



Exploring the parasocial impact among nano, micro and macro influencers

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Introduction

Social media influencers (SMIs) have become central to marketing efforts in the fashion industry (Olivieri, Barbosa and Sousa, 2019). SMIs are people who have accumulated a large social media following through the creation of commercialized content focused on their interests and experiences (Abidin, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019). SMIs are considered micro-celebrities because they use their online identity as a branded good to communicate with followers and attain fame (Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2013). The communication and branding activities by SMIs have been found to encourage the formation of parasocial relationships (PSR) between SMIs and followers (Abidin, 2015; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Current literature has established four main levels of SMIs, based on follower count: “mega” or “super” influencers (> 1 million followers); “macro” influencers (100k-1m); or micro-influencers (5k-100k); and “nano” influencers (< 5k) (Alassani & Göretz, 2019; Mediakix, n.d.), and high numbers of followers have been found to be positively associated with likeability, opinion leadership and credibility (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017; Conde, 2019). Although emerging industry articles indicate a critical role and higher PSR effects of nano-influencers, no studies have conceptualized or examined the development of PSR between this and other levels of SMIs to the best of our knowledge. Thus, as a preliminary study, the purpose of this study is to investigate (1) how PSR and influencer credibility vary across nano, micro and macro SMI levels, (2) how credibility in different levels affect the development of PSR, and (3) how PSR would affect brand attitude. Findings of this study contribute to the literature by providing empirical evidence of multiple SMI categories and its effects on attitudinal relationship.

Literature Review

Source credibility among SMIs reflects their persuasive abilities and influence on consumers, and refers to their trustworthiness, expertise, similarity and attractiveness (Manukka, Uusitalo and Toivonen, 2016). The essence of branding using SMIs is on developing feelings of admiration and identification between SMIs and consumers, which in turn influences perceptions of credibility towards brands among their followers (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2017). Maheshwari (2018) demonstrated higher engagement rates based on credibility among nano-influencers because of consumers’ perception of SMI approachability and genuineness. We therefore expect that SMIs with less numbers of followers will have a higher credibility than those with higher number of followers (H1a). Conde (2019) found that PSR increases as follower

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count decreases, but did not examine this effect in the nano-influencer level. Therefore, we propose that nano-influencers will demonstrate higher PSR than SMIs with higher follower numbers (H1b). Emotional attachment to celebrities has been found to positively influence brand attitudes, and these effects increase with social media interaction (Ilicic & Webster, 2011; Marwick and boyd, 2011). More specifically, PSR has been positively associated with credibility and brand engagement among SMIs (Labrecque, 2014; Lou & Kim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Accordingly, we hypothesize that credibility is positively associated with PSR (H2), and that PSR is a mediator of credibility and brand attitude among consumers (H3).

Methods

To examine the hypothesized relationships, this study employed a quantitative approach, using an online survey. Data was collected using a Qualtrics survey, which was administered via email invitation to Southeastern university students and Amazon MTurk. Participants selected a SMI from the nano, micro or macro SMI categories and considered their interactions with that influencer to complete the survey (n=832). 12 PSR were adapted from Tukachinsky (2010), 11 items for influencer credibility were adapted from Ohanian (1990), and 7 semantic differential scales were adapted to measure brand attitude from Bruner & Kumar (2000). All items except for brand attitude were measured using a 7 point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The survey also included questions about participants' social media activity, content preferences, and demographic information.

Results

The reliability of PSR ($\alpha = .930$), credibility ($\alpha = .911$), and brand attitude ($\alpha = .866$) were confirmed. A random sample for each group (n=140) was used to test H1-2. A preliminary analysis with Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Cronbach's α were performed for validity and reliability check, and composite scores were calculated. One-way ANOVA revealed that the level of credibility was not significantly different across the groups, rejecting H1a ($F(2,417) = .277, p = .758; M_{\text{nano}} = 5.42, SD = 1.04; M_{\text{micro}} = 5.20, SD = .92; M_{\text{macro}} = 5.14, SD = 1.05$). However, the level of PSR was significantly different across the SMI groups (nano vs. micro vs. macro), thus supporting H1b ($F(2,417) = 21.60, p < .05; M_{\text{nano}} = 5.42, SD = 1.28; M_{\text{micro}} = 5.17, SD = 1.21; M_{\text{macro}} = 4.45, SD = 1.37$). Subsequent linear regression analyses found that there was a significant influence of credibility on PSR ($F(1,418) = 293.68, p < .05$) and of PSR on brand attitude ($F(1,419) = 23.71, p < .05$), supporting both H2 and H3. Post hoc analysis was performed to examine PSR as a mediator role, and the results of bootstrapping demonstrated that credibility increases brand attitude through PSR with a significant indirect effect ($B = .56, SE = .049, 95\% \text{ C.I.} = [-.168; .0291]$), through the effect of credibility on PSR ($B = .86, SE = .050, p < .05$) and PSR on brand attitude ($B = -.11, SE = .035, p < .05$). The direct effect of credibility on brand attitude was also significant ($B = .56, SE = .049, p < .05$), therefore partial mediation is supported.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that credibility is linked to PSR development among SMIs, and that PSR is significantly higher among nano-influencers than the micro and macro levels. While credibility was not significantly different across the three levels, because PSR was found to positively influence brand attitude, our findings suggest that nano-influencers are still highly effective endorsers. This study serves as a starting point for future theoretical research on nano-influencers. It also confirms that marketers should seek SMIs at the nano level, as they have stronger relationships with followers than other levels, and can develop more favorable brand attitudes. Though this study has a meaningful contribution, a future study is encouraged to examine how PSR development between influencer levels influences purchase intention. In addition, a further analysis using a structural equation modeling may provide a better understanding of the suggested relationships.

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