#  Key aspects of an influencer marketing campaign to draw (or not) followers’ attention to a post’s commercial content

Francisco J. Martínez-López

Professor,

Dept. of Business Administration 1, University of Granada, Spain,

Guest Researcher, EAE Business School, Barcelona, Spain,

Address: Business School, Campus Cartuja s/n, Granada (Spain), 18011

fjmlopez@ugr.es

Rafael Anaya-Sánchez

Assistant Professor,

Dept. of Economy and Business Administration,

Address: Business School, C/ Ejido, 6, 29013 Málaga (Spain)

rafael.anaya@uma.es

Irene Esteban-Millat

Associate Professor of Marketing,

Open University of Catalonia, Barcelona, Spain.

iestebanm@uoc.edu

Harold Torrez-Meruvia

Head of the Methods of Evaluation Area,

EAE Business School, Barcelona, Spain

harold.torrez@eae.es

Steven D’Alessandro

School of Management and Marketing

Charles Sturt University

sdalessandro@csu.edu.au

Morgan Miles

Professor,

School of Management and Marketing

Charles Sturt University

[mmiles@csu.edu.au](file:///D%3A%5CWORK%20DATA%5CWORDFILE%5CRESEARCH%5CJMM%20paper%20with%20Paco%5Cmmiles%40csu.edu.au)

# Abstract

Leveraging social media influencers allows companies to provide information on their products in a more social and interactive way. In recent years, using influencers have become common among businesses of all kinds. This study proposes a theoretical model to explain how perceived brand control over an influencer`s post and the perceived commercial orientation of such a post affect consumer trust in influencers and therefore the credibility of their messages, as well as the way in which interest in the post is created and the purchase decision process is advanced. PLS results of 503 social media followers show that trust of the influencer is reduced more by the post’s perceived commercial orientation than perceived brand control of the influencer’s post, though perceived brand control also reduces the willingness to search for more information. The results also show that trust of the influencer is salient in predicting post credibility, which in turn predicts interest and willingness to search for more information. There is thus a need for social media marketers to balance the utopia of the trust of influencers, with the dystopia of commercial interests being identified in the post.

**Summary statement contribution:**  This paper offers several insights into how consumers perceive an influencer’s post, leading them to display certain response towards companies (trust, interest in the message, start of purchase decision-making process, etc.), which allows us to establish an explanatory theoretical framework.

**Keywords:** influencer marketing, perceived brand control, influencer, perceived commercial orientation, trust, post credibility, social media marketing.

# Key aspects of an influencer marketing campaign to draw (or not) followers’ attention to a post’s commercial content

# 1. Introduction

The use of influencers has given rise to so-called ‘influencer marketing’. Among the innovative marketing strategies, influencer marketing emerges as the most cost effective, as well as the most direct and organic when contacting with potential customers (Lou, Tan & Chen, 2019). Influencer marketing seeks to create favourable WOM (word of mouth) by employing social media users with the ability to influence the behaviour of their large numbers of followers (Petrescu, O’Leary, Goldring, & Mrad, 2018). Influencers are seen as personal and credible sources, and with whom the consumer can relate (Boerman, 2020; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), in addition to their messages having a digital format (Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017). Companies have realized of the potential of working with influencers (Pöyry, Pelkonen, Naumanen & Laaksonen, 2019); firms can reduce brand-related perceived risk and increase brand awareness (Chatterjee, 2011), while at the same time providing their audiences with valuable information (Pang, Tan, Qi Lim, Kwan, & Lakhanpal, 2016). The followers or fans of influencers, however, are increasingly placing their trust in messages shared by their peers when searching for information and deciding which products/services to buy (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Pöyry et al., 2019) and so the trust and independence of influencers is paramount. The importance of influencers depends not only on the number of followers they have, but also on how adequate influencers are for the brand mentioned in their post in terms of experience, congruence with the brand, and credibility, and the strength of their relationship with their followers (e.g., Arora, Bansal, Kandpal, Aswani, & Dwivedi, 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity & Luoma-aho, 2020). Nevertheless, the strength of influencers comes from them not being associated with sponsors, but it is this strength that organisations wish to leverage in the marketplace (Boerman, 2020; Evans et al., 2017). It seems there is a dance of seduction between marketers, influencers and their social networks. On one hand it involves perceived independence, the credibility of influencers and their affiliation to an issue or brand, and on the other, the need for influencer posts to be in step with the brand and commercial outcomes of the social media marketer (see Boerman, 2020; Pöyry et al., 2019).

The use of influencers as brand ambassadors, creating sponsorized content with the company (Boerman, 2020) has led to an increase in investment in this strategy. It is expected that 63% of companies will increase their budget in influencer marketing during 2020 (The Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020); it would come after another increase of 59% the previous year (Rakuten Marketing, 2019). This tendency could take the influencer marketing industry to reach an estimated value of 15 billion dollars in 2022, starting at 8 billion dollars in 2019 (Businessinsider, 2019). In terms of return on investment, companies get 5 dollars of benefits for every invested dollar (The Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Also, 80% of marketers consider influencer marketing-related actions are effective, and 89% point out that ROI is comparable or even better than other marketing actions (Mediakix, 2019). Furthermore, 69.4% of influencers recognize that they are profit-oriented (TapInfluence & Altimeter, 2019). Thus, with many companies aiming to enhance their competitive edge thanks to the use of influencer programmes (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Trivedi & Sama, 2020), there is a need to understand not only the influencer campaigns, but what to avoid with an increasingly jaded and sceptical follower base (Lin, Swarna & Bruning, 2017; Petrescu et al., 2018).

