



## An Empirical Investigation on Influencer Marketing: the Impact of Content-related, Follower-related and Influencer-related Factors on Consumers' Purchase Intentions\*

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### Abstract

Social media influencer marketing is a new phenomenon in the digital world. It has seen a tremendous and exponential growth, reached a critical mass audience and changed from an obscure marketing tactic to a successful marketing strategy. Therefore, social media influencers and their impact on consumers' purchase decisions have become highly relevant to marketing scholars and professionals. Previous research on influencer marketing mainly concentrates on either source, message or recipient perspectives and elaborates on the effects of influencer marketing on brands and on followers by examining the characteristics of the Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and their posts as well as the motivations and effects experienced by the consumers. However, those studies lack a comprehensive perspective, which combines all these aspects of influencer marketing and considers their influence on consumers' purchase intention. This research aims to address this gap in the literature and examines the influence of (1) influencer-related factors (authenticity, attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise), (2) content-related factors (consistency, quality and interactivity) and (3) follower-related factors (social, ego and self-actualization needs) on followers' purchase intentions. Results indicate that an influencer's authenticity and trustworthiness along with the followers' ego needs are significantly shaping purchase intentions. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed at the end.

### Keywords

Social Media Influencer, Purchase Intention, Authenticity, Consumer Behavior

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## Introduction

The main concepts of marketing will always be the same, yet social media influencers (SMIs) as the “nobodies” of the past are becoming “somebodies” of the future (Booth and Matic, 2011: 184) and are now termed as micro-celebrities (Gaenssle and Budzinski, 2020). In a nutshell, a SMI is a social media user who has a large number of fans and followers, that are mainly Millennials (those between 1980 and 1994) and Generation Z (those between 1995 and 2012), with whom s/he can build strong relationships and can influence their preferences and behavior (Cauberghe et al., 2020). Because of their influence on consumer decision making, they are used very frequently by brands to reach the target audience.

Influencer marketing, as Brown and Hayes (2008) define it, is promoting brands with the use of brand ambassadors and SMIs, who exert influence over their followers, to profit from their large networks, to increase brand awareness and sales (Tapinfluence, 2016). Although, “social media influencer” and “brand ambassador” terms are often being used interchangeably to denote Internet-famous opinion leaders, there are some differences. While brand ambassadors get compensation for representing a brand’s image (Sussman, 2015) and have a long-term relationship with the brand, they might perform a series of tasks even though they do not match with their interests (Mavrcik, 2015). On the other hand, SMIs are third parties that work hard on social media to allow brands to develop stronger relationships with consumers and attract new potential customers. They may or may not receive a compensation by brands, but they only talk about things they experience or believe in (Sussman, 2015). SMIs, thus, “represent a new type of independent third-party endorser, who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg et al., 2011: 90). They have the power to influence the purchasing decisions of consumers as a result of their knowledge, expertise, authority or the exceptional relationship they have with the audience (Freberg et al., 2011).

Although influencer marketing is a valid strategy adopted by many brands, research on influencer marketing is still evolving (Kay et al., 2020) and mainly concentrates on either source, message or recipient perspectives (Hudders et al., 2020). More specifically, previous studies elaborate on the effects of influencer marketing on brands and on followers by examining the characteristics of the SMIs and their posts as well as the motivations and effects experienced by the consumers (Hudders et al., 2020). However, those studies lack a comprehensive perspective, which combines all these aspects of influencer marketing and considers their influence on consumers’ purchase intention.

This study relies on the Revised Communication Model for Advertising by Stern (1994), which focuses on the influence of word-of-mouth from the source, message/media effects and the interactive consumers’ perspectives. Consequently, this study

mainly discusses the influence of (1) influencer-related factors such as attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness and authenticity of the source, (2) message-related factors such as interactivity, quality and consistency of the messages transmitted by the source and finally (3) follower-related factors such as the motivations of the followers in the form of ego, social and self-actualization needs on purchase intention.

The first section provides a literature review on the phenomenon and on the factors affecting followers' purchase intentions. Consistent with the literature, this section suggests a number of hypotheses and proposes a conceptual model. Next, the methodology of the research followed by the findings of the survey are presented. Finally, in the last section, the survey results are discussed with respect to the previous literature and theoretical and managerial implications are provided.

## **Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses**

### **Influencer Marketing and Purchase Intention**

In the marketing literature, purchase intention is a widely studied concept, as it can predict consumers' final buying behavior (Goyal, 2014). Intention is defined in both the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) as the degree of willingness one has to approach a certain behavior and the amount of effort s/he is willing to exert, to achieve a goal. Purchase intention is then, a situation where a consumer is likely to buy a product or service, in certain conditions, in the future (Vineyard, 2014: 28). It is, therefore, one of the main elements of consumer cognitive behavior on how someone is willing to buy a brand or a product (Hosein, 2012) and can highly predict actual buying behavior.

