Research Paper

The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Brand Awareness, Image and Trust in their Sponsored Content: An Empirical Study from Georgian Social Media Users

Arian Matin *
Tornike Khoshtaria **
Nugzar Todua ***

ABSTRACT

This study aims to find the impact of social media influencers on brand awareness, brand image, and trust in their sponsored content. For this purpose, influencers' traits were divided into intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics to measure their impact more accurately. Hypotheses were formulated, and a close-ended questionnaire was distributed to quantitatively analyse the effect of social media influencers. In total, 327 responses were collected for analysis. The results indicated that social media influencers' perceived intrinsic characteristics positively impact the level of brand awareness, and perceived extrinsic traits positively affect brand image, and trust in sponsored content. The research measures consumer reactions to influencer marketing among social media users. It contributes to overall knowledge about social media influencers` impacts on users through implications of attitudinal persuasion knowledge and self-perception theory. The findings shed light on the implications of social media influencers` traits in relation to how the sponsored brands and influencers` content are perceived by customers.

Keywords: Social media influencers, brand awareness, brand image, digital marketing, consumer behavior, perception toward brand

* International Black Sea University, Georgia. Email: arianmatin@outlook.com
** Teaching University Geomedi, Georgia. Email: tornike.khoshtaria@geomedi,edu.ge
*** Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia. Email: nugzar.todua@tsu.ge

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media marketing is one of the main pillars of communication with consumers today (Vollenbroek *et al.,* 2014). Companies constantly include social media advertisements in their marketing plans to increase their reach. Logically, there are various methods of social media advertising that can be employed based on a company's communication objectives and target market. Therefore, companies employ, so called, social media influencers' (SMIs) services to fulfill their objectives set for particular target segments. Influencers, or micro-celebrities, are active internet personalities with enough subscribers or followers to affect a certain part of the market (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

According to Dhanesh and Duthler (2019), influencers present their daily life and narrate their experiences to garner followers. When the number of followers is large enough these influencers can be considered opinion leaders, with sway on customers' purchasing decisions. This model of marketing can be utilized as a way of elevating brand intimacy, which consequently renders brand love (Giovanis & Athanasopoulou, 2018). As we witness growing demand for influencers' services from companies, Voorveld (2019) suggests a model for effective communication through social media platforms. Her model includes channel, message and source characteristics.

However, despite the fact that the role of influencers during the last decade is on a steep incline, in terms of their number and scope, this has also led users to consider promotions through these channels in a more detailed manner. Kumar and Mirchandani (2012), Balakrishnan *et al.* (2014) and Audrezet *et al.* (2017) found that a growing number of users doubt the authenticity of influencers` endorsements on social media.

Therefore, this research is designed to measure the effects of influencer marketing on customers` response. Implications of the persuasion knowledge model are also discussed for better understanding of the relationship between influencer and consumer (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). This study investigates the attributes of agent and its effect on the target in persuasion knowledge model principles (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Moreover, we explore the communicator`s traits and their impact on observers according to self-perception theory (Bem, 1972). Additionally, we

address the inconsistencies of the two frameworks when applied to social media influencers. As explained, there are opportunities and threats surrounding influencer marketing. Thus, companies can take advantage of those opportunities and tackle the threats to create a coherent strategy for the use of micro-celebrities.

The preliminary literature review of influencer marketing indicated that there is no abundance of empirical or theoretical works detailing micro-celebrities intrinsic and extrinsic traits and their impact on the perception of brands and their sponsored content. Bagga and Bhatt (2013) explored intrinsic and extrinsic forces behind consumer demand patterns in online purchases. While, Vollenbroek *et al.* (2014) briefly discussed the traits and concluded that intrinsic characteristics are difficult to measure, hence, they only included elements of extrinsic traits in their measurements. Audrezet *et al.* (2020) summarised intrinsic traits in authenticity and the personality of SMIs. Finally, Shibchurrn and Yan (2015) evaluated intrinsic and extrinsic motivations among social media users and their impact on disclosure intentions. Hence, this study extends the literature by designing constructs measuring SMIs` intrinsic and extrinsic trends.

