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**HOW ENDORSEMENT STYLES
SHAPE PERCEIVED INFLUENCER AUTHENTICITY**

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ABSTRACT

In the current market, consumers are more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands on social networks. They are more skeptical of the motives behind influencers' endorsements and question whether their reporting about products is not unbiased anymore.

Therefore, brand endorsements come with risks for perceived influencers authenticity¹, and in turn, for the persuasiveness of the brand endorsement itself, as message persuasiveness is indeed seen as a function of inferred communicator biases. Hence, brand marketers and endorsers are striving to reduce attribution of self-serving motives as authenticity management is raising unique challenges. Through the use of attribution theory and its discounting principle, the present research hypothesizes that the language used by an influencer when delivering his/her support about a product ("endorsement style") triggers a cognitive mechanism by which followers infer an intrinsic motivation of the influencer in promoting the product (for instance; his/her belief in the quality of the product), which discounts the inferred extrinsic motive (for instance, financial compensation). This will, consequently, make followers perceive the influencer as more authentic. Results provide support to our formulated hypothesis. Analysis of almost 200 Instagram users demonstrates that individuals perceived the influencer as more authentic when an explicit conditional recommendation ("I recommend this product especially for...") was done compared to an implicit endorsement ("I liked this product").

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction to the managerial issue: research area and research problem

The popularity of influencer marketing has been growing considerably. The global market value of influencer marketing was equal to 13.8 billion US dollars compared to the 9.7 in 2020. From 2016 its market value experienced a 700% increase (Statista, 2021). According to a market research conducted by DeRev Lab and reported in Il sole 24 ore, in Italy the influencer market value reached 280 million euros in 2021, and the growth compared to the previous year was 15%. These data are probably due to a progressive shift of marketing investments from traditional to influencer marketing, as firms are slowly becoming aware that social media

¹ which is defined as a person's engagement in intrinsically motivated and genuine behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018) and, thus, not caused by external pressure (e.g., financial compensation).

marketing enables them to have exponential returns in terms of visibility, especially in the youngest population categories.

According to an article in *Il sole 24 ore* (2021), key sectors are fashion & beauty, which covers almost a third of the entire market (31%), followed by travel, food & lifestyle (18%), which was heavily impacted by the pandemic, and fitness & wellness (15%). Gaming & tech (10%), followed by business & economy (6%), are in comparison still niche markets, but also on the rise as a result of the pandemic. The remaining 20% include all the other sectors, such as culture, sport, and automotive.

There are about 20 million Italians between 18 and 54 who follow at least one influencer² on social media, 37% say they look at their profiles every day, while another 37% every two to three days (Buzzoole, Mondadori, Infovalue, 2021). As mentioned in the Social Media Examiner's 2021 Social Media Marketing Industry Report, social media influencers are often used as a marketing tool to increase commercial exposure: 88% of the marketers surveyed stated that their social media efforts have generated more exposure for their business, almost 80% mentioned an increased traffic, 69% indicated an increase in generated leads³, and 60% declared an improve in sales.

Influencers exert effects on consumers' attitudes, brand perceptions and purchase decisions. A consumer survey conducted in Italy examined influencers' level of incidence in buying propensity. The results pinpointed that 85% of consumers interviewed claim to take the opinions of influencers into consideration when buying a product (Buzzoole, Mondadori, Infovalue, 2021). Interestingly, in a global survey in France, Germany, the UK, Australia and the US that was conducted with online shoppers that are rather active on social media, 41% indicated that they frequently discover new brands and products through influencers, 80% of those also purchased the product directly via the influencer link provided on the social media platform and 88% said that they were at least inspired by the post. Furthermore, 61% indicated that they will click on a sponsored post of an influencer to find out more about the product, while only 39% indicated that they explicitly avoid sponsored posts.

It is important to consider that influencers' impact strongly depends on socio-demographic factors (Rakuten Marketing, 2019). Young consumer groups appear to be particularly receptive to influencer marketing. According to a survey conducted in Italy, around 23% of consumers aged between 18-34 bought a product after an influencer's suggestion in 2019, in contrast with

²Social media influencers are individuals who have managed to build up a digital community of different sizes on social media platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook.

³ namely growing consumer interest for a product or a service with the aim of turning that interest into a sale.

16% of consumers aged between 25-64 and 5% of consumers above the age of 65 (Statista, 2022).

However, until a few years ago social media marketing was not regulated properly, one of the main practices posing risks to consumers was the lack of transparency and unclear disclosure⁴ (Michaelsen et al., 2022). In addition to that, due to the lack of separation between sponsored and entertainment content it is possible that consumers do not acknowledge a sponsored post as advertisement, but rather as a personal recommendation. Consequently, to protect consumers from deceptive advertising and guarantee fair communication practices, regulations by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in the US instruct that commercial messages should always be recognizable as such. At EU level, no specific legislation focusing on influencer marketing is in place, but horizontal legislation on consumer protection applies. In Italy self-regulatory measures are adopted and influencer marketing is treated as advertising as “*any kind of communication, distributed by whatever means qualifies as advertising if it directly or indirectly promotes the sale of goods or services*”, pursuant to the legislative decree 206/2005 integrated into the Italian Consumer Code. In the absence of legislation tailored to influencer marketing, indeed, the Italian Competition Authority (AGCM) has started in 2017 to adapt existing legislation to forms of advertising through social networks.

A managerial issue has risen consequently. Firstly, a large body of literature states this politics of disclosure have consequences on followers’ attitudes towards both the brand and the influencer. Sponsorship disclosure, indeed, (as opposed to hiding it) has a negative effect on consumer attitude towards the brand (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). Secondly, extant literature affirms that fairness and transparency in explicitly disclosing the sponsored character of the content did not lead to negative consumers’ attitudes (Jiang et al., 2017; Carr and Hayes; 2014); however, the obligation for influencers to disclose made the act of disclosing no more a symbol of authenticity and sincerity. Thirdly, the enormous increase of brand endorsements and their consequent disclosure have trained consumers to recognize persuasive content and they now are more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands on social networks, doubting the veridicality and unbiased character of influencers’ content about product endorsements.

⁴ Market practices where influencers do not clearly mention their commercial relationship with a company.

Therefore, brand endorsements come with risks for perceived influencers authenticity⁵, and in turn, for the persuasiveness of the brand endorsement itself, as message persuasiveness is seen as a function of inferred communicator biases (Eagly, Wood & Chaiken, 1978). The key element to read this rising issue is represented by perceived endorsers motives, which are intrinsic in the definition of authenticity. Perceived endorser motive is indeed proved to be a key criteria used by consumers to assess the veridicality of messages and is subsequently a crucial determinant of brand endorsement effectiveness (Carr and Hayes 2014; Djafarova and Rushworth 2017). As we will deepen later, perceived endorser motives find its roots in attribution theory and answer to the question about why a spokesperson promotes a particular product (Rifon et al. 2004). Research about attribution theory, indeed, suggests that as followers realize that influencers' motives are negative (e.g., financial motive) rather than positive (e.g., his/her belief about the product quality), they become increasingly critical of them, which weakens their preexisting attitudinal evaluations worsening their attitude toward influencer (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019; Evans et al., 2017).

Consequently, with the exponential development of influencer marketing, it is necessary to deepen the understanding of SMIs' authenticity management, which influencers can adopt to face tensions due to commercial opportunities.

1.2. Research Gap and research question

A great deal of research has investigated factors that contribute to the effectiveness of influencer marketing across various contexts (e.g., De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth 2017; Lou & Kim, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020) – suggesting some key factors such as the follower-influencer parasocial relationship and influencer characteristics (credibility, authenticity, attractiveness), as well as the effects of advertising disclosure. However, to the best of our knowledge, research about the effects of the language social media influencers (SMIs) use when endorsing a product or declaring their personal approval or support – i.e., endorsement style⁶ – is mainly absent.

⁵ which is defined as a person's engagement in intrinsically motivated and genuine behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018) and, thus, not caused by external pressure (e.g., financial compensation).

⁶ Endorsement style represents the language consumers use when endorsing something or declaring their personal approval or support (Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. "endorse," (accessed March 3, 2015), http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/endorse).

Therefore, through the use of attribution theory and its discounting principle – which will be deepened later –, the present research questions whether the language used by an influencer when delivering his/her support about a product (“endorsement style”) triggers a cognitive mechanism by which followers infer an intrinsic motivation of the influencer in promoting the product (for instance; his/her belief in the quality of the product), which discounts the inferred extrinsic motive (for instance, financial compensation). This should, consequently, make followers perceive the influencer as more authentic. In particular, this research aims to answer the following question: *does the endorsement style adopted by an influencer affect his or her perceived authenticity in the follower’s mind when partnering with brands?*

To answer this question and provide insight into SMIs' authenticity management, we specifically study the beauty domain, which features a proliferation of SMI–brand collaborations and represents the main key sector in the Italian market (Il sole 24 ore, 2021).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing relates to a company’s identification with and use of social media influencers to aid in the marketing activities of the brand (Brown and Hayes, 2008). It can be defined as a marketing strategy that uses the influence of key individuals or opinion leaders to exert influence over potential consumers, leveraging brand awareness and/or their purchasing intention (Brown and Hayes 2008). Usually, it is considered a form of native advertising – which is “*paid advertising that takes the specific form and appearance of editorial content from the publisher itself*” (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016, p. 157). Originally, the figure of the social media influencer (SMI) was pictured as “*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, p. 90). It originated as a social media personality who constantly creates and disseminates useful and organic content within a knowledge domain, projects authentic personae, develops intimate relations with a following of various sizes, and thus wields influence over followers’ purchases and decision making (Lou, 2021). The original figure of social media opinion leader led to the spread of the belief that influencers’ content originated

from ordinary expert consumers – the market mavens⁷ of the digital world – being noncommercial in nature and, thus, more trustworthy than marketer-initiated communication.

Prior work has shown strong relationships between the presence of influencers and greater brand awareness and purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Extant literature states that consumers feel a deeper connectedness toward these persons and perceive them as being more credible and authentic (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen 2010) than the less approachable traditional celebrities. Non-traditional celebrities such as bloggers, YouTube personalities and Instafamous individuals have been found to score higher in terms of source credibility and consumer purchase intention since followers regard them as more credible and more relatable than traditional celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In general, previous researchers have investigated factors that contribute to the effectiveness of influencer marketing across various contexts (e.g., De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth 2017; Lou & Kim, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). They suggested that some of the key factors were influencer credibility, trust in the influencer, and the parasocial relationship between followers and influencers.

