Meformer vs. Informer: Influencer type and Follower Behavioral Intentions

Emergent Research Forum (ERF)

Samira Farivar
Carleton University
samira.farivar@carleton.ca

Fang Wang
Wilfrid Laurier University
fwang@wlu.ca

Yufei Yuan
McMaster University
yuanyuf@mcmaster.ca

Abstract

Recently, social media influencer marketing has received great attention from businesses. Companies spend an increasing amount of money on working with influencers who promote the products/brands through their social media posts. Instagram, a popular social networking site, has become the most used platform by social media influencers for brand promotion. This has led to emergent research on social media influencers and how they shape their follower's behaviors. Two key factors have been found to impact the behaviors of influencers' followers: opinion leadership of and para-social relationship with the influencer. In this study, we extend the current literature by introducing the concept of influencer type and considering its potential moderating effects on the relationship between focal elements (opinion leadership and para-social relationship) and followers' behavioral intentions.

Keywords

Influencer marketing, opinion leadership, para-social relationship, influencer type.

Introduction

The increasing popularity of social networking sites has intrigued companies to use these platforms for marketing purposes. Recent statistics and reports have identified "Influencer Marketing" as a prominent marketing channel in social networking sites (Mathew 2018; Wiltshire 2018). Social media influencers are users of social media who are not necessarily public figures, but rather received a great attention from other members and gained a sizable network of followers (Casaló et al. 2018; De Veirman et al. 2017). It has been identified that social media influencers have the ability to shape attitudes of their audience through their social media posts (e.g. Barker 2017; Lin et al. 2018). Recently, in business, influencers are considered as essential marketing channels; since they can significantly affect their followers' purchasing behaviors. As a result, many companies and brands are now working with different social media influencers and are involved in influencer marketing. Influencer marketing refers to the collaboration of businesses with social media influencers; in which influencers are asked to promote brands and products through their social media (De Veirman et al. 2017). Influencer marketing has been found as a growing industry; in 2018, it reached $4.6 billion, and it is expected to continue its growth and will become a $6.5 billion industry in 2019 (Influencer MarketingHub 2019). Among social networking sites, influencers mostly use Instagram for marketing purposes (Statista 2018a). Instagram, with over a billion monthly active users (Statista 2018b), offers various features which enable its members to make their posts more interesting. Instagram users can post information in multimedia format, using pictures and videos. The growing popularity of Instagram as a marketing channel has led to an emergent Information Systems literature on influencers and their followers' behaviors (e.g. Casaló et al. 2018; Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Hwang and Zhang 2018; Lee and Watkins 2016; Muller et al. 2018). Based on the post contents and posting intentions, social media influencers can be categorized into two main groups: meformer whose posts are mostly about themselves and their daily lives, and informers whose posts are more towards sharing new information (Lee 2014). Followers' behaviors are mainly studied by three intentional measures in the literature: intention to

follow the influencers' advice, intention to interact with the influencer, and intention to recommend the influencer. Nevertheless, how the influencer's type may affect followers' intentions has not been studied yet.

This study examines the link between influencer's types and follower's intentions. More specifically, we suggest that influencer's type would affect the relationship between follower's perception on the influencer (opinion leadership vs. para-social relationship) and their intentional behaviors (follow the advice, interact with the influencer, and recommend the influencer to others). In addition, extant literature suggests that follower's perception on the influencer is a key determinant of their behavioral intention and have studied follower's perception of influencer's opinion leadership (Casaló et al. 2018) and para-social relationships separately (Hwang and Zhang 2018; Lee and Watkins 2016). We integrate the literature on the two types of follower's perception and compare them in the influencer-follower relationship.

Background

The increasing popularity of social media influencers and their business value have led to an emerging interest in research communities to understand social media influencers' behaviors and how they impact their followers' decision making. To respond to this trend, recent studies started to explore this phenomenon from various perspectives. Preliminary studies through interviews showed that Instagram users mostly perceive influencers as credible, trustworthy, and expert sources (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Djafarova and Trofimenko 2018). Empirical studies using the survey method analyzed various characteristics of influencers, such as number of followers, perceived popularity (De Veirman et al. 2017), attractiveness (Lee and Watkins 2016), that affect follower's behaviors. A great attention has been paid to follower's perception on the opinion leadership of (Casaló et al. 2018) and the para-social relationship with (Hwang and Zhang 2018; Lee and Watkins 2016) influencer, which have been considered as the focal construct and examined separately in several studies.