This research also advances the literature by exploring Georgian social media users. There are limited number of studies conducted investigating Georgian social media users and very limited in studies in terms of SMIs. Due to high concentration of social media users among 15 to 29 year olds in urban areas, (Geostat, 2019), the research investigates university students in four universities in Tbilisi with the highest concentration of internet users in the country. Hence, the study aims to shed light on consumer perceptions towards SMIs in Georgia, focusing mainly on low to medium involvement consumer goods and excluding very high-involvement products which can be out of reach for younger consumers. Because of high popularity of Facebook and Instagram among social media users in Georgia, SMIs active on these two main platforms are the focus of this research.

Therefore, the study seeks to design constructs measuring SMI`s intrinsic and extrinsic traits collated from the previous literature reviewed in the next section. A research model is then proposed to test the designed constructs against brand awareness, image and trust in the sponsored contents. A survey is distributed among social media users in Georgia and the data is analysed utilising confirmatory factor analysis. Lastly, theoretical, practical implications and research conclusion limitations and recommendation for future research are discussed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media is used for a variety of marketing objectives from creating awareness about a new product to contributing to consumer purchasing decisions. In this section, the role of social media influencers and the way they affect their followers is detailed by reviewing past research conducted into SMIs.

2.1 Social media influencers' characteristics

Depending on the platform and the theme of the influencer's content, the details of their characteristics can differ. However, there is a general model that can be applied to measure the effectiveness of advertising through influencers.

Authenticity is one of the characteristics of influencers' which impacts consumer perception of the products or brand. Nandagiri and Philip (2018) emphasised that in addition to how relatable the influencer is, and how easy it is for their audience to understand the content, their sponsored posts can elevate brand image and trustworthiness if the influencer discusses both negative and positive sides of the product. This link between influencers, brands and customers, according to Xu and Pratt (2018), was formulated as influencer/brand and influencer/consumer congruence.

However, the perception of honesty can be elevated by the traits that the influencer possesses. Gräve (2017) and Lokithasan *et al.* (2019) listed these characteristics, which include likeability, expertise and familiarity. Nevertheless, they specified that some of these variables, such as familiarity, could have a diminishing effect over time as the influencer grows their base and the audience becomes more familiar with their content; at which point they tend to ignore some of the sponsored posts. Their studies also emphasised that the gender of the influencer is an important element in how the audience perceives the fit between the sponsored content and the influencers` channel theme. In the context of the persuasion knowledge model, these elements can be interpreted and classified as part of the agent knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Likewise, the noted traits can be categorised under communicator attributes to investigate the relationship between the communicator and the observer, in terms of self-perception theory (Bem, 1972). Lastly, the elaboration likelihood model suggests likeability and expertise can signal peripheral cues, changing target attitude, toward a subject (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

As observed, there are several, identifiable key characteristics which impact consumer behaviour. Further to this, as Abdullahi (2020) explained, endorsers should possess traits such as credibility (measured by items such as the perception of bias, expertise and personality of the

influencer), physical attractiveness, advertising disclosure and being able to transfer the message effectively in their presentations and their posts online. Brands also need to consider the fit between their products and the influencer's overall content. (Casaló *et al.,* 2017a) identify other relevant characteristics, including a link between an influencer's perceived personality and entertainment value and its connection to the user's own enjoyment and personal hedonism. Where this connection is strong users are more likely to 'follow' influencers (Casaló *et al.,* 2017b).

In addition to those traits, Erdogmus and Cicek (2012) highlighted, that trust and positive attitudes towards a brand can increase when customers` families or friends follow the brand or its endorsers on social media. The findings of Abdullahi (2020) and Erdogmus and Cicek (2012) can both contribute to consumers coping with persuasion attempts under the persuasion knowledge model framework (Friestad & Wright, 1994). They also serve to emphasise the role of social proof as an element in peripheral route, shaping target attitude, as articulated in the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Classification of the influencer's traits is evaluated in models by Vollenbroek *et al.* (2014), Chang *et al.* (2015), and Yadav and Rahman (2017), Gerrath and Usrey (2020) to explore their effectiveness. They determined that an effective influencer should possess sufficient characteristics to communicate the message properly. These traits include their gender, being perceived as a trendsetter and as personable. They also indicated other factors such as the number of followers, shares and the click-through rate, which also affect user perception toward them. However, overall attributes can be grouped into intrinsic and extrinsic categories to better form a model representing various aspects of each determinant (Espejel *et al.,* 2009).

