

# **#AD:**

## **The effects of an influencer, comment and product combination on brand image**

*Abstract*

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Master Thesis

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## **Abstract**

A new era in marketing communications has risen. With the emergence of Social Media and the Internet as a whole, companies have found themselves in a position where traditional marketing strategies were not enough to reach and influence the desired audience anymore. Marketers nowadays need to acknowledge the changing marketing context and the role that the Internet and social media have in this new landscape. In the age of social media and the Internet the message for marketers is that surviving in the era of the empowered customer requires a combination of less traditional mass-marketing tactics and a better understanding of the role of technology and the engagement of consumers with the Internet and social media (Constantinides, 2014). Consumers nowadays search for the information they want on products or brands on the Internet or on social media and also share their experiences online with others. This shift in searching information and communication online has led to the empowerment of the consumer.

As consumers became more tech-savvy, marketers have adapted a digital media strategy (Stephen, 2015). Marketers are increasing their use of digital marketing channels tremendously over the years. According to Zenith Optimedia's report 'Advertising Expenditure Forecasts' of 2015, the Internet will be the biggest advertising medium in 12 key markets by 2017, which together represent 28% of global adspend. Although traditional television adspend is currently larger than Internet adspend, according to this report Internet advertising globally is expected to surpass television ad by 2020. The Internet already dominates adspend in Australia, Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK since 2014. One of the digital marketing tactics currently used by marketers is influencer marketing. As influencer marketing is a rather new term, there is not one specific definition for it. However according to online sources, influencer marketing appears to be a form of marketing in which the focus is placed on specific key individuals, rather than the target market as a whole. With influencer marketing one identifies individuals that have influence over potential buyers of products, and orients marketing activities around these individuals, also called influencers (Wikipedia; Marketingschool.org; Tapinfluence, 2016). Influencer marketing goes hand in hand with social media marketing and content marketing. When making use of an influencer campaign, influencers are expected to spread the word through their personal social media channels. Most influencer campaigns therefore have a content component as well, as there is content that needs to be spread. The content

spread by the influencer can be provided by the brand or can be made by the influencer his or herself (Tapinfluence, 2016).

Many marketers consider influencer marketing to be a new and innovative marketing tactic to reach consumers. However, it can be stated that influencer marketing is no more than word-of-mouth-marketing in the digital atmosphere (EContent, 2016). The principle of word-of-mouth marketing is telling a friend about a specific product or service, and them telling another friend, and so on. Looking at influencer marketing, this is exactly what influencers are doing on a digital level; telling their fan base about a certain product which they are endorsing. However a remarkable difference between word-of-mouth marketing and influencer marketing is that influencers can potentially reach thousands of loyal fans with one single post, making influencers very interesting for brands and organizations to work with.

As Influencer marketing is a relative new term in marketing communications, a significant gap can be found in research on this subject, as research on influencer marketing is mainly focused on why influencer marketing should be implemented by organizations, and not on the effects it can have on a brand.

For this study a literature review was conducted on the effects of product-influencer match-mismatch on brand image, and the effects of positive and negative comments on these collaborations. Influencer marketing was discussed, as well as theories on the match between brands and influencers and the role of positive and negative comments. Also, the difference in influencers, specifically micro and macro influencers, and their reach was discussed. It was expected that a micro influencer would generate less negativity than a macro influencer.

Furthermore a method was introduced to study the effects on influencer and brand image in case of a match-mismatch between product and influencer and the influence that comments have on the match-mismatch. The variables that were discussed in the theoretical framework are the type of influencer (micro-macro), the product (match-mismatch) and the comments (positive-negative). It was important to take these variables into account as the combination between the type of influencer, the product and the comments on the post were expected to have an effect on the way followers perceive the collaboration between a brand and the influencer. The purpose of the experiment was to measure the effects on attitude towards the brand, purchase intention and brand trust. In order to be able to study these effects, the following research question was formulated:

**RQ1:** To what extent does the combination of influencer type, product type and comment type influence the attitude, purchase intention and trust towards the brand?

The main study employed a 2x2x2 between-subjects design, in the form of an online questionnaire (N=240), to measure the effects of the combination of influencer (micro-macro), product (match-mismatch) and comment (positive-negative) type on attitude towards the brand, brand trust and purchase intention. The 2x2x2 design resulted in 8 different conditions. To be able to determine the correct stimulus materials for the main research, a short preliminary study was conducted to determine the right manipulations for the independent variables of influencer, product and comments. The fashion industry is known for its use of influencers; therefore it has been chosen as the industry the influencers in this study were active in. To visualize the conditions the stimulus materials were developed. For the independent variable influencer visuals were created to match the micro influencer, and visuals for the macro influencer. As for the product condition, visual stimuli were created for the product match and mismatch condition as well as for the comment condition. The final stimulus material resulted in the development of 4 influencer profiles, 4 different Instagram posts and 4 different comment posts.