Opinion leadership refers to the extent to which an individual is perceived as a role model who has interesting and persuasive information for others (Casaló et al. 2018). Opinion leadership has a positive impact on follower's behavioral intentions. When followers perceive an influencer as an opinion leader, they intend to interact with the influencer, follow his/her advice, and recommend the influencer to others (Casaló et al. 2018). Para-social relationship refers to the one-sided relationship followers have with an influencer. Para-social relationship is "an illusionary experience, such that consumers interact with personas (i.e., mediated representations of presenters, celebrities, or characters) as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship" (Labrecque 2014, p.135). In the context of influencer marketing, the para-social relationship with an influencer perceived by followers significantly impact their purchasing decisions (Hwang and Zhang 2018). These two factors have been studied separately in the literature and found to play significant roles in influencing follower's behaviors. However, they have not been studied together to understand the combined and comparative effects. In addition, to the best of our knowledge, no research has explored the importance and effect of influencer's type in the relationship of follower's perception on influencer and follower's behavioral intentions.

In this study, we build on and extend the extant literature by combining and comparing the focal constructs of opinion leadership and para-social relationship. In addition, we introduce the concept of influencer type, particularly meformer vs. informer, in research and consider its moderating role in the relationship between follower's perception of influencer and their behavioral intentions. The next section describes our proposed research model and hypotheses.

Proposed Research Model and Hypotheses

Figure 1 shows the proposed research framework, which depicts the relationship between the two key factors, opinion leadership and para-social relationship, and three follower's intentional measures, with influencer type as a moderator. Consistent with the current findings, we propose that opinion leadership influences follower's behavioral intentions (Casaló et al. 2018). Opinion leaders are perceived as having great knowledge on the issue of discussion; thus, when followers consider the influencer as an opinion leader, they are more prone to follow influencer's advice, interact more with the influencer, and also recommend the influencer to others. As a result, we hypothesize:

H1: Opinion leadership would increase follower's intention to follow influencer's suggestion.

H2: Opinion leadership would increase follower's intention to recommend the influencer.
H3: Opinion leadership would increase follower's intention to interact with the influencer.

Previous research suggest that para-social relationship with influencers has a positive impact on follower's intention to follow influencer's product recommendations (Hwang and Zhang 2018). We extend this finding and propose that when followers develop a para-social relationship with the influencer, they are more willing to take actions and hence:

H4: Follower's para-social relationship with an influencer would increase their intention to follow influencer's suggestion.
H5: Follower's para-social relationship with an influencer would increase their intention to recommend the influencer.
H6: Follower's para-social relationship with an influencer would increase their intention to interact with the influencer.

Based on post content and posting intention, social media influencer can be categorized into two general types: meformer vs. informer (Kwak et al. 2010; Lee 2014). Some previous studies explored different types of influencers in Twitter (a social networking site), and based on their tweets, they categorized them into meformer and informer (e.g. Hu and Hong 2017; Hutto et al. 2013); however, the role of influencer's type on affecting followers' behaviors is still largely unknown. Instagram significantly differs from Twitter in user experience. Twitter is a text-based platform, while Instagram is more focused on media content (pictures, videos, etc.) (Robarts 2018). Users of Instagram expect to see aesthetic and interesting posts and aspire to have the lifestyles of influencers and celebrities (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017). Hence, it is crucial to explore the influencers' type on Instagram and understand how it might affect follower's behavior. Opinion leaders are perceived to be knowledgeable persons. Previous studies suggest that opinion leadership is a key characteristic of an influencer that affects follower's behaviors. We argue that the importance of this characteristic and its effect on follower's behavior depends on influencer's type. Influencers who are perceived as being "informer" are posting more information and could be considered as more knowledgeable. We suggest that, opinion leadership is more important for this type of influencers than for "meformer" influencers in affecting follower's behaviors. We propose:

H7-9: The positive relationship between opinion leadership and follower's behavioral intentions (to follow suggestion, to recommend, and to interact) is more significant for "informer" than for "meformer" influencers.