Although companies are gradually abandoning their efforts in traditional celebrity endorsements in favor of social media influencers (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019), influencer marketing literature is scarce and based on previous theory of endorsement (e.g., Lou & Yuan, 2019 ; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Shan et al., 2019). The development of influencer marketing's own literature (eg De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova et al., 2017) has not yet allowed extensive knowledge on the key mechanisms that make it effective (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2019), as well as on its effects on the consumer (Shan, Chen & Lin, 2019). Understanding these mechanisms is currently fundamental. The right choice of influencers and the correct management of their contents show effects on emotional relationships with consumers (Trivedi & Sama, 2020), and might have other benefits for the brand, like better attitudes towards it or purchase intentions (Evans et al., 2017). At the same time, influencers themselves would ideally have to know the effects of their posts in order to adapt content and make it more persuasive (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). In this sense, the credibility of the message issued and the confidence in the influencer are considered key variables in the success of influencer marketing actions (De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014). Brands and influencers must make an adequate negotiation of the content created and shared, maintaining quality criteria, but at the same time being able to show positive commercial effects for the brand, without losing the authenticity and credibility of the message and sender (Gannon & Prothero, 2018; Pöyry et al., 2019; Stubb, Nyström & Colliander, 2019).

This research aims to improve knowledge about the effects that both brand control and the commercial orientation of the influencer’s message have on trust in the influencer and the credibility of his/her message. Previous studies have shown that the disclosure of a commercial purpose when sharing content negatively affects credibility (see De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017), but they have not approached the effects of perceived brand control and commercial orientation on trust in the influencer and credibility of his/her message. In turn, although effects of the credibility of the influencer's message on attitudes and buying intentions have been analyzed (see Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Xiao, Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2018), effects on pre-purchase aspects, such as the interest of the message, which might take consumers to start a product-related search process, have been ignored. This study aims to discuss and analyze these aspects.The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: firstly, it presents the proposed model and its hypotheses, explaining the creation of trust in the influencer and of a post’s credibility, as well as their effects on followers’ attention. Subsequently, it describes the methodology followed in the study and its results. Lastly, the conclusion includes a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications, the study’s limitations, and some future research suggestions.

# 2. background

The novelty of the study of influencer marketing means that there is no consolidated theoretical body yet, as well as the absence of a widely accepted definition (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Brown and Hayes (2008) gave a first approximation, pointing out that they are individuals who are similar to consumers and have a direct impact on their behaviors. De Veirman et al. (2017, p.1) define them as “people who built a large network of followers, and are considered as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches”. In this way, they are content generators, with the status of experts who have created a network of followers that they influence through valuable content through social media (Ge & Gretzel, 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019), and are considered as a credible source of information (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Schouten et al., 2019).

The literature on influencer marketing has studied various topics so far. A first group of works have focused on identifying aspects to consider an influencer as appropriate. Indexes have been proposed that help to find niches of influencers using variables such as engagement (shares, comments, etc.), number of posts, footprints, etc. (see Arora et al., 2019). Similarly, De Veirman et al. (2017) employed variables such as the number of followers, the number of influencer follows, cooperation with other influencers, etc., in order to establish the greatest likeability of each influencer, as well as their effects on the consumer. On the other hand, there is a group of works focused on niche themes. Among them, the following could be highlighted: the effects of influencer marketing on the strategic decision and communication process of companies are studied (Enke & Borchers, 2019); the use of influencer marketing as a favorable environment for the generation of Communities of Practice (Gannon & Prothero, 2018); the use of emerging languages and changes in communication standards (Ge & Gretzel, 2018); the creation of tribes between influencers and followers (Mardon, Molesworth & Grigore, 2018); or the role of the audience in the success of a influencer marketing strategy (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

A third research group focuses on a sponsorship disclosure. Boerman (2020) verified that disclosure affects the recognition of the commercial intention of the message, negatively affecting brand recall and engagement with posts. Similarly, Evans et al. (2017) studied the effects of disclosure on ad recognition, influencing the attitude towards the brand and the intention to share the message. Stubb et al. (2019) studied the influencer's strategy of trying to justify the realization of sponsored content, called “compensation justification disclosure”. Its results highlight that this strategy positively affects consumer attitudes, increasing the credibility of the message.

The broadest group of works analyzes how positive attitudes and behaviors are generated in the consumer from influencer marketing actions. In this sense, Lou et al. (2019) have confirmed that higher levels of engagement and consumer sentiments are obtained in influencer promoted messages than in brand promoted ads. Similarly, Schouten et al. (2019) have set that consumer trusts and feels more identified with an influencer than with a celebrity endorser, improving the effectiveness of the message. Along the same lines, Trivedi and Sama (2020) have compared celebrity vs. expert influencers, using variables such as brand admiration and brand attitude and their effects on purchase intentions. Pöyry et al. (2019) has observed the effect that the authenticity and attractiveness of the influencer have on buying attitudes and intentions. On the other hand, the study by Shan et al. (2019) has showed that the congruence between influencer and brand, and parasocial identification affect the attitude towards the brand, engagement and purchase intentions.

Related to consumer attitudes, the study of trust and credibility in influencers and their messages stands out. For example, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) investigated the impact of Instagram on source credibility, consumer buying intention and social identification. On Twitter, Jin and Phua (2014) studied how the number of followers affected source credibility and WOM. Jin, Maquddam and Ryu (2019) has recently showed that consumers rely more on messages issued by Instagram influencers than on traditional celebrities, showing a more positive attitude towards the brand. On the other hand, Lou and Yuan (2019) has verified that the confidence in the post of an influencer is increased thanks to the value of the content, its attractiveness and the similarity with its followers. The work of Sokolova and Kefi (2019) showed that the parasocial interaction of the audience and credibility have a positive influence on purchase intention. Finally, Xiao et al. (2018) studied the positive effect that informational cues have on the credibility assessments of content created by influencers on YouTube.