The studies noted above prompted this study and the formulation of the main research question, as it is indicated in the introduction. Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) recommended further research to examine the effect of consumers' motivations and beliefs regarding micro-celebrities. They suggested testing the role of factors such as gender on consumer attitude toward influencers. Lim *et al.* (2017) suggested a further examination of elements enabling the target audience to relate to the influencer closely, prompting this study to add personality and attractiveness to the model. They also proposed further research on influencers' reach and coverage, defined by their number of followers and how many shares and likes their posts attract. The focus in this study on extrinsic traits is designed to address that gap in the research. Casaló *et al*. (2020) recommended

testing the perception of users toward influencers by evaluating their perspectives on the credibility and expertise of SMIs. However, as noted previously, elements such as gender and personality are difficult to measure objectively (Vollenbroek *et al.,* 2014). Therefore, this research extends the literature by collating these factors, categorising them under intrinsic values and testing the subjective user perception of the traits.

Finally, Abdullahi (2020) suggested investigating user bias in their perception toward influencers in instances where they hold pre-existing knowledge of the SMI. Casaló *et al.* (2017b) also noted the potential to explore the impact of factors such as the number of likes on social media posts and users' familiarity with the influencers as interesting topics for future studies. As a result, we added another item to our extrinsic construct covering the impact of the degree of a user's prior knowledge about the influencer through their family and friends to evaluate the principles of agent and target relationship, drawing on the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and contrast it with communicator and observer correlation using aspects of self-perception theory (Bem, 1972). Hence, this study gathers the elements mentioned and tests them against brand awareness and image (Xu & Pratt, 2018). Once again, this research advances the literature by measuring users' subjective perception toward elements such as the number of likes, shares and subscribers classified under extrinsic characteristics in the model. Formulating the model entirely on user perceptions reveals a new path of measurement, as it allows the model to assess the noted links through cognitive biases of the target.

2.2 Effects of social media influencers on brand awareness and image

Hund and McGuiga (2019) point out that, authenticity, evaluated by an influencer`s relevance to the brand and his/her presentation and communication with followers, plays a significant role in how the audience receives the brand and message. Influencers that fit into what they call an "ordinary lifestyle" can better communicate the message to their followers. While those who project an out of touch image are not viewed as authentic and do not persuade their audience as effectively.

In line with the Hund and McGuiga (2019) study, Zeljko *et al.* (2018) confirm that influencers can shape customers' attitudes towards a specific product or service. They suggest that influencers can assist in moving their audience through the DAGMAR model. They can create product or brand awareness in the initial stages and contribute to preference and action in the later phases.

Sudha and Sheena (2017) suggested that SMIs have become a significant force in the fashion industry. They indicated that influencers could set trends and affect customer attitudes towards a brand and their purchasing decision considerably. In a more detailed model, Lou and Yuan (2018) found influencers` informative content can lead to trust and consequently to brand awareness among their audience.

Balaban and Mustatea (2019) determined the characteristics that influencers should possess to impact the decision-making process among their followers. They pointed out that the expertise of the influencer, their credibility and physical attractiveness can lead to a larger number of followers and their trustworthiness among the audience.

Consequently, higher levels of trust can raise brand reputation and purchase intention among followers. All the noted influencer traits such as their content presentation, expertise and attractiveness (Lou & Yuan, 2018; Balaban & Mustatea, 2019) are directly observable by users. Hence, they can be categorised as the agent`s contribution to the persuasion episode with regards to the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Accordingly, self-perception theory states that the authenticity of the communicator can persuade the observer into taking the message at face value (Bem, 1972). In terms of personality, gender and credibility influencers can act as enthusiastic communicators for the brand and persuade the observer (target audience) to engage with the message. The level to which users identify and relate to the communicator can also facilitate the signaling of peripheral cues, shaping attitudes toward the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Furthermore, Venus Jin *et al.* (2019) attribute the impact of influencers, on how their followers perceive a brand or a product, to three main elements. Firstly, they pointed out that the trustworthiness of influencers is higher than traditional celebrities. Moreover, their research indicated that attitude towards the brand among customers is more positive when exposed to influencers rather than traditional advertising. Lastly, the audience feels more envious of the influencers than mainstream celebrities, which persuades them to purchase the product they endorse to compensate for that envy.