To come up with a purchase decision, consumers generally use their experiences and evaluate the offerings based on their needs and preferences (Chi et al., 2011). While previous literature identifies several factors that are in relation with the brand and influence purchase intention such as brand identity or brand image (Dash et al., 2021), recent literature also finds that user generated content (UGC) on social media significantly influences young generations' purchase intentions (Mayrhofer et al., 2020) as they serve as valid sources of information and help consumers to evaluate products' or offers' alternatives (Chi, 2011). As such, consumers purchase brands, when they are well-informed about brands and motivated to try them. As influencer marketing strategy is developed to promote brands, it should outstandingly perform the tasks of information transfer and need creation. Thus, SMIs play the role of the independent third party, that help people make their purchase decisions or at least increase the likelihood of buying (Brown and Hayes, 2008).

Research on the role of social media influencers (SMIs) and influencer marketing on consumers' purchase intentions identifies that anticipated objectives can be achieved, if the influencer is credible (Lee and Kim, 2020), trustworthy (Chetioui et al., 2020) and authentic (Kim and Choo, 2019; Wellman et al., 2020) and his/her content is strong enough to persuade people and to trigger their needs (Chetioui et al., 2020). Yet as stated earlier, these are not enough for the followers to come up with a purchase decision. Hence, this study comes as an attempt to discuss and categorize the factors that lay behind the influencer marketing strategy' success. In line with the Revised Communication Model for Advertising by Stern (1994), three main categories are discussed in the following sections that will lead to the theoretical model of the study. The first category is *influencer-related factors*, which are mainly the characteristics that SMIs must have, in order to exert an influence over the purchase intentions of their fans. The second category is *follower-related factors*, which represent the needs, that, when they are satisfied, the customer is more likely to purchase the brand promoted. Finally, the third category is *content-related factors*, which are the qualities that a content must include to persuade audiences to make a purchase.

### **Influencer Related Factors**

Among the factors identified as important for the impact and reach of influencers, previous research identifies credibility (Vollenbroek et al., 2014) and authenticity (Campbell and Farrell, 2020) as the most significant (Hudders et al., 2020).

### **Credibility**

The perceived credibility of an SMI is the extent to which his/her followers see his/her tips and recommendations as true, factual and unbiased (Hass, 1981) and an SMI's credibility has a noticeable effect on his/her content consumers. The internalization process happens when followers embrace the particular SMI, in terms of their personal attitude and value structures (Erdoğan, 1999) and beliefs and behaviors can be influenced only when the source of information is credible. In the case of advertisements, if the influencer is perceived as credible, s/he is more likely to influence his/her followers' attitudes towards the ad, their attitudes towards the brands; and thus, their buying behaviors (Munnukka et al., 2016; Lee and Koo, 2015; Lafferty et al., 2002).

According to Hovland et al. (1953), credibility is constituted by two main components: expertise and trustworthiness. However, in more recent studies, attractiveness has also been added to the components of credibility (McGinnies and Ward, 1980). Finally, Ohanian (1991) involved these three components in one model with an SMI's perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness and level of expertise as the main dimensions of his/her credibility.

*Attractiveness:* Berscheid and Walster (1974) identifies physical attractiveness as an antecedent to interpersonal attraction, which makes it one of the resources in social influence (Mills and Aronson, 1965). A social media influencer's physical attractiveness has a high impact on a follower's perception and acceptance of the advertising message (Lim et al., 2017). Literature has shown that a message from an attractive influencer is more persuasive than an unattractive one's (Erdogan, 1999; Chaiken, 1979) because the more the SMI is attractive, the more s/he captures the followers' attention (Lim et al., 2017); thus, the more s/he exerts an influence over the consumers' attitudes (Bardia et al., 2011) and their purchase intentions (Van der Waldt et al., 2009; Till and Busler, 2000). Certainly, high physical attractiveness, high likeability, and high familiarity, play an influential role in promoting brands and stimulating a consumer's desire to purchase (Lim et al., 2017). Yet, attractiveness is not only physical, but also social. For instance, an influencer's facial expressions, social and soft skills can also cause perception and behavioral changes (Brownlow, 1992; Leeuwen et al., 2009).

*Expertise:* As the second dimension of credibility, expertise, is defined by Tedeschi et al. (1973) as one's ability to provide valuable knowledge and information based on past experiences, educational levels and competences. It is also referred to as authoritativeness (McCroskey, 1966), competence (Whitehead, 1968), expertness (Applbaum and Anatol, 1972) and qualification (Berlo et al., 1969). The expertise of a SMI signifies the degree to which an influencer is perceived to be a competent source (Ohanian, 1991) with a set of solid skills, wide knowledge and fruitful experiences (Eisend and Langner, 2010). The level of expertise is such an important factor in increasing the source's credibility, such that experts constitute greater communicators, since their contents are more appreciated and trusted (Biswas et al., 2006). By proving his/her expertise and credibility, an influencer is considered a reference; thus, people go back to him/her to enlarge the sphere of their knowledge and to make purchasing decisions (Balaban and Mustatea, 2019). Therefore, to get the right information about a certain niche, people look up for experts and in the digital age, SMIs are becoming the experts, since they are deeply knowledgeable about their markets, always available online and easily reachable. Accordingly, past research finds that SMIs are rating higher, in terms of expertise, than celebrities, when promoting brands, which can be translated to higher evaluations of a brand's quality (Biswas et al., 2006; Kang and Herr, 2006) and can significantly improve advertising effectiveness and motivate the purchase act (Amos et al., 2008).