In sum, based on the literature review above, it is clear the importance of aspects such as the consumer's perception of the commercial purpose of the influencer, trust in the influencer and credibility of his/her message which our model considers. In particular, it is made up of six perceptual variables present in every influencer marketing campaign: two exogenous constructs (perceived brand control over the influencer’s post and the post’s perceived commercial orientation), and four endogenous variables (trust in the influencer, post/message credibility, interest of the post’s content, and willingness to search for more information about the post’s products/services) that both influencers and brands need to take into account when designing or assessing such a programme.

# 3. hypotheses DISCUSSION

## 3.1. Trust in the influencer

Many theoretical studies on celebrity endorsement focus on trust in the celebrity conveying the message (Jiang, Huang, Wu, Choy, & Lin, 2015). Trust, in the context of celebrity endorsement, can be defined as the degree to which a message’s audience perceives the sender (celebrity) as being able to convey a sense of integrity, honesty and credibility by means of a marketing medium (Tripp, Jensen, & Carlson, 1994; Wang, Kao, & Ngamsiriudom, 2017). Trust in the celebrity has been shown to be linked to a more positive attitude towards the sponsored message (Wang, Kao & Ngamsiriudom, 2017). The use of social media has increased the use of celebrity endorsement, as it can be dealt with in a more natural and believable way than in other media (Boerman, 2020). This is why literature indicates that there is more trust in influencers than in other figures (Kiss & Bichler, 2008), since they are, in many ways, similar to their followers (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014) and are regarded as authentic (Petrescu et al., 2018) and accessible (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The web ‘2.0’ social media context also allows consumers to control their own search for information and purchasing experiences, creating and sharing information and content on products and brands (Wu, Wang, Wei, & Yeh, 2015). This has led some companies to lose control over their brand’s image (Booth & Matic, 2011; Copulsky & Saia, 2016), creating a problem for many brands unprepared for this (Vernuccio & Ceccotti, 2015). Accordingly, brands may attempt to manage the online conversations taking place about their products (Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan, & Switzer, 2008) through the use of influencers, leveraging their greater credibility. Influencers are perceived as independent (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011) and their messages are considered genuine and not manipulated by the brand (Evans et al., 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014). However, in many cases, the company provides the content or message to be shared, indicating hashtags, timing, keywords, etc. (Copulsky & Saia, 2016), so that the original content does not actually come from the influencer. The main reason for this is to control both the information conveyed by the influencer regarding the brand and to prevent possible crises in its image (Jiang et al., 2015).

Existing literature on the control of content on brands on the Internet recommends that companies participate in conversations as equals with other members of the brand community (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013), ceding some control to the consumer (Bal, Weidner, Hanna, & Mills, 2017). Also, increasing brand control of the content shared by influencers may end up creating a feeling among consumers that the information is biased and inauthentic (Woods, 2016). This would give rise to negative attitudes towards the issuer of the message, in this case, the influencer (Hwang & Jeong, 2016), with the public losing trust in him or her. Por ello, es necesario mantener un balance entre el control y la creatividad y libertad del influencer (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). This gives rise to our first research hypothesis:

H1: The greater the brand/sponsor’s control over the content of the influencer’s post, the less trust followers will have in the influencer.

Content is one of the key aspects in the relationship between brands and followers (Rosenthal & Brito, 2017). This is why influencers can act as important players in the creation of information on brands (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Stubb et al., 2019). Many companies have paid to obtain positive reviews on online review sites (Lee & Koo, 2012). They also pay for influencers to create content favourable to the company or to share other content created directly by the brand (Chatterjee, 2011). But this creates doubt in the mind of the consumer as to the trustworthiness of the influencer’s opinion, not to mention their impartiality (Stubb et al., 2019); giving rise to scepticism (Boerman, Willemsen & Van Der Aa, 2017). Consumers, therefore, want influencers to make recommendations and share their real opinion about brands (Petrescu et al., 2018). This situation has led some countries to impose a legal obligation to disclose whether content is sponsored or not (Boerman et al., 2017; Hwang & Jeong, 2016). In other cases, some influencers, at their own initiative, affirm that their opinion is honest, even if the post is sponsored (Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Stubb et al., 2019). Even a public, but disingenuous, non-commercial orientation would lead consumers to purchase the recommended products more than if they perceived a commercial intent (Boerman et al., 2017; Sammis, Lincoln, & Pomponi, 2016; Shan et al., 2019).

Existing literature demonstrates the desire of influencers to create and share commercial posts in exchange for consideration, even if, in such cases, consumers display negative attitudes towards this content (Chatterjee, 2011; Petrescu et al., 2018) due to the reduced credibility of the celebrity sharing them (Boerman, 2020; Hwang & Jeong, 2016). Therefore, the commercial purpose behind content shared by the influencer has a negative effect on consumers’ perceptions of the influencer (Petrescu et al., 2018; Uribe, Buzeta, & Velásquez, 2016), reducing his or her credibility and trust (Hwang & Jeong, 2016). Therefore:

H2: The greater the commercial orientation of the influencer’s post, the less trust followers will have in the influencer.

## 2.2. Post credibility

A message’s credibility is defined as the extent to which consumers perceive an online source of information as being impartial, believable and factually based (Koo, 2016), which is an individual assessment of the trustworthiness of its content (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). The characteristics of the source of information, the message and the recipients themselves have an impact upon this perception (Filieri, 2016). Therefore, if consumers do not regard a message as credible, they become resistant to attempts at persuasion (Lee & Koo, 2012).