Indeed, one of the most defining characteristics of influencers' success is indeed the relationship they are able to build and foster with their followers – parasocial relationship. This particular kind of relationships might be defined as one-sided relationships, where one person (the follower) extends emotional energy, interest and time, and perceives the other party as an intimate friend, while the other party (the influencer) is completely unaware of the other's existence. This kind of relationship is built on carefully crafted foundations of credibility, which are important for influencers to grow their own media brand. It is impossible to deal with influencer marketing without taking into account the power of this relationship. Extant literature states that it mediates the effect of influencer source credibility, influencer content factors, or communication fairness between influencers and followers on followers' materialistic views, purchase intentions, or product interests in influencer-sponsored posts (Lou & Kim, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Moreover, it has been found to significantly impact on followers' behavioral intentions to purchase the products promoted (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). As a consequence, consumers rely on their advice concerning a company's brand and try to imitate influencers which, in turn, increases their purchase intentions (Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu 2019). Most importantly, ad disclosure does not lead to the development of negative feelings

⁷ A market maven is defined as a person who likes to transmit marketplace information of all types and tend to have a solid overall knowledge of how and where to procure the products, in addition to being more confident in their own ability to make smart purchase decisions (Solomon, 2018).

in the case of strong parasocial relationships (Lou, 2021), since they have been proven to negatively influence perceived self-serving (inauthentic) endorser motives (Aw & Chuah, 2021), suggesting that perception of genuine intentions (authenticity) can be more impactful to followers who have a weak relationship, or have not yet developed an intense relationship, with the influencer (Kim & Kim, 2021). In other words, a strong parasocial relationship makes followers question influencers' authenticity less. For this reason, authenticity is particularly crucial at the very beginning of the follower-influencer relationship.

An additional advantage is represented by the higher affordability of influencers, especially micro and nano, compared with the exorbitant fees required to sign one or more renowned celebrity endorsers.

Due to these positive effects, marketers began to draw particular attention to the SMIs world, and to 2018, 75% of advertisers in the US employed social media influencers, creating an industry expected to be worth US \$15 billion by 2022 (Association of National Advertisers, 2018). However, as anticipated in Paragraph 1.1., brand endorsements do not come without risks for both parties, as they undermine the perceived authenticity typical of traditional influencers and, in turn, negatively affect both advertising effectiveness and brand attitudes.

2.2. Attribution Theory

Marketers have long been interested in how individuals assess the veridicality of persuasive messages. Perceived endorser motive is proved to be a key determinant in influencing the effectiveness of brand endorsement (Carr and Hayes 2014; Djafarova and Rushworth 2017). Its roots reside in attribution theory and it refers to consumers' causal inferences or beliefs about why a celebrity or a spokesperson promotes a product (Rifon et al. 2004).

Attribution theory (Bem 1972; Heider 1958; Jones and Davis 1965; Kelley 1967, 1972a 1972b, 1973; Kelley and Michela 1980) explains the cognitive rule by which individuals attribute others' behavior to a cause (McDermott, 2009). Specifically, this theory posits that individuals undergo a two-step process when facing one's behavior. Firstly, they try to infer the motivations for others' behavior on the basis of the information and beliefs they hold ("*antecedents*"). They, therefore, judge a person (in the case of our study, an influencer) to be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. That is, individuals are motivated to act in a certain way for two main causes: 1) personal factors internal to the endorser, 2) situational factors external to the endorser (Heider, 1958). Attribution, indeed, refers to the perception or inference of

cause (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Secondly, the perceived motivation may influence attributors' behavior, affect and expectancies (“consequences”) in response to the actor's behavior. Therefore, attribution theory consists of two different but related processes: attribution and attributional process. Attribution process entails an observer's attribution of intrinsic⁸ or extrinsic⁹ behavioral motivation to a person's action through the systematic assessment of “antecedents”¹⁰ (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Attributional research concerns the consequences¹¹ of the causal attributions made (e.g., behavior, affect and expectancies). Both typologies of research consider causal attributions as having a central role in human behavior (Kelley & Michela, 1980). The mechanisms interplaying are illustrated by an experiment by Thibaut & Riecken (1955). In the procedure, a subject interacted with two other people, one of higher status than the subject (older, at a more advanced educational level) and the other of lower status. As the situation unfolded, it became necessary for the subject to try to induce the other two to help him, and eventually each of them complied with his request. The subject was then asked why each one had complied. Was it for an "internal" reason, because he wanted to, or for an "external" reason, because of the pressure the subject put on him? The results were that the high-status person's compliance was more often thought to occur for the internal reason, and the low status person's compliance for the external reason (Kelley & Michela, 1980). The attribution of different motives can be explained through the information the attributor has at hand when judging the actor. Indeed, certain information about the actor, his/her behavior and the circumstances of its occurrence are used by the subject to infer its cause. For instance, in the experiment it was assumed that a subject (A) decides between an internal and external cause for the other's (B) behavior on the basis of the other's (B) perceived power (high versus low status). The subject assumes that if a vulnerable person (low status) is exposed to an external force, his behavior consistent with the force cannot be attributed to internal factors.

Hence, attribution theory (Bem 1972; Heider 1958; Jones and Davis 1965; Kelley 1967, 1972a 1972b, 1973; Kelley and Michela 1980) is a useful perspective for undertaking the analysis of persuasion. It suggests that the inferences people make regarding the causal nature of a message (a source's behavior) influence their judgments about the accuracy and believability of that message. For causal nature it is intended the source's motives behind the

⁸ motivation that emanates from an individual's innate desires and passions (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018).

⁹ those driven by external pressures such as reward or punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018).

¹⁰ the factors that lead the subject to attribute a particular event to one cause rather than another.

¹¹ Expectancies are formed about which will be the consequences of the actor's behavior.

formulation of the message. In other words, attribution theory suggests that recipients' explanations about why sources advocate particular positions affect their attitudes toward the message and, thus, message persuasiveness (Kelley, 1973). Evidence, indeed, proves that consumers attribute motives to celebrities endorsing products. Typically, there can be found two possible explanations for an endorser's promotion of a product: 1) the endorser's belief in the product qualities (internal motive) and 2) the endorser's financial compensation (external motive) (Sparkman, 1982; Rifon et al., 2004). The cognitive process consumers undergo when observing a spokesperson's endorsement is provided by Kelley's (1973) discounting principle, which states that people discount an explanation if an alternative explanation is present. Therefore, if consumers believe monetary incentives to be the self-serving motive (external) behind a celebrity's endorsement, they subsequently discount the intrinsic motives of the endorser (e.g., his/her liking of the product or altruistic aim to recommend a product) (Rifon et al., 2004), unless perception of internal motives is triggered.

Similarly, in the influencer endorsement context, followers draw causal inferences from influencers' behavior to deem whether their motives are altruistic or self-serving¹² (Shan et al., 2019). When exposed to endorsing advertisements, users investigate the motives behind the influencer's decision to promote a product or a brand and the effectiveness of the endorsement message depends on whether consumers assess these motives to be self-serving (subject to external pressure) or altruistic (internal) (Shan et al., 2019). In other words, when followers infer financial self-serving motives as the motivating factor for product endorsement, they might subsequently discount the intrinsic motive behind the brand endorsement, such as his or her belief in the qualities or features of the product (Shan et al., 2019).

Extant literature has examined the several consequences of perceived endorsers motives and show that attribution of positive motives (e.g., social responsibility motive) leads to a positive effect on brand evaluations (Ruth and Simonin 2006; Speed and Thompson 2000, as cited in Bergkvist et al, 2016). According to a study conducted by Bergkvist et al. (2016), when consumers perceived that the celebrity was motivated to do the endorsement not only by money but also by product quality, this had a significant positive effect on attitude towards the brand. Conversely, the attribution of negative motives, in turn, might create expectations of reporting bias¹³ in the source, and subsequently negatively affects credibility, persuasiveness, purchase

¹² The influencer is believed to endorse a brand for personal benefits as financial compensation.

¹³ Eagly and colleagues (1978) define reporting bias as the expectancy that a communicator's willingness to convey an accurate version of external reality is compromised, usually due to external pressures (for instance, endorser's financial compensation).

intention (Lee et al., 2013; Rein-hard et al., 2006; Aw & Chuah, 2021), and brand evaluations (Tripp et al., 1994), as well as, fostering in the follower a feeling of betrayal or exploitation by the influencer for financial aims. Eagly and Chaiken (1975) proposed that to the extent the position taken in a message can be explained in terms of either a particular characteristic of the communicator or a pressure in the communicator's situation, the message is regarded as providing a relatively nonveridical interpretation of external reality. Such a message should be less persuasive than one accounted for solely in terms of accurate and unbiased reporting. In other words, recipients may suppose that some aspect of a source's personal characteristics or, most importantly, pressure in the current situation are likely to influence the source's behavior: that is, external pressures influence his/her position about a particular issue (or, in our case, a product) by affecting his or her issue-relevant knowledge (*knowledge bias*) or, most importantly for this study, willingness to report a veridical interpretation of external reality (*reporting bias*).

Eagly and colleagues (1978) define knowledge bias as a recipient's belief that a communicator's knowledge about external reality is nonveridical, and reporting bias as the expectancy that a communicator's willingness to convey an accurate version of external reality is compromised, usually due to external pressures (for instance, endorser's financial compensation). When such an expectancy is confirmed by the source actually taking the expected position, message persuasiveness is lowered, and recipients perceive the source as influenced in expressing his/her opinions because of the external pressure she/he is subject to. Reporting-bias is strictly connected to the concept of authenticity as it could be stated that the advertising disclosure make users perceive the source as inauthentic (pushed by external motives), which in turn would elicit expectations of reporting bias in the source's statements. Therefore, reporting-bias should be collocated in the attributional theory, among the consequences of attributions of self-serving motives. Consequently, attribution theory and the discounting principle might be adopted in order to nihilate and prevent potential negative effects of reporting bias expectancy on authenticity. Finally, authenticity could be considered an anticipator of perceived source trustworthiness¹⁴ (unbiased reporting source), since a source pushed by mainly intrinsic motives will not deliver false statements about a product. These suppositions are confirmed and supported by Kim & Kim (2021) which found authenticity to

¹⁴ Eagley et al. (1978) argued that the lowering of message persuasiveness due to confirmation of a reporting-bias expectancy would be accompanied by an inference of *communicator insincerity*. In support of this, in the study conducted the communicator was regarded as considerably less sincere and free to express his opinions as well as more manipulative when he advocated a position that confirmed rather than disconfirmed subjects' expectancies.

have positive impact on trust. Also Martínez-López et al. (2020) provide support by showing that, when a post is perceived as being commercially oriented and controlled by the brand, it leads to lower trust in the SMI.

