Chapter 9

How Would You Like Your (Sustainability) Influencer?
A Cross-Cultural Discrete Choice Experiment on Preferred Influencer Characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Despite influencer marketing being among the most popular digital marketing tools in practice, there are still many research gaps, especially when it comes to specific influencer types. Though technology is converging worldwide, the perception of social influencers may differ between cultures. In this study, a model of influencer characteristics is applied to cases of sustainable and regular products. The optimal influencer for German and Turkish consumers is investigated via a discrete choice experiment (DCE). Findings suggest that female influencers are preferred over male influencers, and trustworthiness is especially required for promoting sustainable products, regardless of the respondent's involvement for sustainability. For German consumers, attractiveness plays a larger role than for Turkish consumers, who prefer high levels of trustworthiness and expertise. The applicability of this methodology for larger studies with multi-country samples is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter takes a closer look on the preferred characteristics of social media influencers, especially focusing on the topic of sustainability. It identifies several important social media influencer characteristics and tests them in an online experimental setting. By collecting data from Turkish and German subjects, this study achieves an understanding of how cultural differences play a role in the preference of these characteristics. Results of this work are not only important for marketing managers and researchers but also for government executives who want to take advantage of sustainability influencers in their socially responsible and green campaigns.

With the wide proliferation of digital and mobile media that employ the internet, social influencers have become a widespread form of opinion leaders employed by companies to communicate new products and ideas (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021; Hudders & Lou, 2022). Whereas the concept of opinion leaders is not new (Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi, & Thrassou, 2021), during the last decade, user-based online marketing has become ubiquitous with the popularity of various forms of word-of-mouth communication via commenting or recommendation functions, online reviews (Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Argyriou, 2012), and videos on platforms such as Instagram or YouTube. In this context, social influencers are defined as "individuals who create valuable content, have strong reputations in specific fields (…) and are followed by a large number of users on online social networks" (von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021a, p. 366). Besides the academic literature, websites and practitioner-oriented books have not been shy with advice on how to best employ social (for a quasi-academic example, see for example Jahnke, 2018).

While there has been substantive research on the utility of influencer marketing, research gaps still exist (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021; Ye, Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021). Especially, effects of different media platforms and different types of influencers remain underresearched (Taylor, 2020). Types of influencers can include the celebrity status of the influencers or their topical focus (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021), such as fashion influencers or 'finfluencers', who are influencers perceived to be experts for financial products.

One type of influencer that has recently received more attention in the media and in research are influencers on social or sustainability issues (von Mettenheim & Wiedmann, 2021a), also known as Sinnfluencer in German (Baake et al., 2022), which can roughly be translated as "sense-fluencer", since their specific topic is seen as less commercial and rather idealist. This focus is also in line with a call for more research on sustainability influencers in the current literature (Hudders et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021).

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