**Trustworthiness:** Trustworthiness, believability or plausibility are significant aspects of credibility (Van der Waldt et al., 2009). Therefore, an influencer, who wants to have a positive impact on the followers' purchase intentions, needs to make sure that his/her messages, whether audio, visual or audio-visual, are persuasive. Persuasion is not the ability of an influencer to convince people to see from his/her perspective.

Instead, it is his/her ability to find a common ground and shared interest by providing concrete evidence, that proves the added value of the brands s/he promotes. According to Ohanian (1991) the credibility and the effectiveness of a message depends mainly on the endorser's trustworthiness, whether s/he is expert or not. Smith (1973) also mentions that regardless of other traits, if an endorser is untrustworthy, s/he is seen as a questionable source.

Accordingly, Abdulmajid-Sallam and Wahid (2012) have defined the trust paradigm in communication, as the level of acceptance of a communicator's message and the degree of confidence consumers place in his/her intent to convey the most valid assertions (Ohanian, 1991). Trustworthiness is, therefore, the honesty, integrity and believability of the endorser (Van der Waladt et al., 2009). In an influencer marketing context, many sources have suggested the construct of trustworthiness as a factor that positively influences buying behaviors and purchase intentions (Hudders et al., 2020; Pornpitakpan, 2004) because of its proved relationship with credibility (McGinnies and Ward, 1980) and message effectiveness (Chao et al., 2005).

Based on the above discussion, the three following hypotheses are therefore proposed to test the relationships between the three dimensions of credibility and purchase intention.

H1.a.1: Influencer's attractiveness positively affects the followers' purchase intentions.

H1.a.2: Influencer's expertise positively affects the followers' purchase intentions.

H1.a.3: Influencer's trustworthiness positively affects the followers' purchase intentions.

### **Authenticity**

Authenticity is a multifaceted construct that is often linked to attributes such as genuineness, truthfulness, and originality (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Molleda, 2010) as well as credibility and quality (Chen, 2004), all of which are central in effective celebrity endorsement in Social Media. Besides credibility, authenticity has also been mentioned as a key quality for SMIs (Gilmore and Pine, 2007) to improve the effectiveness of their efforts (Brown et al., 2003). An authentic SMI is one who stays true to his/her beliefs, is brave to freely express his/her opinions and feelings and tries to keep his/her personality and his/her actions matching, despite the external pressures. Thus, an SMI's authenticity is determined by his/her honesty and openness with his/her followers and results in a positive consumer-SMI identification (Brown et al., 2003) and strong consumer-brand relationships (Glukzman, 2017).

Since consumers have started perceiving influencer marketing as one of the few real and authentic forms of communication (Scott, 2015) and trust SMIs' messages more than brands' ads, companies have chosen to engage SMIs in their marketing strategies, to insure the profound influence authenticity has on people (Caldwell and Dixon, 2010). The concept of an influencer's authenticity is no longer "just a question of being true to self, but also of being true to a 'self-in-relationship'" (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012: 119). This, in fact, enhances message receptivity, increases its acceptance (Labrecque et al., 2011), improves perceived quality (Moulard et al., 2016) and affects purchase intentions (Napoli et al., 2016). Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested.

H1.b: An influencer's authenticity positively affects the followers purchase intentions.

### **Follower-Related Factors**

Consumer behavior is described as the study "of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy needs and desires" (Solomon, 1995: 7). While there are several factors such as cultural, social, personal and psychological, influencing consumers' decisions (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010), most of them remain uncontrollable and beyond the scope of the SMIs in general. However, especially the motivations of the SMI followers need to be considered, taking the fact into consideration that SMIs are promoting a specific brand to motivate an information search and acquisition among the followers.

Consumers' acts are largely motivated by the desire to satisfy specific needs (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) such as physiological, safety, belongingness (aka, social), esteem (aka, ego) and self-actualization (Maslow, 1987). The last three represent upper levels of the need hierarchy and speak to the scope of the current study as an interpersonal influence on Social Media generally touches those three upper levels that are triggered and achieved with the aid of SMIs (McLeod, 2018; Zhu and Chen, 2015).

*Social needs:* Social needs are followers' needs to be included, affiliated with others and to be accepted and loved (Cialdini, 2007). People generally follow SMIs to belong to a community and seek peer recommendation and choice approval (Park and Kim, 2008) as well as to shape purchase decisions and intentions based on the communities' reactions (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Virtual platforms, where billions of people are connected daily with similar behaviors and expectations, help people enhance their social skills, learn more about the world and entertain themselves (Dellarocas, 2006). But most importantly, they enable consumers to evaluate what is socially acceptable. Social influence, as Rashotte (2011: 562) defines it, is a "change in an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviors that results from interaction with another individual or a group". In other words, people buy a product not just for the sake of

buying but also for the social meanings attributed to it (Solomon, 1983), which is mainly generated from opinion leaders' perceptions (Wood and Hayes, 2012). These perceptions can be more clearly understood when using Social Comparison Theory (SCT). SCT describes the natural desire to compare oneself to others (Festinger, 1954). The comparison often leads to changing one's behavior to get a social group's approval or positive feedback (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Kelman, 1961). Social comparison happens most of the time in a spontaneous and unconscious way without setting a specific objective. Yet, it helps that SMIs have an impact on their followers, as followers start imitating and buying the products they promote.