Therefore, if a SMI is attributed mainly self-serving external motives for making a brand endorsement, this is likely to have a negative effect on brand evaluations. For instance, if the SMI is seen as mainly motivated by monetary incentives, as opposed to actual use and/or liking of the product, this may have a negative effect on brand evaluations. This further emphasizes the importance of perceived endorser's motives and authenticity management.

2.3. Influencer authenticity

After introducing the importance of perceived endorser motive, we suggest that influencers' intentions can explain the concept of authenticity. In sociology, authenticity refers to being true to oneself or to others (Vannini & Franzese, 2008; Zickmund, 2007; Kim & Kim, 2021), and implies sincerity, genuineness, truthfulness, and originality (Molleda, 2010; Kim & Kim, 2021). In influencer marketing, authenticity can be defined as the genuine intention of the influencer, given they can post and recommend any product/service for external compensation (Boerman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). Social media users are therefore aware of the existence of a paid partnership and may be skeptical of the influencer's motives for endorsing the product. Authenticity functions as a criterion that followers adopt to believe that the influencer posting is based on a genuine and unbiased opinion.

More broadly, authenticity refers to a person's engagement in intrinsically motivated behaviors – those that emanate from an individual's innate desires and passions. These behaviors involve the “*active engagement with tasks that [one] finds interesting*” (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018). In contrast, in-authenticity involves engagement in extrinsically motivated behaviors – those driven by external pressures such as reward or punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018) – and often determined by other individuals or groups. Inauthentic actions refer to a “*performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome*” (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 71). In other words, a behavior is perceived as being authentic when it is attributed to internal motivations (that is, when an endorser acts as their true self) as opposed to external pressures (Audrezet et al., 2018; Moulard et al., 2014).

The importance of authenticity is reaffirmed by the crucial role of perceived endorsers motives in message persuasiveness, as the latter is considered a function of inferred communicator biases (Eagly, Wood & Chaiken, 1978), which as anticipated before, are consequence of followers' attribution of negative motives to endorsers' behavior. When viewing an endorsement, indeed, consumers can make attributions via correspondent inferences about the endorser's belief in the product (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). For instance, an endorser might be motivated to endorse a product in accord to 1) their own internal desires and disposition, such as liking for or belief in a product, or 2) responding to the external situation, such as being paid to promote a product (Kapitan et al., 2021).

Following from the definition of authenticity, we might say that consequences of perceived endorser motives correspond to the ones of authentic behavior. Extant literature has examined the effects of inauthentic behavior as well as self-serving perceived endorser motives¹⁵. The effectiveness of SMI endorsements depends on the perceived altruistic (and not self-serving) motivations of the endorser to sponsor the product (Shan et al., 2020). When consumers infer that an endorser is promoting a product merely for compensation, it devalues the endorser's effectiveness and diminishes willingness to pay (WTP) for the endorsed product (Cronley et al., 1999; Folkes, 1988). Moreover, when a post is perceived as being commercially oriented and controlled by the brand, it leads to lower trust of the SMI, lower interest towards the post, and lower willingness to search for more information regarding the endorsed brand (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Indeed, as followers realize that influencers' motives are self-serving and external rather than genuine and internal, they become increasingly critical of them, which weakens their preexisting attitudinal evaluations (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). In addition to that, inauthentic behavior has also effects on credibility: if followers believe that the influencer's content is biased in reporting valid assertions because of a partnership with a brand, the influencer's credibility will be diminished (Djafarova and Bowes, 2020; Stubb et al., 2019). Followers may then begin to believe that the information regularly provided by the influencer is not as genuine as they initially thought and, in turn, generate negative perceptions of the influencer's credibility (De Veirman and Hudders, 2020). Conversely, a study by Pöyry et al. (2019), on sponsored photos on Instagram, showed that perceived authenticity positively influenced follower's attitudes and purchase intentions. Authentic brand endorsements generate the impression that brand partnerships are not necessarily a means for influencers to profit by taking advantage of their followers, but a self-extension opportunity through

¹⁵ Look at Paragraph 2.2. for consequences of perceived endorser motives.

associating with brands the influencer feels enthusiastic about (Audrezet et al., 2018). Because of this, they have been shown to lead to better attitudes towards SMIs, encourage consumers to consider following SMIs and try their product recommendations (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Moreover, recalling what anticipated in Paragraph 2.1., authenticity appears to be relatively important at the very beginning of the follower-influencer relationship, as it sets the basis to a healthy and loyal relationship. Not only it encourages consumers to consider following SMIs (Lee & Eastin, 2021), but also the perception of genuine intention can be more impactful to followers who have a weak relationship, or have not yet developed a deep relationship, with the influencer. A study conducted by Kim & Kim (2021) in the context of influencer marketing showed that authenticity was more important for the weak relationship than for the strong one, suggesting a significant effect of authenticity in the early stage of an influencer-follower relationship. Authenticity, indeed, was demonstrated to have positive impact on trust and, in turn, on loyalty towards the influencer (Kim & Kim, 2021), which is at the basis of parasocial relationships. Therefore, the role authenticity could be said to undergo a life cycle. At the very beginning of the relationship, authenticity is crucial to positively influence trust and in turn loyalty. This sets the basis to the development of a parasocial relationship. Once this special relationship is set, perceived self-serving endorser motives are attenuated or deleted and authenticity is not questioned anymore, or at least less than before. With this, it does not want to be said that authenticity has not a strategic role in also fostering the elderly parasocial relationship anymore, but only that “mistakes” by the influencer are more plausibly forgiven. Therefore, as anticipated before by Kim & Kim (2021), level of parasocial relationship might moderate the effects of potential factors (for example, influencers’ language) on perceived authenticity.

Once again, it is important to notice that attribution of motives is implicit in the definition of authenticity, thus, perceived influencers’ intentions describe their perceived authenticity. Therefore, working on attribution of motives implicitly means working on perceived authenticity.

2.4. The influencer’s language: endorsement style

A great deal of research has focused attention on the negative effects of ad disclosure but not on the micro factors that can impact source authenticity, which in turn mediates the negative effect of ad disclosure on purchase intention. Solutions for authenticity management are provided by Kelley’s discounting principle of attribution theory (1973), which states that “*the*

role of a given cause in producing a given effect is discounted if other plausible causes are also present" (Kelley 1973, p. 113). If the sponsored character of an Instagram post is disclosed or the influencer uses a particular language that the user recognizes as persuasive (for instance, one-sided message), the user will attribute the influencers' positive review to external pressures (coming from the partnership with brand) and the message will be perceived to have persuasive intent. However, followers' attribution of an external cause (i.e., financial motive) will be weakened, and, consequently, persuasion motives will be discounted if plausible strong internal causes are emphasized and brought to the attention of the follower (Hwang and Jeong, 2016). For instance, by explicitly emphasizing honest opinions, a sponsored post could be attributed to self-expression motives or altruistic motives such as providing information to other consumers or expressing the honest liking of the product (Hwang and Jeong, 2016). In other words, it would introduce a second plausible cause to the influencer's posting in addition to monetary self-interest motives: he/she is moved by belief in the product quality or willingness to share opinions with other consumers. When this occurs, the introduction of a second plausible cause inhibits the effect of reporting bias expectancy and discounts persuasion motives. For instance, Hwang and Jeong (2016) show that including a sponsorship disclosure in a blog post had negative effects on source credibility perceptions and message attitudes. However, these negative effects were lessened when the source emphasized that, even though the blog was sponsored, he/she was sharing personal and honest opinions, signaling her/his internal and genuine intentions. Hence, factors that take to the followers' attention internal motives of the source may discount the external self-serving motive that ad disclosure introduces.

Therefore, in this study, we are interested in uncovering how to increase authenticity through the inhibition of the attribution of external perceived endorser motives. It is, thus, hypothesized that the language used by the influencer when endorsing something or declaring his/her personal approval or support to a product/brand ("endorsement style") is crucial in determining his/her perceived authenticity, by making the follower form suppositions about a second plausible cause in addition to the external brand pressure: the willingness to express his/her honest liking of the product and, consequently, suggest it to the follower base without any secondary interests. In other words, the present study aims at adopting language (endorsement style) in order to increase influencers' perceived authenticity, as language use has a substantial impact on persuasion (Hosman, 2002).

Although a great deal of literature has examined various aspects of influencer marketing, research about the role of language in conveying signals of authenticity is mainly absent (especially about endorsement styles). Researchers have begun to examine the consequences of language-related phenomena such as message construal, that is abstract versus concrete word use (Balaji, Jiang & Jha, 2021), message valence, thus, positive or negative valence (Balaji, Jiang & Jha, 2021), boasting (Packard, Gershoff, and Wooten 2016; as cited in Packard & Berger, 2017), explained actions (Moore 2015), figurative language (Kronrod and Danziger 2013, as cited in Packard & Berger, 2017), emotional words (Berger and Milkman 2012, as cited in Packard & Berger, 2017), and linguistic mimicry (Moore and McFerran 2016, as cited in Packard & Berger, 2017). However, only Packard & Berger (2017) investigated, in the context of eWOM, the way consumers explicit their liking of a product endorsed (implicit versus explicit endorsement styles¹⁶) and how this affects their credibility (trustworthiness and expertise).

Therefore, this research helps to address this gap. More precisely, we hypothesize that the language used by an influencer when delivering his/her support about a product (“endorsement style”) triggers a cognitive mechanism by which followers infer an internal motivation of the influencer in promoting the product (for instance; his/her belief in the quality of the product) and thus perceive him/her as more authentic.

In line with the study conducted by Packard and Berger (2017) but with a variation of the dependent variable, we consider words to have a key role in authenticity perceptions. This study sets the basis of its manipulation in the Packard & Berger experiment (2017), and further improves these manipulations while applying them to a different area – the influencer marketing. In particular, two endorsement styles are outlined, implicit and explicit conditional. The former is identical to the one investigated in the Packard and Berger’s experiment, the second represents a further improvement, since we were particularly interested in observing the role of conditional recommendations¹⁷.

Endorsement styles might be *implicit* endorsements when they represent an assertion of one’s personal positive opinion (i.e., first-person pronoun + declaration of approval for self) (Packard & Berger, 2017) – e.g., “I liked it”. *Explicit conditional* endorsements refer to a

¹⁶ Endorsement style represents the language consumers use when endorsing something or declaring their personal approval or support (Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “endorse,” (accessed March 3, 2015), http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/endorse).

