### An Influencer Like Me: Does Influencer Social Status Matter?

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## Introduction

Social media influencers have become an important topic in digital marketing. The most interesting aspect of this relatively new concept is that social media influencers do not necessarily have to be well-known celebrities or famous people. Instead, ordinary people have risen up the ranks of social media to amass hundreds, thousands, or even millions of followers due to their approachable images as well as their expertise on a given subject (Sirohi, 2019; Williams & Valencia, 2019). Research suggests that these relatable influencers tend to be more persuasive and trusted than traditional celebrities in delivering marketing messages (Wischhover, 2018). However, it is still unclear how ordinary people appeal to social media users compared to those with powerful social identity. With that in mind, this study examines the effect of influencer social status on desirable marketing outcomes (i.e., product attitude, willingness to purchase, and loyalty to the influencer). In so doing, this study investigates whether a follower's social comparison orientation intervenes in these relationships.

## Literature Review

*Self-presentation on social media and identification of influencer*

Social media serves as a platform where individuals present the core aspects of self-concept (Krämer & Winter, 2008). Social media users engage in self-affirmation by revealing social affiliations and expressing desired self-images (Toma & Hancock, 2013). While interacting with a particular influencer, followers typically go through this identification process (Kelman, 1961) and adopt the opinion of the influencer who is conforming to their self-definition and desired self-images (Sanitioso & Wlodarski, 2004).

When followers perceive an influencer as holding dissimilar/high social status compare to themselves (e.g., celebrity), they may engage in upward social comparison and self-enhancement motivation (Collins, 1996). They may admire the lifestyle of the influencer and want to emulate it (Kapitan & Silvera, 2015). On the other hand, when followers perceive the influencer as having similar/ordinary social status, they are likely to go through a self-verification process. In other words, while comparing themselves with ordinary people, followers can increase the stability and subjective accuracy of self-appraisals (Wilson, 1973). Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**H1**: If followers perceive the influencer as holding dissimilar/high social status compared to themselves, they will form admiration to the influencer, ultimately leading to positive product attitude, willingness to purchase, and loyalty to the influencer.

**H2**: If followers perceive the influencer as holding similar/ordinary social status compared to themselves, they will form intimacy and interconnectedness to the influencer, ultimately leading to positive product attitude, willingness to purchase, and loyalty to the influencer.

**H3**: The influencer with dissimilar/high (vs. similar/ordinary) social status will be more effective when followers exhibit high (vs. low) social comparison orientation.

### Method & Result

A 2 (Dissimilar/High vs. Similar/Ordinary influencer social status) X 2 (High vs. Low social comparison orientation) subjects design was conducted through an online survey. The participants who had followed a social media influencer were recruited through Amazon's. Mechanical Turk. Participants were asked to recall one particular influencer that they had viewed most frequently and answered the questionnaire while thinking about the influencer they had identified.

Female consumers (n=193) aged 18 or older and living in the U.S. participated in the study. 2 (Dissimilar/High vs. Similar/Ordinary influencer social status) x 2 (High vs. Low social comparison orientation) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted through SPSS 18.0 software. The effect of influencer social status was insignificant on product attitude ($F(1,189)=1.87$, $p=.17$) and willingness to purchase ($F(1,189)=.19$, $p=.67$), but significant on intimacy ($F(1,189)=4.35$, $p=.04$), interconnectedness ($F(1,189)=9.52$, $p=.00$), admiration ($F(1,189)=4.71$, $p=.03$), and loyalty to the influencer ($F(1,189)=4.56$, $p=.03$). Social comparison orientation showed significant main effects on all dependent variables.

Next, the mediation effects were tested by model 4 in PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). It confirmed that admiration and intimacy mediated the effect of influencer social status on loyalty to the influencer (indirect effect $=.23$, 95% confidence interval [CI], .03 to .47; indirect effect -.16, 95% CI, -.33 to -.01). However, interconnectedness did not mediate this effect (indirect effect -.06, 95% CI, -.14 to .01). Additionally, the interaction effect between influencer social status and social comparison orientation was insignificant on product attitude ($F(1,187)=.10$, $p=.76$), willingness to purchase ($F(1,187)=.02$, $p=.88$), intimacy ($F(1,187)=1.43$, $p=.23$), admiration ($F(1,187)=.2.49$, $p=.12$), but significant on interconnectedness ($F(1,187)=4.33$, $p=.04$) and loyalty to the influencer ($F(1,187)=4.89$, $p=.03$).

### Discussion

Promoting a new or existing brand/product through the use of a social media influencer is a strategy that some companies use to build brand awareness and brand image. This research probed consumer thinking and perceptions regarding two different types of social media influencers. This study found that influencer social status had significant effects on followers' feelings and loyalty to the influencer. The mediation analysis revealed that the influencer with dissimilar/high social status triggered admiration while the influencer with similar social status exerted intimacy. These findings confirm that "ordinary people" promoting a brand on social media can bring a human face to the brand and contribute to the formation of the brand's intimate personality in the mind's eye of the follower. However, the effect of influencer social status was not extended to followers' product evaluation and purchase decision. This finding suggests that influencer marketing is a strategy to cultivate brand relationships rather than direct sales revenue.

Interestingly, participants with low (vs. high) social comparison orientation tend to be loyal to the influencer with similar/ordinary (vs. dissimilar/high y) social status. This finding suggest that across the different types of influencers, with their different social status characteristics, other follower-specific underlying processes and mechanisms should be simultaneously considered to explain the effectiveness of influencer marketing. While this study revealed a piece of the puzzle, future research may use a dual impact approach comprehensively integrating both influencer and follower characteristics as determinants of marketing effectiveness.

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