*Ego need:* Ego need or, as it is also called, self-esteem need is defined as the "feeling that you are a worthy person who is as good as anyone else rather than feeling like a loser" (Chen and Zhu, 2015). In other words, ego need is the follower's need to gain recognition and approval (Chen and Zhu, 2015). Relationship-based websites and social platforms help people satisfy this need by giving them the opportunity to connect with their environment. Assuming that social need is fulfilled after following an SMI, belonging to his/her community and building a strong relationship with him/her, the next thing a person generally does is to start listening to the SMI's experiences, advice and motivational speeches carefully and mimicking the SMIs behavioural patterns (Ki and Kim, 2019). This will generate self-confidence (Chen and Zhu, 2015). Even by buying products or trying an activity the influencer promotes, s/he is going to feel more his/her value that gives him/her a further push in life. By achieving that, an SMI develops a parasocial relationship with the follower (Marwick and Boyd, 2011) and thus, insures his/her conversion into a potential customer.

*Self-actualization need:* Self-actualization need is one's feeling of developing his/her skills and best potential, in order to see the real meaning of life rather than being stagnant in one place without making any further step in life and to discover oneself. Social Media makes people, initially, aware of that need, then, it helps them to satisfy it. Social platforms have given the opportunity to individuals to showcase their creativity and find people who support them and gain their self-confidence (Chen and Zhu, 2015). While self-actualization needs are considered as idiosyncratic, which means it may vary from one person to another depending on their stage of growth and maturity, most of the consumers are following SMIs who can provide them with a sense of self-assurance to stay true to their beliefs, abilities and decisions and remind them that "they can" do whatever they dream of.

Norwood (1999) explains how Maslow's hierarchy can be used to describe the information people seek on all Social Media platforms. For example, people usually look for enlightening information, that help them belong to certain social groups or be noticed, loved and cared for, to satisfy their social needs, look for empowering

information, that will develop their ego to satisfy their esteem needs and look for edifying information, that will help them be cognitive and aesthetic to fulfill their self-actualization needs. With these goals, individuals use SMIs as sources of motivation and inspiration, which in turn might have an impact on the followers' attitude, behavior and purchase intentions (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Thus, the three following hypotheses are proposed to test whether these needs, when they are satisfied by the SMIs, may positively affect the followers' purchase intentions.

H2.b: Followers' social needs positively affect followers' purchase intentions.

H2.a: Followers' ego needs positively affect followers' purchase intentions.

H2.c: Followers' self-actualization needs positively affect followers' purchase intentions.

### **Content-Related Factors**

When referring to influencer marketing, content offered by the SMIs, which can provide a large set of intangible and tangible benefits and values such as entertainment, psychological satisfaction, knowledge, and motivation to the followers plays a significant role in shaping consumers' preferences and actions (Fill and Jamieson, 2011). Influencer marketing is mainly based on content marketing; thus, most of an influencers' content is composed of valuable and relevant information about brands, delivered through storytelling, in order to trigger interactions (Pulizzi, 2014; Lieb, 2012; Pulizzi, 2012). Research has provided evidence that if SMIs generate content that is consistent with facts (Patterson, 2007), interactive (Black and Kelley, 2009), and presented with high-quality information (Patterson, 2007) and techniques (Booth and Matic, 2011), they can develop a stronger influence on consumers (Hudders et al., 2020 and increase the possibility of purchase (Tang et al., 2014).

*Interactivity:* As Social Media enables several possibilities of interactivity (Smith et al., 2012) the feedback solicited from both the influencer and his/her followers (Tikkanen et al., 2009), has given active individuals the opportunity to create and share UGC with other people. The ones whose contents were the most influencing, creative and interactive, have succeeded in becoming influencers. While different Social Media platforms have different degrees of interactivity depending on the contingency, context, goals, actions and reactions (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Stewart and Pavlou, 2002), SMIs value feedback and interactivity because they bring followers and SMIs closer by offering opportunities for personal conversations (Hamilton and Weiss, 2005). The direct messages between SMIs and followers, readings of the comments on a live stream, replies to posts (Edgecomb, 2017) or being available on different platforms and easy to reach (Abidin, 2018) are part of these interactions and can make the SMI

the fastest source of information, that people consider a reference (Westerman et al., 2012) and lead to a more personal connection (Glucksman, 2017). Brands make use of these strong bonds between the SMI and the followers (Tang et al., 2014) to deliver advertising messages that increase awareness and sales (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

*Consistency:* Research on the characteristics of effective content indicates, that content consistency, the degree of the source's conformity with facts and with previously shown attitudes, practices and behaviors, is valued by the followers, as they prefer to see regularity in SMIs' behaviors in order to easily predict their future actions and evaluate the types of messages (Hudders et al., 2020). Followers generally assess the consistency of content with their own expectations, which are based on their prior experiences, knowledge and beliefs. If the content falls within the range of their expectations, then, it is more credible and trustworthy, thus content's consistency leads to consistent changes in consumers' behaviors (Ioanid et al., 2015) and an SMI that is committed and consistent maximizes his/her impact on the followers' purchase intentions (Ioanid et al., 2015).

