

Chapter 4

All Users Are Equal, but Some Users Are More Equal Than Others: Exploring the Psychology of Users That Follow Social Media Influencers

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ABSTRACT

The study of social influence in social media settings has gained significant importance in the last years due to the advent of the internet and the increase of social media users and followers of social media influencers (SMI). This chapter focuses on the followers' psychological experience by reviewing how SMIs are perceived by followers and what moves the users to follow SMIs. Users follow SMI in an attempt to obtain information, inspiration, and entertainment, therefore brands have the chance to promote their products and services based on an appealing communication that can be provided by the SMI. However, the SMIs' perceived credibility, trustworthiness, authenticity, and expertise can impact not just the interaction with followers but also the brand image. It is recommended that brands conduct a continuous and careful assessment of SMIs' communication style and followers' perceptions to improve followers' attitudes towards the brands and their purchase intentions.

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INTRODUCTION

Social life is fueled by argument, conflict, and controversy, always in an attempt to influence other individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Social influence among individuals has long and critical importance for human evolution, socialization, and day-to-day interaction in society via persuasion mechanisms. Building on the fact that the real or imagined presence of others impacts and influences our own behavior and attitudes (Hogg & Vaughan, 2014), it is not surprising that Social Influence processes can be transferred from real-world settings to online settings, such as Social Media, to foster human connection but also conformity among Social Media users.

Social media's popularity has skyrocketed in the last few years and this trend is expected to continue in the near future. Indeed, the number of social media users worldwide is expected to grow from 4.59 billion in 2022 to 5.85 billion users in 2027 (Statista, 2023). Given social media's demand in daily activities (Duffett, 2017), we can expect that social media is related to countless effects on its users, namely on the way they get informed about global and local news, their exposure to advertising, and the way they seek for information in general (e.g., Ganguly, 2015; Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Social Networking Sites (SNS) are changing and redefining how people respond to and engage with worldwide information. Despite the worldwide changing and challenging times for the quality of communicated information, companies and institutions have found the new Holy Grail Cup full of communication opportunities between brands and consumers. To respond to the skeptical opinions regarding the traditional forms of marketing, Influencer marketing has been raised to provide the much-needed connection between brands and consumers has increased in the last years. As the terminology suggests, Influencer marketing is based on the investment on influencers to develop forms of branded communication and content close to their followers (Yodel, 2017), these forms of communication seem to lead to a more organic, authentic and direct contact with potential consumers than traditional advertising (Talavera, 2015), thus the popularity of Influencer marketing is been growing exponentially (Bevilacqua & Del Giudice, 2018). Since influencer marketing is based on the interaction between users in SNS, it is important to note that not all social media users are equal, some of them have gained the power to influence other users' behaviors, while others just joined the crew and followed the lead.

In this chapter we propose to review and discuss the psychology of users who follow other users in Social Media, focusing on the perception that users form towards influencers and the motives and reasons to follow them. In the first part, we provide some background concepts by presenting the relevance of influencer marketing for brands and for digital marketing strategy. Then we proceed to a literature review on the definition of Social Media Influencer (SMI), their main characteristics, and their communication styles to influence other users. In the second part, we proceed to the main goals of the chapter which is to provide a literature review on the motives and reasons behind following the SMI, and how the SMI is perceived by their followers. We conclude this chapter, by providing some insights on marketing strategy assessment and possible solutions that can be adopted to improve the influencer marketing effectiveness for brands based on the motives to follow and perception about the SMIs. In the end, some knowledge and research shortcomings are identified to point to future research avenues regarding SMI and marketing strategy.

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