On a larger scale, consumer brand identification can lead to higher levels of engagement and loyalty (Rather *et al.,* 2018). In terms of micro-celebrities, the degree to which the consumers identify with SMIs (Hund & McGuiga, 2019; Venus Jin *et al.,* 2019) is closely related to the characteristics that the influencer possesses. Traits such as gender, physical attractiveness and

personality can directly affect perception and recognition of consumers toward the influencer`s content (Balaban & Mustatea, 2019; Audrezet *et al.,* 2020). The noted characteristics are grouped together to enable the model to define micro-celebrities with regards to overall user perception toward the agent, in the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), and the communicator, in self-perception theory (Bem, 1972). Using the model, we also test whether the collective effects of gender, personality and attractiveness can act as trigger features in the context of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002). Therefore, this study posits:

- **H1a:** *Perceived importance of influencers' intrinsic characteristics positively affects brand awareness in sponsored products.*

Further analyzing the role of communicator, in self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), the other side of SMI`s traits requires to be tested.      Hence, this research attempt to measure perceived extrinsic traits, defined by the number of SMI`s followers, prior familiarity and the number of likes on their posts against brand recall and recognition of users. Testing the link can evaluate, whether, "social proof" as a peripheral cue in elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) can be applied to influencers. Therefore, adding perceived extrinsic traits to the model can reveal the capability of "social proof" to cut through perceptual selectivity of users.

This research seeks to test the above-noted relationship by aligning the model with previous studies in the field. The previous findings include, the ability of the influencer to elevate brand awareness depends on the number of consumers following their updates (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Hence, the number of followers, shares and likes on the posts can directly impact the number of users exposed to the post. Dedeoglu *et al.* (2020) discovered the number of social shares by active participants in the tourism sector can elevate the level of awareness among users. This study aims to extend the literature by grouping the above mentioned traits across different sectors, adding the level of prior familiarity, into extrinsic factors in order to test the role of influencers as communicator (Friestad & Wright, 1994). It will also study its effects in shaping social proof signaling peripheral cues in the context of the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Therefore, we put forward the following.

- **H1b:** *Perceived importance of influencers' extrinsic characteristics positively affects brand awareness in sponsored products.*

Additionally, companies should consider their own communication with social media influencers to achieve their marketing goals with regards to establishing their brand image. Alfiero *et al.* (2016) and Pang *et al.* (2016) discussed these links between influencers and their sponsors. Their study arrived at a framework of different strategies for efficient communication. They found that brands need to seek a fit between their products and the theme of the social media platform and its influencers. Utilising appropriate influencers, in terms of their characteristics and presentation, can contribute to an agent action-psychological event, in the persuasion knowledge model, triggering a response from the target audience (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and potentially shaping their perception toward brand image. Although, the coping mechanism of the target may result in negative attitude toward the stimuli.

Nonetheless, self-perception theory states that if the behaviour is perceived to be caused by external forces the individual does not hold the behaviour as a source of self-attribute (Bem, 1972). In our model influencers as communicators, may lead social media users, as observers, to execute certain behaviour, for instance purchasing a product. However, they are not able to affect the observer's attitude in cases of dissonance, common in today's social media environment with different influencers endorsing various brands.

As discussed, past studies suggest that micro-celebrities can enhance brand awareness and image. Trisna Jaya and Teddy Prianthara (2018) stated that micro-celebrities can influence how customers perceive the brand or product quality. They can also educate customers about the history of the brand and its products. Finally, influencers can reassure customers about the performance, functionality and reliability of the product or the brand they endorse.

The link between the perception of micro-celebrities and brand image has already been established (Alfiero *et al.,* 2016; Pang *et al.,* 2016; Trisna Jaya & Teddy Prianthara, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to interpret the scope of the relationship between the two by examining the impact of intrinsic traits, the extent to which the target identifies with the agents and reduces the coping effect (Friestad & Wright, 1994). We also test the elaboration likelihood model by evaluating the impact its "liking" variable has in shaping target attitude (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) in the context of social media influencers. Thus we posit:

- **H2a:** *Perceived importance of influencers' intrinsic characteristics positively affects brand image of sponsored products.*

On the other side of the spectrum, Scott (2018) discovered the effect of SMI`s extrinsic traits on brand equity. In this research, we seek to examine the link from a different perspective by considering the perceived value of SMI`s extrinsic characteristics and test it against brand image. Once again, testing the noted relationship can reveal the level of impact of "social proof", in elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), on user attitude towards the endorsed brand in the context of social media influencers. Moreover, testing the level of impact can disclose whether the "social proof" factor is effective in reducing coping effect of persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Moreover, Lim *et al.* (2017) hypothesised the significance of source credibility, characterised under extrinsic values of influencers in his study, and could not support its impact on customer attitude towards the brand. His result contradicts the findings of Trisna Jaya and Teddy Prianthara (2018), proposing there is a link between informative contents of the influencer and brand image. Based on the inconsistency in previous research, therefore, the mentioned phenomenon requires further investigation.