*Quality:* In addition to consistency and interactivity, high-quality content that has been produced by an SMI rather than any brand has been perceived as more trustworthy (Cheung et al., 2009) and has been found to affect consumers' attitudes and perceptions towards offerings significantly (Kozinets et al., 2010; Liengpradit et al., 2014). The perceived quality of the content is not only about the quality of the information, in fact, it is also about the overall quality of all the elements of the content such as image, sound, video or presentation. For a content to be perceived as high-quality, it, first, has to be based on great ideas, second, should contain factual and strong information, third, must use multimedia (e.g. pictures, memes, videos, screenshots) to enhance it and finally, should follow technological trends and innovation to assure competitive advantage (Agrawal, 2018). Furthermore, followers perceive the content delivered by SMIs as high-quality when it involves vividness, interactivity and useful information (De Vries et al., 2012) which will attract dynamic followers (Agrawal, 2018) and not only increase engagement but also sales (Sammis et al., 2015).

H3.a: Content's interactivity positively affects followers' purchase intentions.

H3.b: Content's consistency positively affects followers' purchase intentions.

H3.c: Content's quality positively affects followers' purchase intentions.

Based on the discussion above, the conceptual model and related hypotheses of the study are presented below in Figure 1.

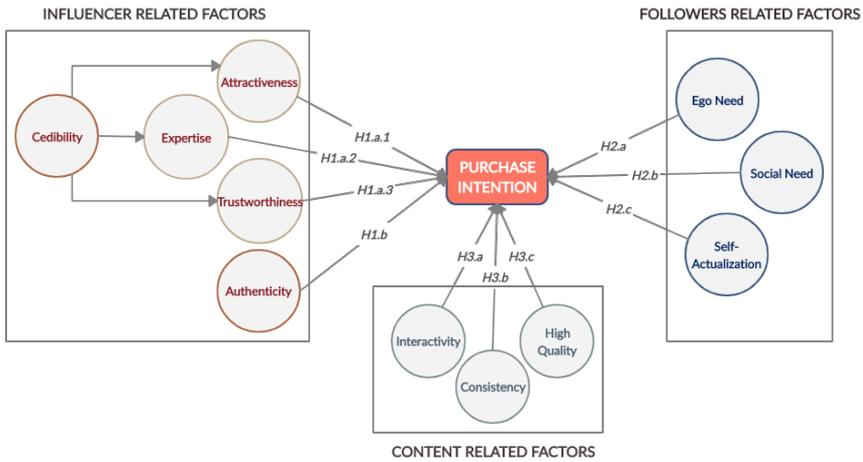


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model

## Research Methodology

### Data Collection and Sampling

An online survey in English using Google Forms was used to collect data for the study and test the proposed hypotheses. The questionnaire was posted on Facebook and Instagram accounts of the researchers between March 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. The social media platforms used in the study and the sample were purposively selected as they are in line with the purpose and represent the population of the study. The survey consisted of five parts. The first part aimed to capture the respondents' involvement with social media and influencer marketing and to screen out the ones who are not following at least one SMI. This part consisted of descriptive questions such as the time spent on social media, number of influencers followed, types of reviews preferred, and respondents' assumptions of influencer marketing future. The respondents who are following at least one SMI are forwarded to the rest of the survey, if not the survey was terminated. The second part was designed to cover respondents' preferences on SMIs' traits and qualities. The third part was about respondents' preferences on SMIs contents' characteristics. The fourth part covered the psychological factors that affect buying behaviors. Finally, respondents evaluated their purchase intentions and provided their demographic information.

### Scales and Items used in the Survey

Measurement items were adopted from reliable and valid scales, which were used previously in literature, hence some of the items' wordings were modified to fit the context of the study. Among the influencer-related factors, credibility of the influencer

(attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness) was measured by 15 items (5 items each) by Ohanian (1990), whereas authenticity was assessed by three items developed by Hajli (2014). Content-related factors such as consistency, interactivity and quality were captured with an overall of 9 items (3 items each) by Flynn et al. (1996). While 6 items (3 items each) from Bearden et al. (1989) was used to measure ego and self-actualization needs among the follower-related factors, social needs were gauged by 4 items developed by Beardon and Rose (1990). Finally, respondents' purchase intentions were evaluated by three items from Hajli (2014). Please see Table 1 for the item wordings.