¹⁷ Recommendations direct to a specific subgroup of people.

speaker's declaration that the object is appropriate for others, and, in particular, for a precise subgroup of people, with specific needs – e.g., “I recommend it especially for those...”.

Hence, do words that apparently have very low relevance actually have a central role and an important impact on perceived influencers' authenticity? We can consequently formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: perceived authenticity in the “explicit conditional” condition will be higher than in the “implicit” condition.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study investigates whether the language influencers use when endorsing a product or declaring their personal approval or support (that is, endorsement style) will have a significant effect on their perceived authenticity. In particular we expect the use of an explicit conditional endorsement style (“I recommend it especially for those who...”) will increase the perceived authenticity of the influencer compared to the use of an implicit endorsement (“I liked it”).

To conduct this study, a manipulation of the endorsement style adopted by the influencer was conducted and inserted in the second part of the caption accompanying the sponsored post shown.

3.1. Data and Method

A sample of 191 Italian people ($N = 191$, 138 female, $M_{age} = 25.54$, $SD_{age} = 9.301$), mainly students, were recruited through network platforms, such as Whatsapp and Instagram, and in person through the use of a QR code. They were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions within a two-cell between-subjects experiment: implicit versus explicit conditional endorsement style. Participants without an Instagram account were automatically pulled out.

With regard to the daily hours expenditure on the social media platform (Instagram), the 38,9 % of participants declared to spend on Instagram between 1 and 2 hours per day, the 27,9% between 2 and 3, the 17,9% less than one hour and the 15,3% more than 3 hours.

Participants were not informed about the scope of the study but only about the area of interest – influencer marketing – in order to avoid potential biases. They were asked to look at an Instagram sponsored post as if they were viewing their own Instagram home, paying

particular attention to the caption accompanying the post. They were told they were going to be shown with a post from a famous beauty influencer, which was in fact made up to remove any additional external factors determining perceived authenticity due to prior exposure to the influencer. Then, a post showing one of the two conditions (implicit vs. explicit conditional) was shown. A timer of 20 seconds was set, in order to avoid participants would not read carefully the caption. The caption was composed by two parts: the first part briefly describing the product and the second, manipulated, expressing support and approval towards the product.

The questionnaire asked participants to rate the influencer's perceived authenticity through the use of a three-item 7-point Likert scale adapted from Beverland and Farrelly (2010) ($\alpha = X$) ("She is genuine", "She is a real user", "She is authentic", with 1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree")¹⁸.

To check whether participants paid attention during the experiment, two questions about the type of product and the condition they have been exposed to were asked. Of all participants, 6 did not remember correctly the product and 41 did not get the manipulation of the endorsement style correctly. Responses of participants who mistook one of the two attention checks have been deleted. The high percentage of people mistaking the second part of the caption might signal that people generally do not pay attention to captions, unless they have particular reasons to do so. Further research might investigate this phenomenon by looking for mediation effects of factors as involvement in the category product, personal relevance, level of need for cognition¹⁹, pre-existing interest in purchasing the category product.

Finally, we controlled for aspects of the respondents: we included demographics (i.e., respondents' age, gender, daily hours expenditure on Instagram).

3.2. Stimulus materials

The stimulus materials consisted of a smartphone showing a sponsored post on Instagram. Sponsorship disclosure was done by the use of the Instagram feature "Paid partnership with...". Apart from manipulating the endorsement style, all other stimulus materials were kept identical across conditions. A verified badge was showed near the account's name and number of likes was not present in order to avoid potential biases. The post showed an influencer applying the

¹⁸ "È genuina"; "Ha utilizzato/ provato il prodotto veramente"; "È autentica".

¹⁹ The need for cognition is defined as the degree to which people enjoy thinking and exerting cognitive effort (Dillard & Pfau, 2012).

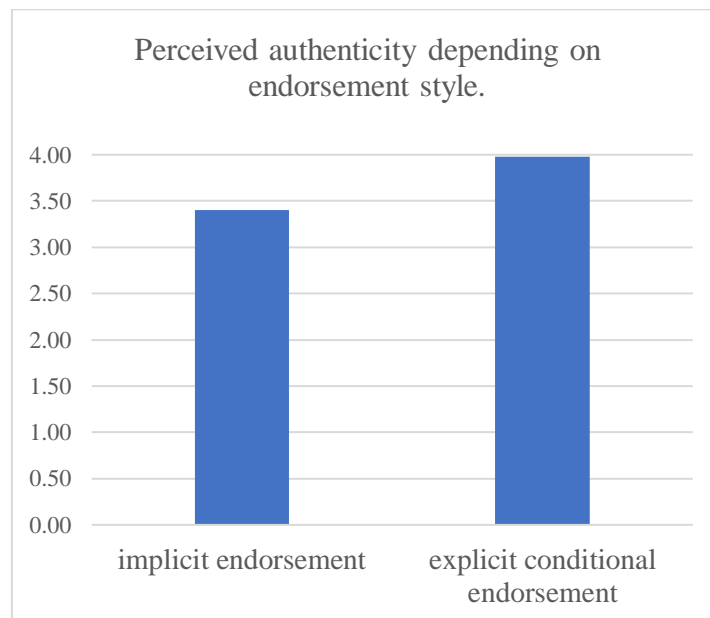
sponsored hand cream and the first part of the caption contained information about the product that was not manipulated: “La nuova crema mani di @camolie contiene principi attivi per nutrire, proteggere e riparare anche la pelle più secca”²⁰.

The second part of the caption was manipulated in order to observe effects on the influencer’s perceived authenticity (Appendix: Figure 3.2.1-3.2.2).²¹

3.3. Results

As expected, the results revealed a significant perceived difference in the influencer’s authenticity depending on the endorsement style used ($M_{\text{implicit}} = 3.40$, $SD_{\text{implicit}} = 1.53$; $M_{\text{explicitconditional}} = 3.98$, $SD_{\text{explicitconditional}} = 1.49$; $F(1, 188) = 6.997$, $p = .009$) (Graph 3.3.1.). An ANOVA test revealed perceived authenticity to increase of 0.583 in the explicit conditional endorsement style compared to the implicit one.

In order to check the effectiveness of the endorsement style manipulation, attention checks were directly included in the questionnaire and respondents who failed answering have been deleted. The scale used resulted reliable ($\alpha = 0.902$).



Graph 3.3.1. Perceived authenticity depending on endorsement style

²⁰ “The new hand cream by @camolie contains active ingredients to nurture, protect and repair even the driest skins.”

²¹ “A me è piaciuta!” = “I liked it!”; “La consiglio specialmente per chi ha mani particolarmente delicate e sta cercando una crema protettiva e riparatrice!” = “I recommend it especially for those who have particularly sensitive hands and are looking for a protective and repairing cream!”

These results might be explained by five main reasons.

An explicit endorsement might convey that (1) the sender feels so positive about the quality of the product to recommend it for others as well (Gershoff, Broniarczyk, and West, 2001). Hence, between the two possible explanations to endorsers' positive speaking identified by Sparkman (1982), an explicit endorsement would signal the endorser's belief in the product qualities (over the endorser's financial compensation). This also recalls the principle at the base of the NPS²², that is, people rating the product with a very high score are the ones who will more likely do positive WOM²³. Secondly, (2) being the endorser's belief in the product qualities inferred as the motive of the posting, followers will subsequently perceive the influencer to be a real user of the product, or at least to have tried it for a period of time.

Thirdly, recommending the product to a specific subgroup of his/her followers would suggest that (3) he/she knows the product well and is aware that its characteristics make it more suitable for people with specific needs; (4) pays attention to the diverse needs of his/her follower base inducing in his/her followers a sense of intimate/ altruistic feeling; (5) financial compensation is not his/her main goal as conditional recommendation implies stating that the product is not suitable for everyone but only for a subgroup of people²⁴.

4. GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the current market, consumers are more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands on social networks. They are more skeptical of the motives behind influencers' endorsements and question whether their reporting about products is not unbiased anymore.

The introduction and application of proper legislation against deceptive advertising in influencer marketing accelerated the emerging of managerial issues. Firstly, a large body of literature states this politics of disclosure have consequences on followers' attitudes towards both the brand and the influencer (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). Secondly, extant literature affirms that fairness and transparency in explicitly disclosing the sponsored character of the content did not lead to negative consumers' attitudes (Jiang et al., 2017; Carr and Hayes; 2014);

²² Net Promoter Score

²³ Word of Mouth

²⁴ Point 3 slightly recalls experiments on message sidedness. Uribe et al. (2016) conducted an experiment entailing the introduction of negative arguments about a product in blog advertising. They demonstrated, analyzing the effect of message sidedness on the behavioral intention of participants (also indicated as effectiveness of blog advertising), that respondents who were exposed to blogs with one-sided messages reported lower behavioral intention in contrast to those who read the two-sided message blogs.

however, the obligation for influencers to disclose made the act of disclosing no more a symbol of authenticity and sincerity. Thirdly, the enormous increase of brand endorsements and their consequent disclosure have trained consumers to recognize persuasive content and they now are more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands on social networks, doubting the veridicality of influencers' content about product endorsements. Therefore, brand endorsements come with risks for perceived influencers authenticity²⁵, and in turn, for the persuasiveness of the brand endorsement itself, as message persuasiveness is indeed seen as a function of inferred communicator biases (Eagly, Wood & Chaiken, 1978).

The key element to read this rising issue is represented by perceived endorsers motives, which are intrinsic in the definition of authenticity, which refers to a person's engagement in intrinsically motivated behaviors, those that emanate from an individual's innate desires and passions (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018). Perceived endorser motive is indeed proved to be a key criterion used by consumers to assess the veridicality of messages and is subsequently a crucial determinant of brand endorsement effectiveness (Carr and Hayes 2014; Djafarova and Rushworth 2017). Perceived endorser motives find its roots in attribution theory and answer to the question about why a spokesperson promotes a particular product (Rifon et al. 2004). Eagly and Chaiken (1975) proposed that to the extent the position taken in a message can be explained in terms of either a particular characteristic of the communicator or a pressure in the communicator's situation, the message is regarded as providing a relatively nonveridical interpretation of external reality, reducing message persuasiveness.

Hence, brand marketers and endorsers are striving to reduce attribution of self-serving motives as authenticity management is raising unique challenges.