The main study was performed in the form of an online survey by means of online software survey tool Qualtrics. Instagram was chosen as the medium of communication because of its visually engaging nature and its closeness to influencers. According to a study conducted by Rhythm One in 2015, Instagram is the best performing channel for social action, with an average rate of 3.2% engagement, which is far above all the other social networks, which have an engagement rate of 1.5% (Rhythm One, 2015).

In the introduction of the survey a short explanation about the study was given. Participants were told that they would see a profile of a fashion instagrammer and would have to answer some questions regarding the profile and products that were displayed. In the survey the word influencer was not used. Instead, fashion instagrammer was used as the term for influencer.

Participants of the questionnaire were asked to answer questions regarding their attitude towards the brand, purchase intention and brand trust. Before any stimulus material was shown, participants received a set of questions on involvement. Source credibility and the influencer evaluation were measured after the stimulus material was shown. Attitude and Purchase intentions were measured with each 5 items based on Spears and Singh (2004) on a bipolar 7-point scale. Trust was measured with 7 items based on Lau & lee (1999) and McKnight, Choudhury & Kacmar (2002) on a 7-point

Likert scale. Subsequently Trust was measured with 7 items based on Lau & lee (1999) and McKnight, Choudhury & Kacmar (2002) on a 7-point Likert scale. The mediator source credibility was measured with 15 items based on Ohanian (1990). The 15 items were subdivided into 3 dimensions: attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise. For the purpose of the study a new scale was developed to be able to measure the opinion of participants on the specific influencers. The scale consisted four dimensions analyzing participants' perceived similarity to the influencer, connectedness to influencer, perceived authenticity and integrity of the influencer. The items were measured on 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). For the measurement of the covariates involvement with the subject and fashion influencer, two items of the involvement measurement scale of Zaichkowsky (1985) were used. For the measurement of involvement with the fashion influencer the three items of Zaichkowsky (1985) were used.

The study explored the effectiveness of micro and macro influencers in influencer marketing by integrating theories of social identity, match-up hypothesis and the elaboration likelihood model. The study integrated several studies on influencer marketing (Woods, 2016; Chen and Xie, 2008; Lui et al., 2015; Booth & Matic, 2010) and on type of influencers (Aral & Walker, 2012; Lui et al., 2015; Monga & Sundaram, 2012; Eirinaki et al., 2012; Probst et al., 2014) which lead to the hypothesis that micro influencers are perceived to have a greater positive influence on attitude, trust and purchase intention than macro influencers. The results of the study showed that there was no significant effect of the influencer on the dependent variables attitude towards the brand, purchase intention and brand trust. The micro and macro conditions were based on what a marketers' perception is of many followers. However, the perception of consumers on what is 'many' can be very different.

Furthermore the study also integrated studies on the fit between an endorser and a product (Paliwal, 2014; McCormick, 2016; Chang & Ko, 2016; Meyer-Levy and Tybout, 1989). According to these theories a match between product and endorser would lead to a more positive evaluation of the product. The theories on endorser – product match led to the hypothesis that a product match would have a greater positive influence on attitude towards the brand, brand trust and purchase intention than a product mismatch. The outcome of the study however revealed some interesting results. The product mismatch scored higher on attitude towards the brand, brand trust and purchase intention than the product match. According to Mandler, (1982) (as cited in Meyer-Levy and Tybout, 1989) products that are considered to be a moderate mismatch with relation to the influencer can lead to a more favorable evaluation than products

that are considered to be a complete match or a complete mismatch with relation to the influencer.

Subsequently the role of comments was also taken into account. Studies on the importance of E-WOM (Yan et al., 2016) positive and negative reviews (Sparks and Browning, 2011; Lee et al., 2008) and the effect of negative online consumer reviews on consumer behavior (Lee et al., 2008) led to the hypothesis that negative comments are perceived to have a greater negative effect on attitude towards the brand, purchase intention and brand trust. There were no main effects or interaction effects found of the comments.