Literature on para-social relationship explains that fans of a social media character feel that they know the person completely through his/her social media posts (Lee and Watkins 2016; Stever 2011). As the social media character posts more information about his/herself, the para-social relationship strengthens and has more influence on fans. Extending the literature on para-social relationship, we suggest that when an influencer is perceived to be a "meformer", the impact of para-social relationship on follower's behavioral intentions would be more significant than when the influencer is an "informer". We propose:

H10-12: The positive relationship between para-social relationship and follower's behavioral intentions (to follow suggestion, to recommend, and to interact) is more significant for "meformer" than for "informer" influencers.

Proposed Methodology

An online survey will be conducted to test our hypotheses. All measurement items in the survey are adapted from existing literature (see appendix A). First, we will conduct a pilot study to check the reliability and validity of our measurement scales. Then we will collect data for analysis from active users of Instagram, who are following at least one influencer. We will ask them to consider an influencer they follow and respond to questions for that specific influencer. To measure the type of influencer, respondents will be asked to rate the extent they consider the influencer as "meformer" vs. "informer". The collected data will be analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM).
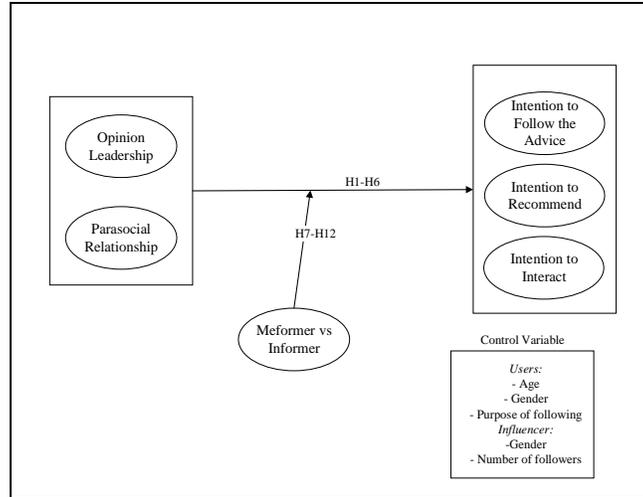
Figure 1. Proposed Research Model

Conclusion

The popularity of social media influencer marketing is increasing among businesses. This has led an increasing number of studies on this phenomenon from various perspectives. In this study, we propose a research framework that considers both opinion leadership and para-social relationship of influencer, two key factors examined in the literature, and the moderating role of influencer type. The results of this study could guide influencers and marketers in their Instagram marketing practices.

REFERENCES

Barker, S. 2017. "How Social Media Is Influencing Purchase Decisions," *Social Media Week*. (https://socialmediaweek.org/blog/2017/05/social-media-influencing-purchase-decisions/, accessed February 28, 2019).

Casaló, L. V., Flavián, C., and Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. 2018. "Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and Consequences of Opinion Leadership," *Journal of Business Research*.

Djafarova, E., and Rushworth, C. 2017. "Exploring the Credibility of Online Celebrities' Instagram Profiles in Influencing the Purchase Decisions of Young Female Users," *Computers in Human Behavior* (68), Elsevier Ltd, pp. 1–7.

Djafarova, E., and Trofimenko, O. 2018. "'Instafamous' – Credibility and Self-Presentation of Micro-Celebrities on Social Media," *Information Communication and Society* (4462), pp. 1–15.

Hu, Y., and Hong, Y. 2017. "Modeling Twitter Engagement in Real-World Events," *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (2017)*, pp. 960–969.

Hutto, C. J., Yardi, S., and Gilbert, E. 2013. "A Longitudinal Study of Follow Predictors on Twitter," in *Proceedings of the Sigchi Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems. ACM*, pp. 821–830.

Hwang, K., and Zhang, Q. 2018. "Influence of Parasocial Relationship between Digital Celebrities and Their Followers on Followers' Purchase and Electronic Word-of-Mouth Intentions, and Persuasion Knowledge," *Computers in Human Behavior* (87:2018), pp. 155–173.