Through the use of attribution theory and its discounting principle – which states that “*the role of a given cause in producing a given effect is discounted if other plausible causes are also present*” (Kelley 1973, p. 113) – it is possible to discount external motives in favour of internal ones. If the sponsored character of an Instagram post is disclosed or the influencer uses a particular language that the user recognizes as persuasive (for instance, one-sided messages), external motives will be attributed, and the persuasiveness of the message will be lowered. However, if internal motives are taken to the attention of the follower, the first cause attributed

²⁵ which is defined as a person's engagement in intrinsically motivated and genuine behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018) and, thus, not caused by external pressure (e.g., financial compensation).

by the recipients to the source's message (i.e., endorser's financial compensation) will be discounted, and, perceived authenticity automatically increased.

The present research has hypothesized that the language used by an influencer when delivering his/her support about a product ("endorsement style") triggers a cognitive mechanism by which followers infer an intrinsic motivation of the influencer in promoting the product (for instance; his/her belief in the quality of the product), which discounts the inferred extrinsic motive (for instance, financial compensation). This will, consequently, make followers perceive the influencer as more authentic. Results provide support to our formulated hypothesis.

Analysis of almost 200 Instagram users demonstrates that individuals perceived the influencer as more authentic when an explicit conditional recommendation ("I recommend this product especially for...") was done compared to an implicit endorsement ("I liked this product") ($M_{\text{implicit}} = 3.40$, $SD_{\text{implicit}} = 1.53$; $M_{\text{explicitconditional}} = 3.98$, $SD_{\text{explicitconditional}} = 1.49$; $F(1, 188) = 6.997$, $p = .009$) (Graph 3.3.1.). Possible explanations about these results are provided in Paragraph 3.3.

5. MANAGERIAL AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

From a managerial point of view, our findings show important implications for marketing practitioners. In the current market, characterized by influencer endorsements, consumers are more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands and are more skeptical of the motives behind influencers' endorsements. Hence, brand marketers and endorsers are striving to reduce attribution of self-serving motive and authenticity management raises unique challenges. The present study highlights the importance of the language used by influencers when providing support to a product, suggesting one method to improve authenticity management and in turn manage tensions created by brand endorsement into social media influencers' personal sphere.

Our findings provide guidelines for authenticity management, suggesting influencers to adopt a particular type of language when delivering the endorsement of a product and their approval or support of it. More precisely, results show that using an explicit conditional endorsement style increases perceived influencer's authenticity compared to "I like" endorsements. In particular, results show that the manipulation of endorsement style strongly impacted the perception that the influencer is a real user.

Furthermore, findings also provide guidelines to marketers when collaborating with influencers for marketing campaigns. Marketers should insert in Instagram captions explicit conditional endorsements and demand to influencers to adopt the guidelines provided.

This research also further analyzes extant literature about attribution theory and fills the gap about its link with influencer marketing. Furthermore, it provides supplementary literature about authenticity management, which is a source's characteristic poorly examined by research, compared to source credibility.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This work suggests some directions for future research. One interesting aspect that needs further investigation is whether people do pay attention to captions or if images have a significant stronger impact on followers' attitudes. It would be also interesting to introduce mediation effects, also according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984), to investigate under which conditions followers are keener to read captions. We believe that involvement in the category product, personal relevance, level of need for cognition²⁶, pre-existing interest in purchasing the category product might have a significant role in explaining the conditions in which people prefer images to captions (Paragraph 3.1.). In particular, we suggest that in cases of less thoughtful processing due to recipients' lack of motivation or ability to process the message, images might serve as peripheral²⁷ cues for processing.

Future research might also consider mediators explaining the outcomes observed (see Paragraph 3.3.).

As suggested by Kim & Kim (2021), the perception of genuine intention can be more impactful to followers who have a weak relationship, or have not yet developed an intense relationship, with the influencer. Therefore, para-social relationship might reduce the importance of the endorsement style used, since followers probably already consider the influencer authentic and the type of language might not have an important effect on them.

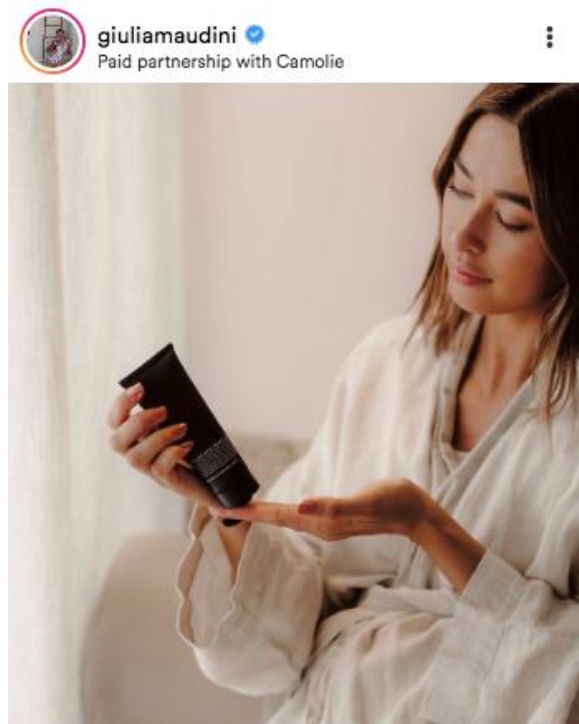
²⁶ The need for cognition is defined as the degree to which people enjoy thinking and exerting cognitive effort (Dillard & Pfau, 2012).

²⁷ The ELM posits that attitude change may occur through one of two different processing routes (Solomon, 2017). Due to cognitive constraints that prevent people from thoughtfully processing all of the messages to which they are exposed, in some instances, persuasion will occur through the central route, and in other instances it will occur through the peripheral route (Dillard & Pfau, 2012). Central route processing of persuasive messages produces attitude change based on critical evaluation of the merits of the arguments contained within a message, whereas persuasion via the peripheral route is associated with less thoughtful processing, such as reliance on cues – peripheral cues – or heuristics that are unrelated to the actual merits of the message (e.g., the message is associated with an attractive source) (Dillard & Pfau, 2012).

Hence, future research could investigate whether the intimacy level of the follower-influencer relationship moderates the effect of endorsement style on authenticity.

Moreover, this study focused on endorsement styles, but the text surrounding an endorsement may influence its impact. A language signaling lower involvement or interest of the influencer in promoting the product might increase authenticity by signaling the presence of a non-extrinsic motive. However, this type of language might decrease the influencer's perceived confidence in the product quality. It would be interesting to investigate whether the use of words such as "I guess I kind of recommend it" has a positive or negative impact on users' attitudes towards the ad and the influencer.

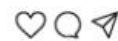
APPENDIX



Piace a mavirossi e altre persone
giuliamaudini La nuova crema mani di @camolie
contiene principi attivi per nutrire, proteggere e
riparare anche la pelle più secca.

A me è piaciuta! 🧡

Figure 3.2.1. Implicit endorsement condition



Piace a mavirossi e altre persone
giuliamaudini La nuova crema mani di @camolie
contiene principi attivi per nutrire, proteggere e
riparare anche la pelle più secca.

La consiglio specialmente per chi ha mani
particolarmente delicate e sta cercando una crema
protettiva e riparatrice! 🧡

Figure 3.2.2. Explicit conditional endorsement).²⁸

²⁸ “A me è piaciuta!” = “I liked it!”; “La consiglio specialmente per chi ha mani particolarmente delicate e sta cercando una crema protettiva e riparatrice!” = “I recommend it especially for those who have particularly sensitive hands and are looking for a protective and repairing cream!”

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SUMMARY (FOLLOWING)



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**HOW ENDORSEMENT STYLES
SHAPE PERCEIVED INFLUENCER AUTHENTICITY**

(SUMMARY)

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ABSTRACT

In the current market, consumers are more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands on social networks. They are more skeptical of the motives behind influencers' endorsements and question whether their reporting about products is not unbiased anymore.

Therefore, brand endorsements come with risks for perceived influencers authenticity²⁹, and in turn, for the persuasiveness of the brand endorsement itself, as message persuasiveness is indeed seen as a function of inferred communicator biases. Hence, brand marketers and endorsers are striving to reduce attribution of self-serving motives as authenticity management is raising unique challenges. Through the use of attribution theory and its discounting principle, the present research hypothesizes that the language used by an influencer when delivering his/her support about a product ("endorsement style") triggers a cognitive mechanism by which followers infer an intrinsic motivation of the influencer in promoting the product (for instance; his/her belief in the quality of the product), which discounts the inferred extrinsic motive (for instance, financial compensation). This will, consequently, make followers perceive the influencer as more authentic. Results provide support to our formulated hypothesis. Analysis of almost 200 Instagram users demonstrates that individuals perceived the influencer as more authentic when an explicit conditional recommendation ("I recommend this product especially for...") was done compared to an implicit endorsement ("I liked this product").

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction to the managerial issue: research area and research problem

The popularity of influencer marketing has been growing considerably. The global market value of influencer marketing was equal to 13.8 billion US dollars compared to the 9.7 in 2020. From 2016 its market value experienced a 700% increase (Statista, 2021). According to a market research conducted by DeRev Lab and reported in Il sole 24 ore, in Italy the influencer market value reached 280 million euros in 2021, and the growth compared to the previous year was 15%. These data are probably due to a progressive shift of marketing investments from traditional to influencer marketing, as firms are slowly becoming aware that social media marketing enables them to have exponential returns in terms of visibility, especially in the youngest population categories.

²⁹ which is defined as a person's engagement in intrinsically motivated and genuine behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018) and, thus, not caused by external pressure (e.g., financial compensation).

However, in the current market, consumers appear to be more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands on social networks. People developed a high capability to recognize paid partnerships between brands and influencers, and they are more skeptical of the motives behind influencers' endorsements, questioning whether their reporting about products is not unbiased anymore. This evolution in consumers' minds has experienced an acceleration especially after the adoption of measures against deceptive influencer advertising. To protect consumers from lack of transparency and unclear disclosure (Michaelsen et al., 2022) on social media, regulations by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and self-regulatory measures at EU level have been adopted in the last years. In Italy, in particular, self-regulatory measures are applied and influencer marketing is treated as advertising as "*any kind of communication, distributed by whatever means qualifies as advertising if it directly or indirectly promotes the sale of goods or services*", pursuant to the legislative decree 206/2005 integrated into the Italian Consumer Code. In the absence of legislation tailored to influencer marketing, indeed, the Italian Competition Authority (AGCM) has started in 2017 to adapt existing legislation to forms of advertising through social networks.