One concept associated with the above and which can be used to analyse the objectivity and usefulness of the message is balanced messages—that is if the message covers both the strengths and weaknesses of the product or brand discussed (Hwang & Jeong, 2016). These latter messages can be used to partially offset the effect of sponsorship disclosure (Hwang & Jeong, 2016) and are regarded as more credible than one-sided ones (Uribe et al., 2016). The fact that consumers believe the message to be authentic, and they can therefore regard it as credible, is important, as this affects the audience’s attitudes and behaviour.

In this regard, the electronic word-of-mouth messages (eWOM) created in conversations, rather seeded eWOM, based on peer recommendations are regarded as being free of commercial intent and manipulation and more trustworthy than others with commercial intent (De Veirman et al., 2017; Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Nevertheless, brands may attempt to control the messages issued by the endorsers and influencers they hire, to avoid certain risks or problems with the image they want to convey for the product. If consumers detect that this is taking place, they will perceive the message as being less authentic (Woods, 2016) and as including information biased in the company’s interest (Uribe et al., 2016). This will obviously affect the message’s credibility (Carl, 2008) and the way in which consumers react to it (Hwang & Jeong, 2016). Additionally, this will affect consumer opinion of all the messages issued by the influencer, impacting negatively on his or her own image and credibility (Woods, 2016). Thus:

H3: The greater the brand/sponsor’s control over the content of the influencer’s post, the less credible followers will perceive the post to be.

Similarly, any concealment of a commercial relationship between an influencer and a brand, established through sponsorship, may be difficult for consumers to detect. This may lead them to think that the influencer’s or endorser’s opinion is sincere and genuine, inciting greater acceptance of the latter’s commercial intent (Boerman et al., 2017; Sammis et al., 2016). In any case, when a commercial intent is perceived, the credibility of both the influencer (Hwang & Jeong, 2016) and the message (Boerman, 2020) is affected. To keep followers from becoming sceptical and not accepting the message (Uribe et al., 2016), influencers declare that their opinion is honest (Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Stubb et al., 2019). This is because consumers have more trust in honest, proven messages with no (apparent) commercial intent (Jung, Walsh-Childers, & Kim, 2016; Koo, 2016), and in messages issued by influencers considered to have similar interests and no connection with the companies (De Veirman et al., 2017). When there is clear commercial intent, the messages become less useful (Petrescu et al., 2018), as their content is a worse fit with the audience’s real interests (Zhang, Moe, & Schweidel, 2017). To improve message acceptance and achieve higher levels of commitment and acceptance, the message must focus on brand-related information and opinions, not on encouraging sales (Boerman, 2020; Uribe et al., 2016). Therefore:

H4: The greater the commercial orientation of the influencer’s post, the less credible followers will perceive the post to be.

Another issue to consider regarding credibility involves the role played by the originator. The message’s credibility is strongly influenced by the trust that the recipient places in the source of the information (Evans & Clark, 2012; Filieri, 2016), because perceptions about the communicator impact the persuasion and perception of messages in audiences (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). In this regard, information shared by other consumers who are influential on social media is regarded as independent and valid (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Additionally, the information received by those with whom they are weakly linked with is regarded as less credible (Koo, 2016). Nevertheless, influencers *do* establish links with their followers, which would increase trust. This fact makes their information more credible than that offered by other sources such as brands or celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). So, brands try to choose trusted influencers to enhance the credibility of the message sent through them (Enke & Borchers, 2019) and thereby ensure that the message is more effective due to being better accepted (Jin et al., 2019; Shan et al., 2019). In this sense, previous studies propose that trust in the influencer positively influences the confidence of his followers towards his/her messages about brands (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Xiao et al., 2018).This leads to hypothesis 5:

H5: The greater the followers’ trust in the influencer, the greater the perceived credibility of the influencer’s post by followers.

## 2.3. Interest of the post content

Content’s interest is the degree to which someone regards the information as of interest to them, thus making them more willing to read it (Chen, Shang, & Li, 2014). This variable is closely linked to the relevance of the information and with other aspects such as fun and pleasure (see Chen et al., 2014). Influencers messages offer content that attracts consumers’ attention, giving rise to cognitive responses that lead to higher levels of persuasion (Chen et al., 2014). This turns them into engaging content that affects consumer behaviour, in terms of both purchasing processes and recommendations, appealing to either rational or emotional components (Chen et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2017).

Through social media, brands attempt to meet the challenge of keeping their followers interested in their content and engaged with their messages (Rosenthal & Brito, 2017). Consumers show a greater tendency to engage and interact with messages issued by influencers than by the brands themselves (Lou et al., 2019). This is due to the fact that influencers generate user-oriented content, based on their experience and with honesty (Arora et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2017; Schouten et al., 2019), which makes messages more acceptable and interesting to consumers. Credible messages reduce consumers’ resistance to such messages (De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). In particular, credibility of messages by other consumers (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009) and influencers (Lou & Yuan, 2019) has a significant impact on both their persuasive power and consumer attitudes (Xiao et al., 2018), establishing a relationship between perceived truthfulness in the message's fit and audience interest (Stubb et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017). Hence:

H6: The greater the degree of perceived credibility in the influencer’s post among followers, the greater their interest in the post’s content.

## 2.4. Willingness to search for more information about the posted product

The use of influencers has a great effect on how information is disseminated and how behaviours y attitudes spread through social media (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Shan et al., 2019). This is due to the way in which consumers are currently affected by information received via WOM, the most influential source of information (Roelens, Baecke, & Benoit, 2016). This has led companies’ use of WOM programmes based on other consumers’ recommendations to become commonplace on social media (Roelens et al., 2016). As such, consumers seek information received from other people through recommendations (Hajli, Sims, Zadeh, & Richard, 2017).