Influencer MarketingHub. 2019. "Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report:2019."

Kwak, H., Lee, C., Park, H., and Moon, S. 2010. "What Is Twitter, a Social Network or a News Media?," in *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on World Wide Web. AcM*, pp. 591–600.

Labrecque, L. I. 2014. "Fostering Consumer–Brand Relationships in Social Media Environments: The Role of Parasocial Interaction," *Journal of Interactive Marketing* (28:2), pp. 134–148.

Lee, J. E., and Watkins, B. 2016. "YouTube Vloggers' Influence on Consumer Luxury Brand Perceptions and Intentions," *Journal of Business Research* (69:12), pp. 5753–5760.

Lee, K. 2014. "6 Guaranteed Ways to Get More Followers on Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ | Time.Com," *Time*. (http://time.com/2843469/get-more-followers-facebook-twitter/, accessed February 15, 2019).

Lin, H. C., Bruning, P. F., and Swarna, H. 2018. "Using Online Opinion Leaders to Promote the Hedonic and Utilitarian Value of Products and Services," *Business Horizons* (61:3), "Kelley School of Business, Indiana University," pp. 431–442.

Mathew, J. 2018. "Understanding Influencer Marketing And Why It Is So Effective," *Forbes*. (https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2018/07/30/understanding-influencer-marketing-and-why-it-is-so-effective/#f7327e571a94, accessed February 14, 2019).

Müller, L., Mattke, J., and Maier, C. 2018. "#Sponsored #Ad: Exploring the Effect of Influencer Marketing on Purchase Intention," *Twenty-Fourth Americas Conference on Information Systems, New Orleans, 2018*, pp. 1–10.

Robarts, K. 2018. "Differences between Instagram and Twitter," *DifferenceBetween.Net*. (http://www.differencebetween.net/technology/differences-between-instagram-and-twitter/, accessed February 20, 2019).

Statista. 2018a. "Primary Social Media Platforms Used by Social Influencers for Brand Collaborations Worldwide as of January 2018."

Statista. 2018b. "Instagram: Number of Monthly Active Users 2013-2018."

Stever, G. S. 2011. "Fan Behavior and Lifespan Development Theory: Explaining Para-Social and Social Attachment to Celebrities," *Journal of Adult Development* (18:1), pp. 1–7.

De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., and Hudders, L. 2017. "Marketing through Instagram Influencers: The Impact of Number of Followers and Product Divergence on Brand Attitude," *International Journal of Advertising* (36:5), Taylor & Francis, pp. 798–828.

Wiltshire, E. 2018. "The Brand Value of Influencer Marketing in 2018," *Social Media Today*. (https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/the-brand-value-of-influencer-marketing-in-2018-infographic/520810/, accessed February 14, 2019).

Appendix 1- Measurement Scales:

Intention to follow the advice *(Hwang and Zhang 2018)*
1. I will buy the product that this influencer advertised through Instagram.
2. I have the intention to buy the product that this influencer advertised through Instagram.
3. I am interested in buying the product that this influencer advertised through Instagram.
4. It is likely that I will buy products that this influencer advertised through Instagram in the future.

Intention to recommend *(Casaló et al. 2018)*
1. I would likely recommend this influencer to friends and relatives.

Intention to interact *(Casaló et al. 2018)*
1. I have the intention to interact with this influencer in the near future.
2. I predict that I will interact with this influencer.

Opinion leadership *(Casaló et al. 2018)*
1. This influencer serves as a model for others.
2. This influencer is one step ahead of others.
3. This influencer offers interesting pictures that suggest new ideas
4. This influencer influences people's opinions
5. I follow this influencer as a source of information

Para-social relationship *(Lee and Watkins 2016)*
1. I look forward to watching the posts of this influencer on his/her Instagram account.
2. If this influencer appeared on another Instagram account, I will follow that account as well.
3. When I'm watching/reading the posts of this influencer, I feel as if I am part of her (his) group.
4. I think this influencer is like an old friend.
5. I would like to meet this influencer in person.
6. If there were a story about this influencer in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.
7. This influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.