This study extend the literature by not only testing the source credibility (Lim *et al.,* 2017; Trisna Jaya & Teddy Prianthara, 2018), but other extrinsic characteristics of the influencers to once again create an inclusive and clear picture of an efficient agent, reducing coping effects on the target (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Moreover, this study aims to test the "social proof" variable in the elaboration likelihood model, specifically in a digital marketing context (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) Therefore, we hypothesise:

- **H2b:** *Perceived importance of influencers' extrinsic characteristics positively affects brand image of sponsored products.*

2.3 The effects of social media influencers on customers' trust in the message and its content

Another advantage of influencer marketing is the nature of its two-way communication. Emory *et al.* (2018) suggest this communication creates a perception of one-on-one advertising and can contribute to a higher level of engagement and trust. Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) listed some of the trust elements such as the ability of the influencer to take the needs of his or her followers into consideration and their expertise and their understanding of the concerns of their followers about the product or the brand they advertise.

An additional factor contributing to gains in customer trust over social media platforms is authenticity. Audrezet *et al.* (2020) and Wellman *et al.* (2020) detailed that influencers should balance their content between what their followers prefer, their overall theme and the sponsor's requirement. Hanna *et al.* (2011) and Gan *et al.* (2019) confirmed the significance of fit between micro-celebrities' content, their followers and the brand to create trust; however, they highlighted that the fit should not erode the uniqueness of their channels. Overall, the fit can contribute to attitudinal persuasion knowledge regarding the influencer and target audience relationship (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019)

As noted, the degree to which the consumer identifies with the influencer, in terms of gender, personality and attractiveness, can determine the perception of fit between the influencer and the consumer (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). The level of fit can then result in higher levels of trust in the sponsored content (Hanna *et al.,* 2011, Gan *et al.,* 2019; Wellman *et al.,* 2020). As observed, there is an indirect path starting from gender, personality and attractiveness, to fit between the influencer`s channel and finally to the level of trust. This study attempts to extend the literature by directly testing the effect of intrinsic traits of SMIs on the level of trust among consumers. As noted, the right balance of these traits can minimise the coping mechanisms in the target (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and act as a trigger feature, creating a hyper-reality, and shaping target trust and attitude toward the message (Bandura, 2002) Hence we posit:

- **H3a:** *Perceived importance of influencers' intrinsic characteristics positively affects the level of trust in their sponsored content.*

Booth and Matic (2011) and Scott (2018) indicated variables such as integrity and reputation of the influencer, the number of his/her followers and their consistency and expertise, among other factors, can lead to higher level of trust. Thus, the relevance of the product endorsed to the influencer's overall channel theme and their follower size affect customer trust in the endorsement and brand equity. Stephen (2016) suggests rating and reviews on social media can impact customers' trust and their decision-making process. While, Chatzigeorgiou (2017) indicated that the number of followers, personality and activities presented by an influencer can impact trust in their sponsored content. This link can be explained in the framework of the persuasion knowledge model through agent knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994), since users

can better evaluate and judge the influencer by these readily observable elements; even though, it may result in dissonance with the authenticity of the message. Stubb *et al.* (2019), exploring a different side of trust, concluded that when the SMIs compensation by the sponsor is justified, it raises the credibility of the SMI and the message.

Yet, the number of followers, shares and likes as well as ad disclosure can have both positive and negative effects in terms of recognition and resistance and coping mechanism (Eisend *et al.,* 2020). In the framework of self-perception theory, once the communicator appears to have ulterior motives, such as monetary gain, the level of trust and attention paid to the message by the observer diminishes (Bem, 1972). As a result, influencers (as communicators) with large number of followers and sponsored content can reduce the level of trust among their target audience (observers).

Nevertheless, follower size can have an adverse effect in some instances. Veirman *et al.* (2017) found that influencers with a small or medium number of followers are perceived as more exclusive. This exclusivity extends to the brands they endorse. As a result, when influencers with a large number of followers endorse a product or service, that exclusivity factor diminishes.