The first thing that consumers do when facing a purchase process, online or not, is to seek out relevant information, processing it to help them spend less time on evaluating products of interest to them (Wu et al., 2015); they try to just consider accurate information (Petrescu et al., 2018). In this way, the purpose of the search for information is to give sense to things about which people are forming an opinion (Hajli et al., 2017). This process is affected not only by personal circumstances (e.g., experience), but also situational (e.g., purchasing context) and external ones; such as the information supplied by others (Utkarsh, 2017), which has been favored by the large networks of consumers available in social media (Stubb et al., 2019). In the case of influencers, one of a company’s objectives will be for consumers to embark upon a purchase decision-making process after receiving information from the influencer (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Pöyry et al., 2019), thereby bringing about a search for more information on the product. This information must also be consistent with that already in the consumer’s possession, to enhance its acceptance by its recipients (Petrescu et al., 2018).

Consumers may exercise passive control over information, ignoring that which is uninteresting or irrelevant (Wu et al., 2015). Influencers and other opinion leaders, however, contact their public by means of suggestions regarded as being of interest to their audiences, encouraging followers to find out more information and, in the end, purchase the product (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996; Schouten et al., 2019). Thus, to start the purchase process by searching for more information, the content generated by the influencer must arouse the interest of the consumer (Lou & Yuan, 2019). So, posts need to be interesting for consumers to show behaviour that is more engaged with the brand (Lin et al., 2017) and to encourage them to find out more about the recommended products (Chen et al., 2014). Therefore, we propose one final hypothesis for our model:

H7: The greater the followers’ interest in the influencer’s post content, the greater their willingness to search for more information about the product/service mentioned in the post.

Figure 1 depicts the full model with the hypothesised relationships.

Figure 1:

Conceptual Model

Trust in the influencer

Perceived brand control over the influencer’s post

H1(-)

Post’s perceived commercial orientation

Interest in the

post

Willingness to search for + info rel. to prod./serv.

Post credibility

H2(-)

H3(-)

H4(-)

H5(+)

H6(+)

H7(+)

H5(+)

# 3. Methodology

## 3.1. Sampling criteria and method

The survey was conducted in November and December 2017 following a non-probabilistic sampling method. Study participants had to be habitual social media network users—particularly Instagram—and women, in line with the women’s beauty product featured in the post used in the study. It was not a prerequisite to be a follower of any influencers, although the subjects did have to be familiar with the kind of messages shared by them. In this regard, the percentage of respondents who followed influencers daily stood at 59.2%, with a great variety of different profiles, including both celebrities and micro-influencers, and encompassing a wide range of subjects (beauty, sports, fitness, humour, music, film, etc.).

## 3.2. Questionnaire: measures and pretest

The questionnaire was drawn up on the basis of the information shown in Appendix 2, which shows the scales used to measure the model’s constructs in detail. All the study’s items were measured using 7-point rating scales.

Before the survey stage, we performed a pre-test with 20 female undergraduate students to appropriately adapt the questionnaire, making sure that it was understandable. The pre-test also helped in choosing the post that we would finally use for the study. The criteria for selecting the post were that there was a lack of prior knowledge of the influencer to avoid biasing the results if the respondent had a pre-established image of the individual, and that it involved a sector of which the sample’s target public had knowledge, so they would regard it as normal that promotion was being carried out via this type of opinion leader. The post chosen was a simulation shared by a fictitious influencer (Ciara Bell, @ciarabellworld), specialised in sharing and creating beauty brand-related content. To guarantee the realism of the post’s image, its picture (see Appendix 1) was obtained from the profile of Instagrammer Grace Abbott (@agraceabbott), a micro-influencer who is focused on this sector.

## 3.3 Data collection and sample

Participants were recruited among university students, following the sampling criteria, at the business school at the University of Malaga (Spain). To increase the participation ratio, potential participants were told that respondents would be entered into a draw to receive 50 euros. The questionnaire was taken in person in a computer lab, using computers to show the post used in the study. The process was introduced and supervised by one of the researchers. This meant it was possible to guarantee the time needed to review the post, and to resolve any doubts that arose. Participants were asked to answer a questionnaire based on a post they viewed previously.

The total number of valid questionnaires was 503. Also, 91.1% of respondents stated that they were studying for a bachelor’s degree, with ages ranging mainly between 20 and 23 (84.5%). Also, 89.3% was mainly dedicated to study, while 10% combined their studies with work; 72.8% of the respondents had no income of their own and were supported by their families, 16.7% had an income lower than € 6,000 annually, and only 10.5% earned more thatn € 6,000 annually. As for the social networks that they used mostly when following influencers, Facebook and Instagram were in first place (82.5 and 81.7% respectively), followed by YouTube (48.7%) and Twitter (21.3%).

# 4.0 Results

## 4.1 Measurement model

Partial Least Squares (PLS) path modelling was used to simultaneously estimate both the measurement and structural components of the model. PLS is a component based structural equation modelling technique that has advantages over covariance modelling (Slotegraaf & Dickinson, 2004). There are many precedents for the use of PLS in recent marketing studies (Anderson & Swaminathan, 2011; Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012; Hennig-Thurau, Henning, & Sattler 2007). PLS is a variance-based technique, which can deal well with issues of formative versus reflective measures and moderation effects and can include categorical variables. PLS is not constrained by identification issues, even in complex models (Hair et al., 2012). Maximisation of variance explained (or R2 values) in all dependent variables is the primary objective of PLS (Hulland, 1999).

Measurement model details are shown in Table 1, and the structural model was analysed using PLS software Warp PLS 6.0 (Knock, 2017). This model simultaneously estimates the parameters of the structural model and the psychometric properties of the measurement model and provides detailed information about both the direct and indirect path relationships between the variables considered. Measures for this study were developed by procedures as recommended by Gefen and Straub (2005), where all standardised factor loadings onto constructs had to be greater than 0.70 and have significant t-values. All measures met the cut-off of 0.50 on the average variance extracted (AVE) as recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981); Cronbach Alpha reliabilities were above the recommended point of 0.70.