A managerial issue has risen consequently. Firstly, a large body of literature states this politics of disclosure have consequences on followers' attitudes towards both the brand and the influencer (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). Secondly, extant literature affirms that fairness and transparency in explicitly disclosing the sponsored character of the content did not lead to negative consumers' attitudes (Jiang et al., 2017; Carr and Hayes; 2014); however, the obligation for influencers to disclose made the act of disclosing no more a symbol of authenticity and sincerity. Thirdly, the enormous increase of brand endorsements and their consequent disclosure have trained consumers to recognize persuasive content and they now are more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands on social networks, doubting the veridicality of influencers' content about product endorsements.

Therefore, brand endorsements come with risks for perceived influencers authenticity³⁰, and in turn, for the persuasiveness of the brand endorsement itself, as message persuasiveness is seen as a function of inferred communicator biases (Eagly, Wood & Chaiken, 1978). The key element to read this rising issue is represented by perceived endorsers motives, which are intrinsic in the definition of authenticity. Perceived endorser motive is indeed proved to be a

³⁰ which is defined as a person's engagement in intrinsically motivated and genuine behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018) and, thus, not caused by external pressure (e.g., financial compensation).

key criteria used by consumers to assess the veridicality of messages and is subsequently a crucial determinant of brand endorsement effectiveness (Carr and Hayes 2014; Djafarova and Rushworth 2017). As we will deepen later, perceived endorser motives find its roots in attribution theory and answer to the question about why a spokesperson promotes a particular product (Rifon et al. 2004).

Consequently, with the exponential development of influencer marketing, it is necessary to deepen the understanding of SMIs' authenticity management, which influencers can adopt to face tensions due to commercial opportunities.

1.2. Research Gap and research question

A great deal of research has investigated factors that contribute to the effectiveness of influencer marketing across various contexts (e.g., De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth 2017; Lou & Kim, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020) – suggesting some key factors such as the follower-influencer parasocial relationship and influencer characteristics (credibility, authenticity, attractiveness), as well as the effects of advertising disclosure. However, to the best of our knowledge, research about the effects of the language social media influencers (SMIs) use when endorsing a product or declaring their personal approval or support – i.e., endorsement style³¹ – is mainly absent.

Therefore, through the use of attribution theory and its discounting principle – which will be deepened later –, the present research questions whether the language used by an influencer when delivering his/her support about a product (“endorsement style”) triggers a cognitive mechanism by which followers infer an intrinsic motivation of the influencer in promoting the product (for instance; his/her belief in the quality of the product), which discounts the inferred extrinsic motive (for instance, financial compensation). This should, consequently, make followers perceive the influencer as more authentic. In particular, this research aims to answer the following question: *does the endorsement style adopted by an influencer affect his or her perceived authenticity in the follower’s mind when partnering with brands?*

³¹ Endorsement style represents the language consumers use when endorsing something or declaring their personal approval or support (Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “endorse,” (accessed March 3, 2015), http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/endorse).

To answer this question and provide insight into SMIs' authenticity management, we specifically study the beauty domain, which features a proliferation of SMI–brand collaborations and represents the main key sector in the Italian market (Il sole 24 ore, 2021).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Influencer marketing

Originally, the figure of the social media influencer (SMI) was pictured as “*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, p. 90). It originated as a social media personality who constantly creates and disseminates useful and organic content within a knowledge domain, projects authentic personae, develops intimate relations with a following of various sizes, and thus wields influence over followers’ purchases and decision making (Lou, 2021). The original figure of social media opinion leader led to the spread of the belief that influencers’ content originated from ordinary expert consumers – the market mavens³² of the digital world – being noncommercial in nature and, thus, more trustworthy than marketer-initiated communication.

Social media influencers have, indeed, been proven to positively affect brand awareness and purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019), foster the development of deeper feelings of connectedness (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2010) and score higher in terms of source credibility, compared to traditional celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). One of the most defining characteristics of influencers’ success is indeed the intimate relationship they are able to build and foster with their followers – parasocial relationship. This particular kind of relationships might be defined as one-sided relationships, where one person (the follower) extends emotional energy, interest and time, and perceives the other party as an intimate friend, while the other party (the influencer) is completely unaware of the other's existence. It is impossible to deal with influencer marketing without taking into account the power of this relationship. Extant literature states that it mediates the effect of influencer source credibility, influencer content factors, or communication fairness between influencers and followers on followers’ materialistic views, purchase intentions, or product interests in influencer-sponsored

³² A market maven is defined as a person who likes to transmit marketplace information of all types and tend to have a solid overall knowledge of how and where to procure the products, in addition to being more confident in their own ability to make smart purchase decisions (Solomon, 2018).

posts (Lou & Kim, 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Moreover, it has been found to significantly impact on followers' behavioral intentions to purchase the products promoted (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Most importantly, they have been proven to negatively influence perceived self-serving (inauthentic) endorser motives (Aw & Chuah, 2021), suggesting that perception of genuine intentions (authenticity) can be more impactful to followers who have a weak relationship, or have not yet developed an intense relationship, with the influencer (Kim & Kim, 2021). In other words, a strong parasocial relationship makes followers question influencers' authenticity less. For this reason, authenticity is particularly crucial at the very beginning of the follower-influencer relationship.

2.2. Attribution Theory

Marketers have long been interested in how individuals assess the veridicality of persuasive messages. Attribution theory (Bem 1972; Heider 1958; Jones and Davis 1965; Kelley 1967, 1972a 1972b, 1973; Kelley and Michela 1980) is a useful perspective for undertaking the analysis of persuasion, as message persuasiveness is seen as a function of inferred communicator biases (Eagly, Wood & Chaiken, 1978). It indeed explains the cognitive rule by which individuals attribute others' behavior to a cause or motive (McDermott, 2009) and it is key in understanding that followers make inferences about endorsers' motives in showing a product. Specifically, this theory posits that individuals undergo a two-step process when facing one's behavior. Firstly, they try to infer the motivations for others' behavior on the basis of the information and beliefs they hold (the "*antecedents*"). They, therefore, judge a person (in the case of our study, an influencer) to be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. There can be identified two main explanations to an endorser's behavior: (1) personal factors internal to the endorser (for instance., his/her beliefs in the quality of the product), (2) situational factors external to the endorser (external pressures, for instance, financial compensation) (Heider, 1978; Sparkman, 1982; Rifon et al., 2004). Secondly, the perceived motivation may influence attributors' behavior, affect and expectancies (the "*consequences*") in response to the actor's behavior.

The cognitive process consumers undergo when observing a spokesperson's endorsement is provided by Kelley's (1973) discounting principle, which states that people discount an explanation if an alternative explanation is present. Therefore, if consumers believe monetary incentives to be the self-serving motive (external) behind a celebrity's endorsement, they subsequently discount the intrinsic motives of the endorser (e.g., his/her liking of the

product or altruistic aim to recommend a product) (Rifon et al., 2004), unless perception of internal motives is triggered. The attribution of negative motives, in turn, might create expectations of reporting bias³³ in the source, and subsequently negatively affects credibility, persuasiveness, purchase intention (Lee et al., 2013; Reinhard et al., 2006; Aw & Chuah, 2021), and brand evaluations (Tripp et al., 1994), as well as, fostering in the follower a feeling of betrayal or exploitation by the influencer for financial aims. Eagly and Chaiken (1975) proposed that to the extent the position taken in a message can be explained in terms of either a particular characteristic of the communicator or a pressure in the communicator's situation, the message is regarded as providing a relatively nonveridical interpretation of external reality, negatively impacting, in turn, message persuasiveness. Conversely, extant studies show that attribution of positive motives (e.g., social responsibility motive) leads to a positive effect on brand evaluations (Ruth and Simonin 2006; Speed and Thompson 2000, as cited in Bergkvist et al, 2016). According to a study conducted by Bergkvist et al. (2016), when consumers perceived that the celebrity was motivated to do the endorsement not only by money but also by product quality, this had a significant positive effect on attitude towards the brand.

2.3. Influencer authenticity

After introducing the importance of perceived endorser motive, we suggest that influencers' intentions can explain the concept of authenticity. In sociology, authenticity refers to being true to oneself or to others (Vannini & Franzese, 2008; Zickmund, 2007; Kim & Kim; 2021), and implies sincerity, genuineness, truthfulness, and originality (Molleda, 2010; Kim & Kim, 2021). In influencer marketing, authenticity can be defined as the genuine intention of the influencer, given they can post and recommend any product/service for external compensation (Boerman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). More broadly, authenticity refers to a person's engagement in intrinsically motivated behaviors – those that emanate from an individual's innate desires and passions. These behaviors involve the “*active engagement with tasks that [one] finds interesting*” (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018). In contrast, inauthenticity involves engagement in extrinsically motivated behaviors – those driven by external pressures such as reward or punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018) – and often determined by other individuals or groups. Inauthentic actions refer to a

³³ Eagly and colleagues (1978) define reporting bias as the expectancy that a communicator's willingness to convey an accurate version of external reality is compromised, usually due to external pressures (for instance, endorser's financial compensation).

“performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 71). In other words, a behavior is perceived as being authentic when it is attributed to internal motivations (that is, when an endorser acts as their true self) as opposed to external pressures (Audrezet et al., 2018; Moulard et al., 2014).

The importance of authenticity is reaffirmed by the crucial role of perceived endorsers motives in message persuasiveness as the latter is considered a function of inferred communicator biases (Eagly, Wood & Chaiken, 1978), which as anticipated before, are consequence of followers’ attribution of negative motives to endorsers’ behavior. Following from the definition of authenticity, we might say that consequences of perceived endorser motives correspond to the ones of authentic behavior. Again, external perceived endorser motives devalue endorser’s effectiveness and willingness to pay for the endorsed product (Cronley et al., 1999; Folkes, 1988), lead to lower trust of the SMI, lower interest towards the post, and lower willingness to search for more information regarding the endorsed brand (Martínez-López et al., 2020), and weakens their preexisting attitudinal evaluations (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Inauthentic behavior negatively affects credibility as followers believe the source to be biased in reporting the veridicality of the message (Djafarova and Bowes, 2020; Stubb et al., 2019; De Veirman and Hudders, 2020). Conversely, a study by Pöyry et al. (2019), on sponsored photos on Instagram, showed that perceived authenticity positively influenced follower’s attitudes and purchase intentions. Authentic brand endorsements generate the impression that brand partnerships are not necessarily a means for influencers to profit by taking advantage of their followers, but a self-extension opportunity through associating with brands the influencer feels enthusiastic about (Audrezet et al., 2018). Because of this, they have been shown to lead to better attitudes towards SMIs, encourage consumers to consider following SMIs and try their product recommendations (Lee & Eastin, 2021). Moreover, recalling what anticipated in Paragraph 2.1., authenticity appears to be relatively important at the very beginning of the follower-influencer relationship. Not only it encourages consumers to consider following SMIs (Lee & Eastin, 2021), but also the perception of genuine intention can be more impactful to followers who have a weak relationship, or have not yet developed a deep relationship, with the influencer. A study conducted by Kim & Kim (2021) in the context of influencer marketing showed that authenticity was more important for the weak relationship than for the strong one, suggesting a significant effect of authenticity in the early stage of an influencer-follower relationship. Authenticity, indeed, was demonstrated to have positive

impact on trust and, in turn, on loyalty towards the influencer (Kim & Kim, 2021), which is at the basis of parasocial relationships.