The study also took the covariates of involvement with product, involvement with fashion and involvement with fashion influencers as possible explanatory predictors of the outcome of the study. It was expected that involvement would have a direct effect on the dependent variables. Thereby source credibility was added to the study as a mediator, as well as an influencer evaluation. The mediator source credibility was added to the study as literature review revealed that it could have an effect on the strength between the influencer and the dependent variables attitude towards the brand, purchase intention and brand trust. Also influencer evaluation was taken as a mediator as it was expected that a micro influencer was perceived as being trustworthier than a macro influencer. Four dimensions measured the influencer evaluation: similarity, connectedness towards the influencer, authenticity and integrity of the influencer.

An interesting outcome of the study was the role of the dependent variables on the influencer evaluation. An interaction effect was found between the influencer and comments on connectedness towards the influencer, whereby it was concluded that when dealing with negative comments, the macro influencer was significantly affected, and the micro influencer was not. The connectedness towards the influencer resulted in the same mean for the positive and negative comment variable when dealing with a micro influencer. According to the social identity theory individuals have more expectations of members of the in-group as they are considered to be trustworthy (Lui et al., 2015). However the results of this study show that the micro influencer, who is considered to be part of the in-group, was not affected by the comments in their connectedness towards the influencer.

Several limitations of the study were addressed. First, although there was a pretest conducted to determine the micro and macro influencer used for the study, the difference between the both could have not been large enough, which led to the effects of the influencer not being significant. Therefore it is necessary to replicate the study with a clearer distinction between a macro and micro influencer with the use of existing

influencers to further confirm the internal validity of the results. Second, actual product brands were utilized to enhance the external validity of this study. However by using actual product brands it is hard to control on existing attitudes towards the brand, which could have influenced the results. However, for future research the use of actual brands is advisable as it might be easier for participants to answer statements regarding attitude, trust and purchase intention.

Third, the sampling frame of young women may have limited the generalizability of the results, although it was considered suitable for the research environment of Instagram. Replicating the study with a broader sampling frame on various social media environment contexts might increase the generalizability of the findings. Last, this study did not measure sharing intention. Practical studies have indicated that an increase in followers affects engagement rates with the influencer. It would be interesting to study the actual effects of an increase in followers on engagement with the influencer and eventually on attitude, brand trust and purchase intention.

The results of the study also led to several managerial implications. Influencer marketing is becoming an important marketing tool for many marketers. Before indulging in this strategy there are several aspects that have to be taken into consideration. Although it was not significant in the study, the results did indicate that the micro influencer did have a more positive influence on brand trust, attitude towards the brand and purchase intention, meaning that it is interesting for marketers to focus on micro influencers instead of macro influencers when considering to make use of influencer marketing. The results of the influencer type on the connectedness towards the influencer did show that the connectedness towards a micro influencer is less likely to be influenced by negative or positive comments and by the product shown. This indicates that micro influencers are considered to be trustworthier and have a closer connection to consumers than macro influencers, which can lead to more positive evaluations, regardless of the product or comments that are given, thus making them a safer choice for marketers to collaborate with. However, as with every digital marketing strategy, marketers have to take into account the ever-changing landscape of social media. The social media platform that is considered to be important today may not be so tomorrow. This has an effect on the influencers one targets to work with. Having an individual with a lot of followers on the wrong platform would not benefit ones brand.

Furthermore the product that is related to the influencer does not necessarily have to be a product that completely matches with the influencers' identity to have a positive evaluation of the product. Having a moderate mismatch product would intrigue consumers more which could lead to more curiosity and therefore a more positive

evaluation of the brand (Meyer-Levy & Tybout, 1989). However it is still important that the product used in relation to the influencer is not a complete mismatch.

Last, the results of the study lead to the conclusion that negative comments do not necessarily have a negative impact on a brand. It is important for marketers to keep track of what is said of their brand and how it is positioned online, but negativity online does not directly imply that the brand will suffer from it. However it is important to take into consideration the type of consumers the brand mostly deals with. When dealing with high-involvement consumers, negativity can have a far more negative influence on the evaluation of the product, than when dealing with low-involvement consumers. Marketers should acknowledge this difference and act on it. A few studies have been conducted on celebrity endorsement and the importance of a match with the product. However, for influencer marketing, little research has been done on the effects of a product and influencer match. In this respect, the current study sheds light on the importance of a match or mismatch and the role of negative comments. Although influencer marketing has been proven to be effective, the difference between a micro and macro influencer is underexplored. Further research on the difference and especially the starting point of both micro and macro influencers is needed to help marketers find the right influencers for their brand.

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