# Table 1:

Details of the Measures Used in this Study

| Variables |
| --- |
| Scale and items: weights (w) and loadings (L) of latent constructs  | Measurement Statistics |
| Std.Factor Loading | Weight | Mean(SD) |
| **Brand control** |  |  |  |
| (3 items, Cronbach α = 0.79, AVE=0.71). |  |  |  |
| The brand/sponsor of the posted product/service supervises the content created by the influencer. | 0.83 | 0.39 | 4.89 (1.67) |
| The information that the influencer wishes to share with his/her followers must first be filtered by the brand/sponsor of the posted product/service. | 0.83 | 0.39 | 4.54 (1.74) |
| The brand/sponsor of the posted product/service controls the flows of information and content between the influencer and his/her followers. | 0.87 | 0.36 | 4.43 (1.77) |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Post commercial orientation** (5 items, Cronbach α = 0.92, AVE=0.69). |  |  |  |
| The post shared by the influencer tries to sell rather than to inform. | 0.83 | 0.24 | 4.95 (1.70) |
| The post shared by the influencer applies pressure to get followers to buy the product/service.  | 0.71 | 0.21 | 3.96 (1.72) |
| The post shared by the influencer tries to convince followers to buy, not to satisfy his/her followers’ need for information. | 0.89 | 0.26 | 4.62 (1.68) |
| The post shared by the influencer is more focused on persuading followers to buy than on their true information interests. | 0.90 | 0.26 | 4.69 (1.64) |
| The post shared by the influencer stretches the truth when describing a product/service. | 0.81 | 0.24 | 4.52 (1.65) |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Trust in the influencer** |  |  |  |
| (3 items, Cronbach α = 0.92, AVE=0.86). |  |  |  |
| The influencer is trustworthy. | 0.92 | 0.36 | 3.92 (1.25) |
| The influencer is honest. | 0.92 | 0.37 | 3.70 (1.40) |
| The influencer is reliable. | 0.94 | 0.36 | 3.75 (1.34) |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Post credibility** |  |  |  |
| (3 items, Cronbach α = 0.92, AVE=0.86). |  |  |  |
| Not reliable/reliable. | 0.92 | 0.36 | 3.79 (1.44) |
| Not credible/credible. | 0.94 | 0.36 | 3.72 (1.53) |
| Not believable/believable. | 0.92 | 0.37 | 3.85 (1.41) |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Interest of the post’s content**(3 items, Cronbach α = 0.95; AVE=0.88). |  |  |  |
| I am interested in its content. | 0.93 | 0.35 | 4.32 (1.50) |
| I like the post. | 0.94 | 0.36 | 4.19 (1.52) |
| I have a good impression of the shared content. | 0.92 | 0.36 | 4.20 (1.52) |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Willingness to search for more information about the product in the post**.(3 items, Cronbach α = 0.92; AVE=0.79). |  |  |  |
| I think I will search for information about the posted product/service. | 0.88 | 0.37 | 4.69 (1.64) |
| I think I will search for online word of mouth about the posted product/service. | 0.90 | 0.38 | 4.87 (1.57) |
| I think I will compare prices of the posted product/service. | 0.88 | 0.37 | 4.86 (1.59) |

Note: S.D. = Standard Deviation; AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

To confirm that the different latent variables extracted a higher share of variance from their own indicators than from other latent variables, we tested for discriminant validity among the various constructs. The square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) by each of the latent variables as shown in the diagonal of Table 2 is higher than the correlation between the latent variable and all the other latent variables, which provided evidence of discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981). A further examination of the cross-loadings of items also confirmed that there was evidence of convergent validity. This was shown by all items loading highly on to their respective constructs, but not to cross-load onto other constructs, most cross-loadings being around 0.1 to 0.2. In addition, we tested for collinearity between the variables. All variables exhibited a variance inflation factor (VIF) of between 2.66 (Trust of the Influencers) and 1.38 (Brand control of the post) with an average VIF of 1.30. These measures are well within the suggested acceptable range of 3.3 or lower of evidence of multicollinearity and common bias method (Kock & Lynn, 2012). Once the measurement model was satisfactory (Hock, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2010), we proceeded to evaluate the structural model.

Table 2:

Correlations between constructs

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | BranCont | Trust\_In | Cred\_ps | Commer | Interes | Willing |
| BranCont |  **0.84** | -0.30\*\* | -0.20\*\* |  0.51\*\* | -0.11\* | -0.18\*\* |
| Trust\_In |  -0.30\*\* |  **0.93** |  0.72\*\* | -0.54\*\* |  0.57\*\* |  0.48\*\* |
| Cred\_ps |  -0.20\*\* |  0.72\*\* |  **0.93** | -0.46\*\* |  0.58\*\* |  0.39\*\* |
| Commer |  0.51\*\* | -0.54\*\* | -0.46\*\* |  **0.83** | -0.31\*\* | -0.25\*\* |
| Interes | -0.11\* | 0.57\*\* |  0.58\*\* | -0.31\*\* |  **0.94** |  0.52\*\* |
| Willing |  -0.18\*\* | 0.48\*\* |  0.39\*\* | -0.25\*\* |  0.52\*\* |  **0.89** |

Note: \* = p<0.05, \*\* = p<0.01. Note: Square root of average variances extracted (AVEs) shown on diagonal in bold. BrandCont, Brand Control, Trust\_In, Trust in the influencer, Cred\_ps, Post credibility, Commer, Commercial orientation of the post, Inters, Interest in the post’s content, Willing, Willingness to search for more information about the product in the post. N=503

## 4.2 Structural model

As shown in Figure 2, the results supported H1 (brand control of the post leads to less trust of the influencer, β=0.07, p<0.05), H2 (commercial orientation of the post leads to less trust in the influencer, β=-0.50, p<0.01), H4 (commercial orientation of the post is associated with less credibility of the post, β=-0.12, p<0.01), H5 (trust in the influencer leads to belief in greater credibility of the post, β=0.67, p<0.01), H6 (creditability of the post positively predicts interest of the post, β=0.59, p<0.01) and H7 (interest in the post predicts willingness to search for more information, β=0.51, p<0.01).