2.4. The influencer's language: endorsement style

Solutions for authenticity management are provided by Kelley's discounting principle of attribution theory (1973), which states that "*the role of a given cause in producing a given effect is discounted if other plausible causes are also present*" (Kelley 1973, p. 113). If the sponsored character of an Instagram post is disclosed or the influencer uses a particular language that the user recognizes as persuasive (for instance, one-sided messages), the persuasiveness of the message will be lowered. However, followers' attribution of an external cause (i.e., financial motive) will be weakened, and, consequently, persuasion motives will be discounted if plausible strong internal causes are emphasized and brought to the attention of the follower (Hwang and Jeong, 2016).

The present study aims at adopting language in order to increase influencers' perceived authenticity. Although a great deal of literature has examined various aspects of influencer marketing, research about the role of language in conveying signals of authenticity is mainly absent (especially about endorsement styles). Researchers have begun to examine the consequences of language-related phenomena such as message construal, that is abstract versus concrete word use (Balaji, Jiang & Jha, 2021), message valence, thus, positive or negative valence (Balaji, Jiang & Jha, 2021), boasting (Packard, Gershoff, and Wooten 2016; as cited in Packard & Berger, 2017), explained actions (Moore 2015), figurative language (Kronrod and Danziger 2013, as cited in Packard & Berger, 2017), emotional words (Berger and Milkman 2012, as cited in Packard & Berger, 2017), and linguistic mimicry (Moore and McFerran 2016, as cited in Packard & Berger, 2017). However, only Packard & Berger (2017) investigated, in the context of eWOM, the way consumers explicit their liking of a product endorsed (implicit versus explicit endorsement styles³⁴) and how this affects their credibility (trustworthiness and expertise).

Therefore, this research helps to address this gap. More precisely, we hypothesize that the language used by an influencer when delivering his/her support about a product ("endorsement

³⁴ Endorsement style represents the language consumers use when endorsing something or declaring their personal approval or support (Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. "endorse," (accessed March 3, 2015), http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/endorse).

style”) triggers a cognitive mechanism by which followers infer an internal motivation of the influencer in promoting the product (for instance; his/her belief in the quality of the product) and thus perceive him/her as more authentic.

In line with the study conducted by Packard and Berger (2017) but with a variation of the dependent variable, we consider words to have a key role in authenticity perceptions. This study sets the basis of its manipulation in the Packard & Berger experiment (2017), and further improves these manipulations while applying them to a different area – the influencer marketing. In particular, two endorsement styles are outlined, implicit and explicit conditional. The former is identical to the one investigated in the Packard and Berger’s experiment, the second represents a further improvement, since we were particularly interested in observing the role of conditional recommendations³⁵.

Endorsement styles might be *implicit* endorsements when they represent an assertion of one’s personal positive opinion (i.e., first-person pronoun + declaration of approval for self) (Packard & Berger, 2017) – e.g., “I liked it”. *Explicit conditional* endorsements refer to a speaker’s declaration that the object is appropriate for others, and, in particular, for a precise subgroup of people, with specific needs – e.g., “I recommend it especially for those...”.

Hence, do words that apparently have very low relevance actually have a central role and an important impact on perceived influencers’ authenticity? We can consequently formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: perceived authenticity in the “explicit conditional” condition will be higher than in the “implicit” condition.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study investigates whether the language influencers use when endorsing a product or declaring their personal approval or support (that is, endorsement style) will have a significant effect on their perceived authenticity. In particular we expect the use of an explicit conditional endorsement style (“I recommend it especially for those who...”) will increase the perceived authenticity of the influencer compared to the use of an implicit endorsement (“I liked it”).

³⁵ Recommendations direct to a specific subgroup of people.

To conduct this study, a manipulation of the endorsement style adopted by the influencer was conducted and inserted in the second part of the caption accompanying the sponsored post shown.

3.1. Data and Method

A sample of 191 Italian people ($N = 191$, 138 female, $M_{age} = 25.54$, $SD_{age} = 9.301$), mainly students, were recruited through network platforms, such as Whatsapp and Instagram, and in person through the use of a QR code. They were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions within a two-cell between-subjects experiment: implicit versus explicit conditional endorsement style. Participants without an Instagram account were automatically pulled out. With regard to the daily hours expenditure on the social media platform (Instagram), the 38,9 % of participants declared to spend on Instagram between 1 and 2 hours per day, the 27,9% between 2 and 3, the 17,9% less than one hour and the 15,3% more than 3 hours.

Participants were not informed about the scope of the study but only about the area of interest – influencer marketing – in order to avoid potential biases. They were asked to look at an Instagram sponsored post as if they were viewing their own Instagram home, paying particular attention to the caption accompanying the post. They were told they were going to be shown with a post from a famous beauty influencer, which was in fact made up to remove any additional external factors determining perceived authenticity due to prior exposure to the influencer. Then, a post showing one of the two conditions (implicit vs. explicit conditional) was shown. A timer of 20 seconds was set, in order to avoid participants would not read carefully the caption. The caption was composed by two parts: the first part briefly describing the product and the second, manipulated, expressing support and approval towards the product.

The questionnaire asked participants to rate the influencer's perceived authenticity through the use of a three-item 7-point Likert scale adapted from Beverland and Farrelly (2010) ($\alpha = X$) (“She is genuine”, “She is a real user”, “She is authentic”, with 1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree”)³⁶.

To check whether participants paid attention during the experiment, two questions about the type of product and the condition they have been exposed to were asked. Of all participants,

³⁶ “È genuina”; “Ha utilizzato/ provato il prodotto veramente”; “È autentica”.

6 did not remember correctly the product and 41 did not get the manipulation of the endorsement style correctly. Responses of participants who mistook one of the two attention checks have been deleted. The high percentage of people mistaking the second part of the caption might signal that people generally do not pay attention to captions, unless they have particular reasons to do so. Further research might investigate this phenomenon by looking for mediation effects of factors as involvement in the category product, personal relevance, level of need for cognition³⁷, pre-existing interest in purchasing the category product.

Finally, we controlled for aspects of the respondents: we included demographics (i.e., respondents' age, gender, daily hours expenditure on Instagram).

3.2. Stimulus materials

The stimulus materials consisted of a smartphone showing a sponsored post on Instagram. Sponsorship disclosure was done by the use of the Instagram feature "Paid partnership with...". Apart from manipulating the endorsement style, all other stimulus materials were kept identical across conditions. A verified badge was showed near the account's name and number of likes was not present in order to avoid potential biases. The post showed an influencer applying the sponsored hand cream and the first part of the caption contained information about the product that was not manipulated: "La nuova crema mani di @camolie contiene principi attivi per nutrire, proteggere e riparare anche la pelle più secca"³⁸.

The second part of the caption was manipulated in order to observe effects on the influencer's perceived authenticity (Appendix: Figure 3.2.1-3.2.2).³⁹

3.3. Results

As expected, the results revealed a significant perceived difference in the influencer's authenticity depending on the endorsement style used ($M_{\text{implicit}} = 3.40$, $SD_{\text{implicit}} = 1.53$; $M_{\text{explicitconditional}} = 3.98$, $SD_{\text{explicitconditional}} = 1.49$; $F(1, 188) = 6.997$, $p = .009$) (Graph 3.3.1.). An

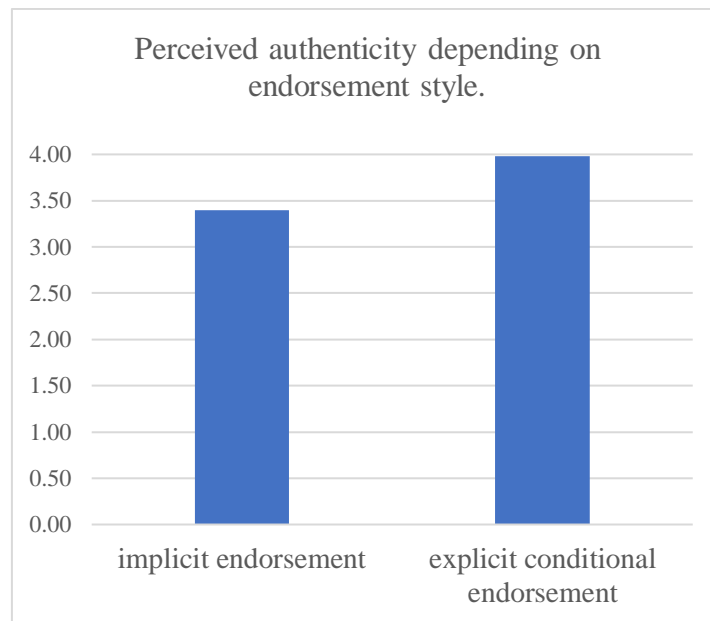
³⁷ The need for cognition is defined as the degree to which people enjoy thinking and exerting cognitive effort (Dillard & Pfau, 2012).

³⁸ "The new hand cream by @camolie contains active ingredients to nurture, protect and repair even the driest skins."

³⁹ "A me è piaciuta!" = "I liked it!"; "La consiglio specialmente per chi ha mani particolarmente delicate e sta cercando una crema protettiva e riparatrice!" = "I recommend it especially for those who have particularly sensitive hands and are looking for a protective and repairing cream!"

ANOVA test revealed perceived authenticity to increase of 0.583 in the explicit conditional endorsement style compared to the implicit one.

In order to check the effectiveness of the endorsement style manipulation, attention checks were directly included in the questionnaire and respondents who failed answering have been deleted. The scale used resulted reliable ($\alpha = 0.902$).



Graph 3.3.1. Perceived authenticity depending on endorsement style

These results might be explained by five main reasons.