## **Findings of the Study**

### **Sample Characteristics**

After conducting a pretest with 50 individuals and checking the validity and reliability of the data, the survey was distributed among Facebook and Instagram accounts of the researchers and reached 360 convenience sampled respondents. 14 participants were screened out in the first stage of the survey and 346 respondents, who are following at least 1 influencer on social networking sites remained for further analysis. Of these 346 people, 61.6% (213) are women with 177 respondents (51%) being Millennials (between 24 and 38 years old), 142 respondents (41%) being Generation Z and the rest being from Generation Y.

In terms of the respondents' involvement with Social Media and SMIs, results confirm the validity of the results. More than one third of the sample are following at least 20 influencers, which indicates the huge involvement of the respondents with the topic of the study. Approximately 23% of the respondents follow between 11 and 20 SMIs, and finally, almost 36% follow between 1 and 10 SMIs. Furthermore, 66% of the respondents indicated that they use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube, more than 3 hours, on a daily basis.

### **Factor and Reliability Analyses**

Initially, to test the proposed item structure, Exploratory Factor with Varimax rotation and then Cronbach's Alpha reliability analyses were run. Descriptive analysis in terms of the mean scores, standard deviations along with the factor loadings, percentage of variance and reliability coefficients are presented below, in Table 1. As can be seen, all items have high factor loadings (greater than 0.8), loading to the corresponding factors with the factors' Cronbach Alpha values ranging between 0.802 and 0.917, confirming high validity and reliability (Durmuş et al., 2013). As a result, none of the items were eliminated from further analysis.

Table 1  
Reliability and Factor Analysis Results

Constructs	Items	Means	$\sigma$	Factor loading	% of VAR	Cronbach Alpha
Purchase Intention	I pretend to buy the products promoted by social media influencers.	2.77	1.276	0.901	83.466	0.900
	It is likely that I will buy the products promoted by social media influencer.	2.97	1.176	0.929	9.639	
	It is likely that I will buy the products promoted by social media influencer.	3.04	1.225	0.910	6.895	
Interactivity	Interacting with SMIs makes me interested in things they promote.	3.42	1.137	0.929	86.370	0.842
	Interacting with SMIs makes me want to try new things.	3.70	1.130	0.929	13.630	
Consistency	I trust SMIs' advertisements when the advertising messages are consistent.	3.68	1.121	0.885	72.372	0.807
	I am not likely to buy a product promoted by a SMI when the ad is not consistent with facts.	3.96	1.030	0.849	16.553	
	I am not likely to buy a product promoted by a SMI when the frequency of posting about it is low.	3.60	1.222	0.817	11.074	
High-Quality	I trust advertising contents with high-quality more when making my purchase decision.	3.59	1.129	0.859	71.707	0.802
	I am not likely to buy a product promoted by an SMI when the quality of information is low.	3.86	1.135	0.859	15.752	
	I prefer to purchase a product when the SMI present it in a high-quality content.	3.72	1.095	0.822	12.541	

Ego Need	If I want to be like the SMI, I often try to buy the same products s/he promotes.	3.14	1.329	0.953	9.237	0.898
	I feel confident by purchasing the same products and brands SMIs purchase.	3.24	1.311	0.953	90.763	
Social Need	To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what SMIs are buying and using.	3.40	1.266	0.907	79.884	0.915
	I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands that SMIs promote and use.	3.11	1.320	0.903	8.553	
	I often get persuaded to buy the product promoted by a SMI, with whom I have strong ties.	3.40	1.255	0.887	7.183	
	I feel more comfortable choosing products when I have gotten SMI opinions on them.	3.52	1.155	0.877	4.380	

Table 1  
*Reliability and Factor Analysis Results-Continued*

<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b><math>\sigma</math></b>	<b>Factor loading</b>	<b>% of VAR</b>	<b>Cronbach Alpha</b>
Self-Actualization A SMI positively affect my purchase intention/decision if his/her life goals and my life goals are very similar.	I would buy the product s/he promotes, if the SMI really inspires the best in me.	3.61	1.036	0.929	83.538	0.901
	3.59	1.147	0.907	9.495		
I would buy a product promoted by a SMI who motivates me to reach my potential.	3.60	1.116	0.906	6.966		0.838
Authenticity I am very likely to buy a product which has been tried by an Influencer.	I tend to trust SMIs' recommendations more than brands' ads because they are more authentic.	3.53	1.163	0.927	86.025	0.838
	3.52	1.155	0.927	13.975		

Attractiveness	SMI's social attractiveness positively affects his/her credibility.	3.68	1.151	0.902	83.997	0.903
	I tend to trust SMIs who are more attractive.	3.36	1.314	0.92	9.219	
	SMI's physical attractiveness positively affects his/her credibility.	3.39	1.317	0.927	6.784	
Trustworthiness	I tend to consult a trustworthy SMI to help me choose the best alternative available from a product class.	3.72	1.154	0.932	86.819	0.848
	I tend to buy a product which has been promoted by a trustworthy Influencer.	3.72	1.167	0.932	13.181	
Credibility	A SMI may affect my purchase intention if s/he has the expertise needed to provide valuable knowledge/Information about a product/service.	3.94	1.042	0.871	79.370	0.87
	To make sure I follow a credible influencer, I often search for SMIs having the expertise needed to provide valuable knowledge/Information.	3.88	1.089	0.910	12.044	
	To make sure I buy the right product from the right brand, I often look up a SMI having the expertise needed to provide me with valuable knowledge/Information.	3.83	1.126	0.891	8.586	
Expertise						