Support was not found for H3 (brand control of the post negatively predicts credibility of the post, β=-0.06, n.s), though the path is in the right direction. Overall the model predicts quite well the credibility of the post (R2=0.55), and to some extent the interest in the post (R2=0.35) and does a reasonable job in the prediction of trust in the influencer and willingness to search for more information (R2=0.29 for both). The goodness of fit index of the model (GOF), derived from prediction and measurement fit (Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Esposito, Chatelin, & Lauro, 2005), was 0.54, which was greater than the acceptable large fit of the model to the data of 0.36.

Figure 2.

PLS Path model

β1= -0.07\*

Trust in the influencer

(R2 = 0.29)

Perceived brand control over the influencer’s post

Post’s perceived commercial orientation

Interest in the

post

(R2 = 0.35)

Willingness to search for more info related to product/service

(R2 = 0.29)

Post credibility

(R2 = 0.55)

β3= -0.06 , n.s

β2= -0.50 \*\*

β4= -0.12 \*\*

β5= 0.67 \*\*

β6= 0.59 \*\*

β7= 0.51 \*\*

Note: \* = p<0.05, \*\* = p<0.01, GoF=0.543.

# 5. Discussion and Conclusion

## 5.1 Theoretical implications

Research on the key mechanisms that lead to successful influencer marketing campaigns requires further study (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2019). So far, work has been carried out that indicates benefits in its use such as purchase intentions, the ability to persuade the message issued or improve attitudes towards the brand (see Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Xiao et al., 2018). Other works have focused on the importance of trusting both influencers and their messages (eg De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014), or on the negative effects of disclosure and commercial intentions that could be related to influencer marketing (eg Shan et al., 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019; Stubb et al., 2019). However, there are no works that combine these lines of research, so that the relationships between the perception of a commercial orientation of an the influencer’s message, and trust in the source and the message can be approached as a whole in the specific context of influencer marketing. This paper offers several insights into how consumers perceive an influencer’s post, leading them to display certain responses towards companies (trust, interest in the message, start of purchase decision-making process, etc.), which allows us to establish an explanatory theoretical framework. The results obtained help us fill these gaps in our knowledge on consumer attitudes and behaviour.

First, we conclude the negative influence that the two variables proposed to measure the effects of disclosure on consumer perception (perceived brand control over the influencer's and post's perceived commercial orientation) have on trusting the source and his/her message used in actions of influencer marketing; in particular, a perceived commercial orientation of the message shows greater negative effects than those of perceived brand control. This shows that consumers penalise this kind of message, as they regard it as insincere, possibly due to the impression that the influencer is not acting in accordance with his or her beliefs but is instead prioritising economic profit over creating useful content for followers, thus giving rise to resistance to messages. These results are in line with other similar ones offered by the influencer marketing literature (e.g. Boerman et al., 2017; Boerman, 2020; Shan et al., 2019).

We also find evidence of a less negative relationship between a brand’s control over an influencer and trust of the influencer and the message’s credibility.This could be explained by consumers largely accepting the content shared by influencers, showing great trust in them and their criteria for deciding which brands to promote or not. So, they tolerate somewhat that the brand may have some control over their recommendations, but they presume that influencers will always act according to their convictions, and in accordance with their followers’ interests. These results contradict those obtained by previous research in the field of endorsement and branding which indicate that the capacity to influence is lost and the message issuer’s status is harmed due to a loss of trust in him or her and the credibility of his or her message (e.g. Evans et al., 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014), ). However, in recent works in the particular context of influencer marketing, it is observed that the audience does not see completely negative that the influencer works with brands, as long as it is perceived a sincere opinion about the posted products (see Boerman, 2020). The differing results in this social media context of influencers show that the links that followers establish with influencers are different from those established with celebrities in the traditional media, having a more favourable attitude and greater trust.

Additionally, our results point to the positive effect that having trust in influencers has on their messages. In other words, in the context of influencer marketing, when there is trust in an influencer, his or her messages have higher credibility levels. These results confirm those obtained by a number of authors (e.g., Borah, 2015; Carr & Hayes, 2014; Jung et al., 2016) in other fields, but also in influencer marketing (e.g. Lou & Yuan, 2019; Xiao et al., 2018), which establish that if a source is regarded as trustworthy based on its authority, neutrality or level of expertise, this trust embraces the messages it issues..

Similarly, the results confirm that a message’s credibility is a strong predictor, or even a prerequisite, for the interest it attracts. These results are in line with those obtained by a number of authors in the context of messages issued on social media (Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2015; Dobele, Toleman, & Beverland, 2005), by endorsers (Dwivedi & Johnson, 2013) and in online reviews (Koo, 2016; Lee & Koo, 2012), indicating that a message’s credibility gives rise to positive attitudes towards it, such as interest or engagement. It should be also considered that previous research has not focused so much on the interest of the influencer's message, but on its capacity to persuade (e.g. Xiao et al., 2018). But focusing on interest is more appropriate than persuasion, which is closer to traditional endorsement environments in which the commercial orientation is clearer; although in influencer marketing actions it is rather sought a balance between providing interesting content to the audience and brands’ commercial interests (see Stubb et al., 2019).

