Do Consumers Believe Product Reviews on Instagram? Comparing Review Source Type:
Acquaintances and Social Media Influencers.

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Keywords: consumer perception, influencer, product review, social media

## Introduction

Consumers have used social media as a way to receive varied product- or brand-related information that is based on other consumers' experiences. Consumers may perceive product reviews differently depending on the review source type, such as whether the reviewer is a well-known influencer or a real-life friend due to differences in their personal relationships with the review source, such as how must they can relate to the review source, how much they trust the review source, and how interactive they can be with the review source. Based on this relationship-focused perspective, this study examined whether the level of believability of favorable product reviews on Instagram differs depending on "who" posted the reviews (i.e., review source type: acquaintances vs. social media influencers [SMIs]) and whether varying relationship characteristics, such as how congruent consumers perceive the review source is with their actual and ideal self (i.e., actual/ideal self-congruity) and how credible and interactive consumers perceive the review source to be influence their review believability, and ultimately their attitude toward the brand in the product review. Among existing social media platforms, this study focused on Instagram because Instagram has been the most popular social media platform among young consumers with the image- and video-based formats that allow diverse ways of product- and brand-related information sharing (De Veirman et al., 2017).

## Literature Review

Self-congruity theory explains that a match between images of an object or another person and consumer self-images lead to the consumer's favorable thoughts and behavior toward the object or person (Choi & Rifon, 2012). Specifically, actual self-congruity describes how consistent consumers perceive the object or person to be with the way they are; whereas ideal self-congruity occurs when consumers desire to extend themselves to be like the object or person (Sirgy, 1982). Consumers are prone to receive information on social media through recommendations from either their friends and family members (i.e., acquaintances) or SMIs (De Veirman et al., 2017). It is expected that consumers may be more likely to experience actual self-congruity with acquaintances (vs. SMIs) as they may consider their lifestyles to be similar (*H1*), whereas consumers may be more likely to experience ideal self-congruity with SMIs (vs. acquaintances) who tend to be famous with idealized images on social media (Choi & Rifon, 2012) (*H2*). Further, consumers may perceive greater source credibility when the reviews are posted by SMIs (vs. acquaintances) as they perceive SMIs as knowledgeable and dependable (De Veirman et al., 2017) (*H3*); whereas consumers may perceive greater interactivity with

acquaintances (vs. SMIs) as they personally know them and can interact with them outside social media (*H4*). The self-congruity theory suggests that consumers would form a more favorable thought (e.g., believability) about a product review when they perceive a higher actual (*H5*) or ideal (*H6*) self-congruity with the review source (Wang et al., 2015). Also, consumers would be more likely to believe a product review as they perceive the review source as more credible (*H7*) and interactive (*H8*). By believing the posted reviews, consumers will be able to have more positive attitudes toward those product brands (*H9*) because believability is a critical factor in determining individuals' attitude (Colton, 2018).

## Method

An online survey was conducted with a convenience sample of 284 students recruited from a Southeastern U.S. university. Participants were asked whether they were an Instagram user and whether they had seen product reviews on Instagram. Participants who responded yes to both questions were directed to the main questionnaire on which participants were asked to recall a recent Instagram product review post and respond to a question asking whether the review source was an acquaintance or a SMI and completed measures for actual and ideal self-congruity (Helgeson & Supphellen, 2004), source credibility with three dimensions (i.e., attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise) (Ohanian, 1990), perceived interactivity (McMillan & Hwang, 2002), review believability (Cheung et al., 2009), and brand attitude (Spears & Singh, 2004), based on the recalled Instagram product review. All of the measures were rated on a five-point Likert scale, except for brand attitude which was measured with a semantic differential scale.

## Results

The majority of the participants were female (91.2%) with the mean age of 19.49. Confirmatory factor analysis showed a good model fit ($\chi^2$ (449) = 926.02, $p$ = .00; CFI = .93, TLI = .93; RMSEA = .06) after eliminating two credibility items that had low factor loadings (< .50). The average variance explained (AVE) estimates of all factors were above .50 and smaller than shared variances with other factors, and Cronbach's $\alpha$s ranged from .77 to .96, demonstrating the validity and reliability of the measures. For hypotheses testing, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted with the maximum likelihood estimation method and demonstrated a good fit: $\chi^2$ (484) = 1024.75, $p$ = .00; CFI = .92, TLI = .92; RMSEA = .06. SEM path coefficients revealed that review source type did not significantly predict actual self-congruity ($\beta$ = .09, $p$ = .16), rejecting *H1*; but significantly predicted ideal self-congruity ($\beta$ = .15, $p$ < .05), supporting *H2*. Ideal self-congruity was higher when the review source was a SMI (M = 3.40) than for acquaintances (M = 3.05). The review source type did not have a significant relationship with perceived source credibility ($\beta$ = -.03, $p$ = .70), rejecting *H3*; but was significantly related to perceived interactivity ($\beta$ = -.45, $p$ < .001), supporting *H4* (M$_{acquaintance}$ = 3.28, M$_{SMI}$ = 2.04). Actual self-congruity had a positive influence on perceived review believability ($\beta$ = .13, $p$ < .05); supporting *H5*, while ideal self-congruity did not have a significant influence on perceived review believability ($\beta$ = -.02, $p$ = .71); rejecting *H6*. As expected, perceived source credibility positively influenced review believability ($\beta$ = .75, $p$ < .001); supporting *H7*. However, *H8* was

rejected because perceived interactivity negatively influenced review believability ($\beta$ = -.10, $p <$ .05). Review believability positively influenced brand attitude ($\beta$ = .53, $p < .001$); supporting *H9*.

Discussion and Implications

In this study, we compared consumers' perceived relationship characteristics (e.g., credibility, interactivity, self-congruity) of two types of social media product review sources, SMIs and acquaintances, and how they relate to believability of the review. Findings of this study extend the application of the self-congruity theory by showing that consumers are more likely to believe a product review when they perceive a higher actual self-congruity with the review source. Interestingly, the review source type per se does not influence consumers' perceived source credibility probably because consumers form their credibility based on many other factors, such as the number of followers and likes, regardless of "who" posts the review. As expected, consumers perceive less interactivity from SMIs than from acquaintances, but this lack of personal interaction does not appear to hurt the believability of SMIs' product reviews given the negative relationship between perceived source interactivity and review believability. This may be because more interactions with the review source may expose the consumer not only to positive aspects of the review source, but also to their negative aspects. The findings of this research suggest that brand marketers should use a source who are similar to their target consumers and show credibility.

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