## Regression Analysis

After checking the reliability and validity of the model and meeting the six regression assumptions (Hair et al., 2010), a stepwise regression analysis was run to test the linear relationships between the influencer's qualities, content characteristics and followers' motivations as the independent variables and purchase intention as the dependent variable. The last model in the stepwise regression analysis shows that only three variables were significant explaining 57.1% of the variance in purchase intention. Results indicate that SMI's authenticity ( $\beta=0.354$ ), followers' ego need ( $\beta=0.332$ ) and SMI's trustworthiness ( $\beta=0.189$ ) significantly influence followers' purchase intentions, while authenticity explaining 45% of the variance of purchase intention is the main factor in influencers' impact on followers' purchase intentions. (Please see Table 2). Accordingly, while hypotheses H1a3, H1b and H2a are supported, the rest of the hypotheses are rejected.

Table 2  
*Stepwise Regression Analysis Results*

Model Beta	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	Sig
Authenticity	.354	7.298	.000	0.571	154.273	0.000
Ego Need	.332	6.822	.000			
Trustworthiness	.189	3.992	.000			

## Discussion and Conclusion

The new movements and trends in the digital world have brought many opportunities for regular people to become Internet stars and for brands to become more successful and powerful. Social networking sites have become the place for creativity and innovation since they bring people from different cultural backgrounds together. Social media platforms are a pool full of leads, who may be easily and quickly converted into potential customers; therefore, brands are feeling the need to redesign their marketing strategies, in order to fit that pool's norms and requirements, so that they can convert as many consumers as possible, to achieve their sales and marketing objectives. With this aim using SMIs has become common practice.

This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and approaches it from the theoretical lens of the Revised Communication Model for Advertising by Stern (1994), which focuses on the influence of word-of-mouth from the source, message/media effects and the interactive consumers' perspectives. With this purpose, characteristics of the SMIs and their messages that have been identified in the literature have been discussed in this study, along with followers' basic motivations for purchasing a product and their overall influence on purchase intention.

Although there is a growing literature on SMIs and their influence on consumers, there are still some shortcomings of past studies that have been addressed in this study. First, while previous literature denotes the characteristics of SMIs and their messages in creating effective outcomes, these studies are fragmented and often provide mixed results. Second, although those studies are mainly from the follower perspective, they do not take consumers innate needs in consumption situations into consideration. This study, on the other hand, identifies the related needs and through the holistic nature of this study tests the key factors' overall influence in interplay with each other on followers' purchase intentions with the data collected from the 346 SMI followers and identifies the ones that are most significant. As a result, this research advances previous studies in bringing all aspects separately discussed in literature in a comprehensive framework together and identifying the most influential ones in shaping consumers' purchase intentions.

While this study considered several factors that are either SMI (authenticity, attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise), content (consistency, quality and interactivity) or follower (social, ego and self-actualization needs) related, three factors were found to significantly influence followers' purchase intentions. These are authenticity and trustworthiness of the SMI and ego-needs of the followers.

Authenticity, as already discussed by a vast number of researchers (Moulard et al., 2015; Moulard et al., 2014; Spiggle et al., 2012; Thomson et al., 2005; Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Brown et al., 2003), is one of the most important characteristics new generations appreciate in SMIs (Glucksman, 2017), that helps influencers interact with their audience and reach successful outcomes (Leigh et al., 2006). Loroz and Braig (2015) have as well noted that an SMI's authenticity makes people reciprocate the perceived authenticity by committing to him/her and engaging in feelings. Thus, it leads to positive outcomes in attitudes (Moulard et al., 2015) and purchase intentions (Ilicic and Webster, 2014). The results of the current study are also in line with previous literature in emphasizing the importance of authenticity in influencer marketing. Besides authenticity, several papers have also proven the positive relationship between the perceived credibility of influencers and the followers' purchase intentions (Hudders et al., 2020) since information delivered by a credible influencer has the power to influence followers' beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (Erdoğan, 1999). This positive relationship predicts that the more an SMI is credible, the more the followers are willing to buy the products promoted. As, attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness are the three dimensions of credibility (Ohanian, 1991), those three aspects were expected to explain some variances in purchase intentions (Sertoglu et al., 2014; Ohanian, 1990). However, in this study, only trustworthiness was found to be significant. Surprisingly, expertise and the attractiveness of the SMI were found to be insignificant, which is in line with Pöyry et al. (2019)'s findings, that the authenticity of the SMI is far more

important than attractiveness. This result can be attributed to the fact that trust is created through the perceived expertise of the influencer. In other words, to trust an SMI, followers need to appreciate the expertise of that particular SMI and follow his/her recommendations.