An explicit endorsement might convey that (1) the sender feels so positive about the quality of the product to recommend it for others as well (Gershoff, Broniarczyk, and West, 2001). Hence, between the two possible explanations to endorsers' positive speaking identified by Sparkman (1982), an explicit endorsement would signal the endorser's belief in the product qualities (over the endorser's financial compensation). This also recalls the principle at the base of the NPS⁴⁰, that is, people rating the product with a very high score are the ones who will more likely do positive WOM⁴¹. Secondly, (2) being the endorser's belief in the product qualities inferred as the motive of the posting, followers will subsequently perceive the influencer to be a real user of the product, or at least to have tried it for a period of time.

Thirdly, recommending the product to a specific subgroup of his/her followers would suggest that (3) he/she knows the product well and is aware that its characteristics make it more

⁴⁰ Net Promoter Score

⁴¹ Word of Mouth

suitable for people with specific needs; (4) pays attention to the diverse needs of his/her follower base inducing in his/her followers a sense of intimate/ altruistic feeling; (5) financial compensation is not his/her main goal as conditional recommendation implies stating that the product is not suitable for everyone but only for a subgroup of people⁴².

4. GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the current market, consumers are more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands on social networks. They are more skeptical of the motives behind influencers' endorsements and question whether their reporting about products is not unbiased anymore.

The introduction and application of proper legislation against deceptive advertising in influencer marketing accelerated the emerging of managerial issues. Firstly, a large body of literature states this politics of disclosure have consequences on followers' attitudes towards both the brand and the influencer (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). Secondly, extant literature affirms that fairness and transparency in explicitly disclosing the sponsored character of the content did not lead to negative consumers' attitudes (Jiang et al., 2017; Carr and Hayes; 2014); however, the obligation for influencers to disclose made the act of disclosing no more a symbol of authenticity and sincerity. Thirdly, the enormous increase of brand endorsements and their consequent disclosure have trained consumers to recognize persuasive content and they now are more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands on social networks, doubting the veridicality of influencers' content about product endorsements. Therefore, brand endorsements come with risks for perceived influencers authenticity⁴³, and in turn, for the persuasiveness of the brand endorsement itself, as message persuasiveness is indeed seen as a function of inferred communicator biases (Eagly, Wood & Chaiken, 1978).

The key element to read this rising issue is represented by perceived endorsers motives, which are intrinsic in the definition of authenticity, which refers to a person's engagement in intrinsically motivated behaviors, those that emanate from an individual's innate desires and passions (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018). Perceived endorser motive is indeed proved to be a key criterion used by consumers to assess the veridicality of messages and is

⁴² Point 3 slightly recalls experiments on message sidedness. Uribe et al. (2016) conducted an experiment entailing the introduction of negative arguments about a product in blog advertising. They demonstrated, analyzing the effect of message sidedness on the behavioral intention of participants (also indicated as effectiveness of blog advertising), that respondents who were exposed to blogs with one-sided messages reported lower behavioral intention in contrast to those who read the two-sided message blogs.

⁴³ which is defined as a person's engagement in intrinsically motivated and genuine behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Audrezet et al., 2018) and, thus, not caused by external pressure (e.g., financial compensation).

subsequently a crucial determinant of brand endorsement effectiveness (Carr and Hayes 2014; Djafarova and Rushworth 2017). Perceived endorser motives find its roots in attribution theory and answer to the question about why a spokesperson promotes a particular product (Rifon et al. 2004). Eagly and Chaiken (1975) proposed that to the extent the position taken in a message can be explained in terms of either a particular characteristic of the communicator or a pressure in the communicator's situation, the message is regarded as providing a relatively nonveridical interpretation of external reality, reducing message persuasiveness.

Hence, brand marketers and endorsers are striving to reduce attribution of self-serving motives as authenticity management is raising unique challenges.

Through the use of attribution theory and its discounting principle – which states that “*the role of a given cause in producing a given effect is discounted if other plausible causes are also present*” (Kelley 1973, p. 113) – it is possible to discount external motives in favour of internal ones. If the sponsored character of an Instagram post is disclosed or the influencer uses a particular language that the user recognizes as persuasive (for instance, one-sided messages), external motives will be attributed, and the persuasiveness of the message will be lowered. However, if internal motives are taken to the attention of the follower, the first cause attributed by the recipients to the source’s message (i.e., endorser’s financial compensation) will be discounted, and, perceived authenticity automatically increased.

The present research has hypothesized that the language used by an influencer when delivering his/her support about a product (“endorsement style”) triggers a cognitive mechanism by which followers infer an intrinsic motivation of the influencer in promoting the product (for instance; his/her belief in the quality of the product), which discounts the inferred extrinsic motive (for instance, financial compensation). This will, consequently, make followers perceive the influencer as more authentic. Results provide support to our formulated hypothesis.

Analysis of almost 200 Instagram users demonstrates that individuals perceived the influencer as more authentic when an explicit conditional recommendation (“I recommend this product especially for...”) was done compared to an implicit endorsement (“I liked this product”) ($M_{\text{implicit}} = 3.40$, $SD_{\text{implicit}} = 1.53$; $M_{\text{explicitconditional}} = 3.98$, $SD_{\text{explicitconditional}} = 1.49$; $F(1, 188) = 6.997$, $p = .009$) (Graph 3.3.1.). Possible explanations about these results are provided in Paragraph 3.3.

5. MANAGERIAL AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

From a managerial point of view, our findings show important implications for marketing practitioners. In the current market, characterized by influencer endorsements, consumers are more aware of the persuasion tactics employed by brands and are more skeptical of the motives behind influencers' endorsements. Hence, brand marketers and endorsers are striving to reduce attribution of self-serving motive and authenticity management raises unique challenges. The present study highlights the importance of the language used by influencers when providing support to a product, suggesting one method to improve authenticity management and in turn manage tensions created by brand endorsement into social media influencers' personal sphere.

Our findings provide guidelines for authenticity management, suggesting influencers to adopt a particular type of language when delivering the endorsement of a product and their approval or support of it. More precisely, results show that using an explicit conditional endorsement style increases perceived influencer's authenticity compared to "I like" endorsements. In particular, results show that the manipulation of endorsement style strongly impacted the perception that the influencer is a real user.

Furthermore, findings also provide guidelines to marketers when collaborating with influencers for marketing campaigns. Marketers should insert in Instagram captions explicit conditional endorsements and demand to influencers to adopt the guidelines provided.

This research also further analyzes extant literature about attribution theory and fills the gap about its link with influencer marketing. Furthermore, it provides supplementary literature about authenticity management, which is a source's characteristic poorly examined by research, compared to source credibility.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This work suggests some directions for future research. One interesting aspect that needs further investigation is whether people do pay attention to captions or if images have a significant stronger impact on followers' attitudes. It would be also interesting to introduce mediation effects, also according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984), to investigate under which conditions followers are keener to read captions. We believe that involvement in the category product, personal relevance, level of need for cognition⁴⁴, pre-

⁴⁴ The need for cognition is defined as the degree to which people enjoy thinking and exerting cognitive effort (Dillard & Pfau, 2012).

existing interest in purchasing the category product might have a significant role in explaining the conditions in which people prefer images to captions (Paragraph 3.1.). In particular, we suggest that in cases of less thoughtful processing due to recipients' lack of motivation or ability to process the message, images might serve as peripheral⁴⁵ cues for processing.

Future research might also consider mediators explaining the outcomes observed (see Paragraph 3.3.).

As suggested by Kim & Kim (2021), the perception of genuine intention can be more impactful to followers who have a weak relationship, or have not yet developed an intense relationship, with the influencer. Therefore, para-social relationship might reduce the importance of the endorsement style used, since followers probably already consider the influencer authentic and the type of language might not have an important effect on them. Hence, future research could investigate whether the intimacy level of the follower-influencer relationship moderates the effect of endorsement style on authenticity.

Moreover, this study focused on endorsement styles, but the text surrounding an endorsement may influence its impact. A language signaling lower involvement or interest of the influencer in promoting the product might increase authenticity by signaling the presence of a non-extrinsic motive. However, this type of language might decrease the influencer's perceived confidence in the product quality. It would be interesting to investigate whether the use of words such as "I guess I kind of recommend it" has a positive or negative impact on users' attitudes towards the ad and the influencer.

⁴⁵ The ELM posits that attitude change may occur through one of two different processing routes (Solomon, 2017). Due to cognitive constraints that prevent people from thoughtfully processing all of the messages to which they are exposed, in some instances, persuasion will occur through the central route, and in other instances it will occur through the peripheral route (Dillard & Pfau, 2012). Central route processing of persuasive messages produces attitude change based on critical evaluation of the merits of the arguments contained within a message, whereas persuasion via the peripheral route is associated with less thoughtful processing, such as reliance on cues – peripheral cues – or heuristics that are unrelated to the actual merits of the message (e.g., the message is associated with an attractive source) (Dillard & Pfau, 2012).

APPENDIX

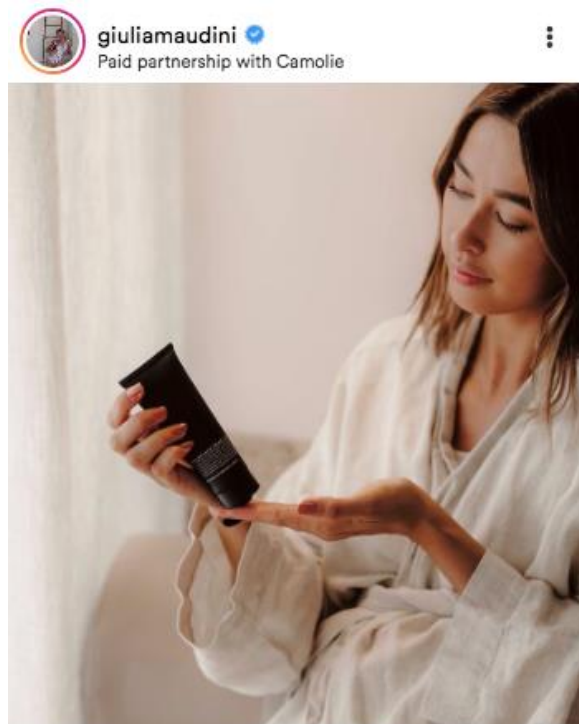


Figure 3.2.1. Implicit endorsement condition



Figure 3.2.2. Explicit conditional endorsement).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ “A me è piaciuta!” = “I liked it!”; “La consiglio specialmente per chi ha mani particolarmente delicate e sta cercando una crema protettiva e riparatrice!” = “I recommend it especially for those who have particularly sensitive hands and are looking for a protective and repairing cream!”

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