and purchasing the same product, individuals are more likely to buy it out of fear of social exclusion or dependence on group norms for confirmation. This social pressure also leads to imitative consumption, and people's behaviour is closely related to their desire to uphold their social status.

Influencer marketing also makes products carry specific symbols. In addition to introducing the features of the products themselves, they are more interested in linking these products with people's lives. For example, a fitness influencer promotes a brand of sports shoes by linking them to healthy living and good habits. Regularly exercising followers may purchase a pair of sneakers to wear and display their image as active people. Through this strategy, people will imitate the influencers actively to demonstrate their own personality and gain a sense of belonging.

In general, under the influence of influencers' social behaviour through imitation, it can change people's consumption patterns in the future.

5.2 Suggestion

To ensure the long-term social support of micro-influencers and new media staff, they need to enhance their own integrity. Research indicates that people's purchase behaviour is often influenced by those they look up to [21]. Therefore, influencers need to increase their attention and activity on social media by enhancing the quality of their blog posts or other content; One prior study also pays attention to the advertisements during the process of fans' recognition and accumulation of credibility [22]. Only when the recommended products are truly of high quality will the influencer be able to gain the trust of the audience over time and effectively enhance consumers' desire to purchase.

Strengthening supervision to crack down on false and misleading marketing conduct is also important. Some brands deliberately magnify or invent functions for their products to deceive consumers, causing some people to be deceived economically. Therefore, the government needs to release more stringent regulations to standardise the market and reduce the harm to some extent.

6 Conclusions

With the development of society and people's lives, more needful places have appeared among them. The three concepts of this paper are: influencer marketing, social identity, and imitative consumption; Their internal connections and relationships have been clarified; And it is explained that social identity drives imitative consumption and the dual effects of influencer marketing in society. Based on a finding from the research, social identity plays a fundamental role in the influencing mechanism of new media; that is to say, people have greater confidence in ads that align with their own groups and these ads can drive imitation behaviour more effectively. Influencers' approachable content and the symbolisation of products are necessary to realise social identity imitation. At the same time, the study also recognizes that there are two sides to

influencer marketing. On the other hand, it can help promote the sales of a product and build its own special image. On the other hand, Blind faith of consumers may also lead to a bad shopping experience and economic losses.

Based on the core mechanism of influencer marketing, this paper provides practical references for all parties concerned. To improve sales performance for enterprises in light of matching influencers; To be cautious when selecting cooperative products to maintain their own reputation among the people and support long-term growth in the influence of micro-bloggers' marketing under legal norms; For the government, it is essential to punish false propaganda severely to promote the healthy development of this industry. Only by jointly nurturing a sense of routine can the bridge built by influencer marketing for consumers and brands have greater value.

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