Lastly, the results confirm the relationship between interest in the message and the intention to seek more information on the product/brand appearing in the post. This relationship has not been the object of direct study in existing literature, although it has considered consumer attitudes towards the advertised brand and purchase intentions (e.g. Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Pöyry et al., 2019; Schouten et al., 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Therefore, this study contributes to better understanding the relationship between influencers and consumers’ decision process, particularly in its initial stage of information search, where influencer marketing actions can have a greater effect.

In closing, the model highlights the importance of trust in both the influencer and his/her message, which causes consumers to be interested in the message and progress to embarking upon the purchase decision-making process, seeking information on the product. There is some negative impact on brand control, but crucially the message must be constructed so that there is no perception of a high degree of commercial orientation, as this would lead to a loss of trust in the influencer, who would appear to be acting against his/her audience’s interests.

## 5.2 Managerial implications

A number of practical recommendations and implications for all practitioners can be extracted from this research. What all these recommendations have in common is the fact that these practitioners need to overhaul the ways in which they engage in conversations about their brands with their customers. Social media has created an environment that permits more interactive and direct communication with customers, shaping a more creative, informal relationship. On the other hand, it has meant that brands have lost a great deal of control over their messages, which are now, in part, created by the brand community on social media.

The feedback, scalability and interactivity of social media, means that not only must influencers be carefully selected, but that the content they post can only be trusted if it is perceived to be free of commercial interests. A degree of brand control tempts fate somewhat, but the main issue is that managers need to yield control somewhat and avoid making “every post a winner” in social media.

Brands in social media, and perhaps in the offline world, may leverage the strong connections with followers established through influencers (Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2018) because of the interest in credible content, but this content can easily be tainted by the advocacy of sponsors.

## 5.3 Limitations and future research

No study is without limitations, and this one is no exception. Firstly, the sample used is not a probability sample and consisted of university students forming part of the ‘millennial’ generation. However, it should be noted that members of this generation are highly active social media users, that the entire sample knew of at least one influencer, with 59.2% of it following at least one daily, and that it has been used in other studies on influencer marketing and endorsement (e.g., McCormick, 2016; Uribe et al., 2016). The reliability of the results could be improved by using a random sample representative of all social media users, and also by not focusing on a single country (Spain).

Secondly, the choice of a single Instagram post (promoting a single product), although guaranteeing avoidance of any risk arising from the use of multiple stimuli, may affect the results obtained. So, future research could use several different posts and/or social media, establishing a comparison between the different samples, allowing for an analysis of whether differences arise depending upon the configuration of the post or the influencer used.

Lastly, future research could include other variables to broaden the scope of the proposed model. For example, the influencer’s persuasive power (Langner, Hennigs & Wiedmann, 2013) or their personality (Zamudio, 2016), the eWOM from followers (Boerman et al., 2017), prior attitudes towards the brand (Doyle, Pentecost & Funk, 2014), brand equity generated (Dwivedi & Johnson, 2013) or clearly specifying that the post is sponsored (Hwang & Jeong, 2016). Likewise, future research could consider the nexus of product adoption and consumer privacy and how that could potentially impact adoption (Miltgen, Henseler, Gelhard, & Popovič, 2016).

To conclude, the dance between social media marketers, influencers and their followers can be a tango more than a waltz, with various parties wishing to show their independence and evoking the trust of others, despite having conflicting interests. Yet the dance can still be enjoyable to those who follow, providing the seduction of commerce is not overt, and the control of the movements is recognised to some extent bus not overpowering.

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**Appendix 1. Post shown to participants in the study**



**Appendix 2. Measurement scales**

These are the measurement scales applied to our model’s constructs. In all cases, 7-point rating scales were used. In some cases, Likert-type scales (1=totally disagree, 7=totally agree) were used and in others differential semantic scales.

*Brand’s degree of control over the post*. We used a 3-item scale validated by Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Molinillo, Aguilar-Illescas and Esteban Millat (2017):

* The brand/sponsor of the posted product/service supervises the content created by the influencer.
* The information that the influencer wishes to share with his/her followers must first be filtered by the brand/sponsor of the posted product/service.
* The brand/sponsor of the posted product/service controls the flows of information and content between the influencer and his/her followers.

*Post commercial orientation*. We adapted the 5-item scale used by Boles, Babin, Brashear, and Brooks (2001) to measure selling orientation:

* The post shared by the influencer tries to sell rather than to inform.
* The post shared by the influencer applies pressure to get followers to buy the product/service.
* The post shared by the influencer tries to convince followers to buy, not to satisfy his/her followers’ need for information.
* The post shared by the influencer is more focused on persuading followers to buy than on their true information interests.
* The post shared by the influencer stretches the truth when describing a product/service.

*Trust in the influencer*. We adapted a 3-item scale recently used by Dwivedi and Johnson (2013), and originally proposed by Ohanian (1990), to assess an endorser’s trustworthiness. In our case we used ‘influencer’ instead of ‘endorser’:

* The influencer is trustworthy.
* The influencer is honest.
* The influencer is reliable.

*Post credibility*. The differential semantic scale used by Lim, Ri, Egan and Biocca (2015) was used to measure message credibility: *How reliable was the information of the influencer’s post you watched?*

* Not reliable/reliable.
* Not credible/credible.
* Not believable/believable.

*Interest of the post’s content*. A scale was adapted from the 3-item scale used by Wei and Lu (2013) to measure interest in a product in an ad: *After reading this influencer’s post*:

* I am interested in its content.
* I like it.
* I have a good impression of the shared content.

*Willingness to search for more information about the product in the post*. We adapted the 3-item scale also used by Wei and Lu (2013) to measure an individual’s intention to search for more information about a product in an ad:

* I think I will search for information about the posted product/service.
* I think I will search for online word of mouth about the posted product/service.
* I think I will compare prices of the posted product/service.