This study also considered the content delivered by SMIs in terms of their consistency, quality and interactivity. While the results of the study suggest that none of these factors are significantly influencing purchase intentions, previous research assumed that content consistency is important in converting followers into brands' potential customers (Payne et al., 2008), whilst interactivity was considered a positive sign for an influencer's success (Smith et al., 2012). In terms of quality, everything from the sound effects, image resolution, script and even the ideas can be considered when evaluating the content's quality (Booth and Matic, 2011), therefore based on the results of the current study, being uninfluential on purchase intention would mean that consumers are now basically prone to quality content such that if they are expecting a certain level of quality that would trigger interactivity and insure a competitive advantage. As a result, providing high-quality content does not ensure purchase intention.

Most of the research on influencer marketing has focused on the influencer's traits as factors of success and their role in implementing the influencer marketing strategy; however, almost none has considered the followers' needs as the predominant factors in the influencer marketing chain. Among self-actualization, social and ego needs, considered in the study, only ego needs were significant and were found to have an effect on the purchase intention. This finding can be attributed to the fact that the core of influencer marketing is eventually the satisfaction of social and ego needs since influence can occur only when the influencer builds strong ties with the followers and engages in topics that interest them. However, to be able to shape their purchase intention towards the products that the SMI is promoting, depending on the type of the Social Media (Zhu and Chen, 2015), the SMI needs to make the follower believe that purchasing the product will eventually improve their self-confidence (Ki and Kim, 2019).

### **Managerial Implications**

Although influencer marketing is not a new concept in business, it has gained an extraordinary popularity among people, made its way to the forefront and seen its peak in recent years. Social media is considered a treasured and powerful marketing channel especially for professionals and brands (Erdogan, 1999) since the world has become more technologically advanced and involves almost all categories of populations. Attracting the target segments becomes easier with the aid of social media influencers, who, through their strong contents, may increase a brands' awareness and revenues, by shaping their followers' buying behaviors and purchase intentions. However, social

media influencers, in this age, are a double-edged weapon in the hands of brands. They can boost a brand's reputation and destroy it by a single word or a simple action. This research is focusing only on the power of their positive impact on brands. The majority of practitioners and academics believe in that power, considering SMIs precious PR and marketing tools in this turbulent business environment and advising companies to wisely choose the right influencer for the right niche, at the right time. There are different predictions of the future of these digital influencers. Some think that influencer marketing has come to stay, and a brighter future is awaiting. Others believe that it will very soon diminish, and other trends will take over. For instance, in our study, when asked about their predictions on influencer marketing future, almost 70 percent of respondents said that "influencer marketing is a successful marketing strategy that has come to stay".

To effectively and positively affect consumers' purchase intentions, an SMI needs to possess some key features. Authenticity, mainly being real, true, original and genuine (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010), helps improve message receptivity (Labrecque et al., 2011), increase perceived quality (Moulard et al., 2016) and influence buying behaviors (Napoli et al., 2014). Besides authenticity, an SMI's trustworthiness is one of the main dimensions of credibility. Therefore, brands, who are looking for SMIs to promote their offerings, should choose ones who are known for their integrity, honesty and believability (Van der Waldt et al., 2009).

The digital world is moving so fast and hundreds of features and technologies are introduced on a daily basis. Thus, content expectations are continuously changing such that consumers are no longer impressed by mediocre content. More specifically, they do not request creative forms of content, they expect them. In the last years, new forms of motion content are running on social media platforms, such as, boomerangs, stop motion, GIFs, filters and stories. SMIs leveraging these formats are more likely to get a leg up on the competition and convert their followers into potential customers. Yet, they need to also consider the fact that consumers are looking for ego-boosting product offers in Social Media in general and apparently from SMIs in particular.

In terms of influencer marketing as part of a marketing strategy, there will be several innovative platforms, which will guide influencer marketing and offer advanced communication options. Further, given that several regulatory policies, such as the one by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which makes influencers notify followers when they are in a sponsored relationship with a brand, are and will be introduced to make influencer marketing more transparent, the SMIs and their content will be more trustworthy. So, from now on, more authenticity and transparency are going to be demanded from influencers (DeMers, 218) and deeper study of the influencers' market using qualitative and quantitative metrics is required from brands, in order to

choose the right influencer for the right target segments. Eventually, both brands and SMIs must understand that people do not buy on logic; instead they buy on emotion and justify with logic.

### **Limitations and Future Research Recommendations**

This research is, like any other research in social sciences, has several limitations. First, while the results of validity and reliability tests are within acceptable limits, the study is still prone to common-method biases that are raised due to a common method, item and context effects (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, although socio-demographic characteristics were collected, they were not used to compare between the different groups' behaviors. A close-up look can be done on Millennials and Generation Z behaviors, and a gender-based comparison would be held within, to reveal more aspects about how different groups behave when exposed to influencer marketing. Third, most of the survey respondents are Tunisians; therefore, the sampling bias may affect the findings and the generalizability of the study results. Last but not least, this research has focused on the purchase intentions of consumers without specifying whether these intentions may lead to buying decisions. Thus, it would be very fruitful to repeat the study by focusing on all the decision-making stages and investigating the contributions of the SMIs at each stage.

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