In summary, there is an inconsistency in the link between an influencer`s number of followers and overall exposure to the level of trust among consumers. While a larger number of followers can increase exposure and consequently the level of trust (Matic, 2011; Stephen, 2016; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Scott, 2018), it can also reduce the level of perceived exclusiveness and may have an adverse effect on trust levels (Veirman *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, based on conclusions above, this study is motivated to add to the previous literature by collating the aforementioned models through the classification of influencers` characteristics into extrinsic factors, to find the balance in agents' perceived characteristics, which minimises the coping mechanism in the target (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This research also tests the impact of social proof, using the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), on creating trust in the message. Thus, we hypothesise:

- **H3b:** *Perceived importance of influencers' extrinsic characteristics positively affects the level of trust in their sponsored content.*

3. METHOD

3.1 Research strategy and measurement scales

To achieve the objectives of the study, quantitative research strategies were employed. We used a survey instrument initially developed by the authors who are mentioned in the literature review sections. In addition, the list of authors, constructs and construct items are provided in the Table I below. However, we took some particular steps towards adjusting the questionnaire to the realities of the market.

Particularly, this study divides micro-celebrities' characteristics into two categories, intrinsic and extrinsic (independent variables) and their impacts are measured against dependent variables.

For this study, we identified three dependent variables. Firstly, trust in the content and brand (perception of honesty in sponsored content, the extent to which influencers take customers` concerns and opinions into consideration). Secondly, brand awareness (respondents hearing from a new brand or product from an influencers` content, whether influencers` content have new information, the trendsetting ability of influencers) and, thirdly, brand image (quality of sponsored product or brand, history of the brand, reliability of the product and exclusivity of the brand).

3.2 Research construct and model

The variables in this study are formed based on a deductive and quantitative approach collating items for intrinsic and extrinsic traits (Table 1).

Table 1. Research construct

Constructs	Past literature
Influencers' intrinsic traits	Vollenbroek *et al.* (2014) ; Chatzigeorgiou (2017); Abdullahi (2020)
Influencer's extrinsic traits	Vollenbroek *et al.* (2014); Chatzigeorgiou (2017); Abdullahi (2020)
Brand awareness	Sudha and Sheena (2017); Lou and Yuan (2018); Trisna Jaya and Teddy Prianthara (2018); Zeljko *et al.* (2018)
Brand image	Lim *et al.* (2017); Sudha and Sheena (2017); Trisna Jaya and Teddy Prianthara (2018); Venus Jin *et al.* (2019)
Trust in the sponsored contents	Chatzigeorgiou (2017); Scott (2018); Dhanesh and Duthler (2019)

Based on the construct, the research model below illustrates the visual representation of relationships analysed in this study (Figure 1).
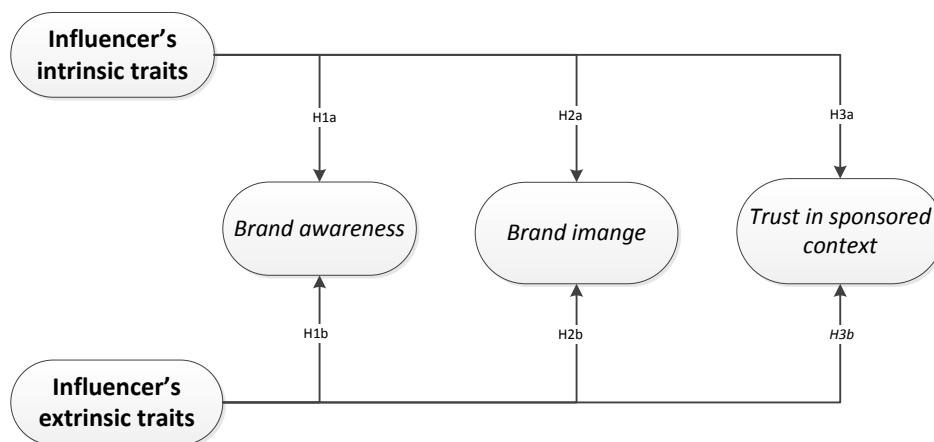
Figure 1. Research model

3.3 Sampling techniques and sample selections

With the rise in the number of internet users (Geostat, 2019), social media paid advertisements among enterprises in Georgia has increased drastically from 48% of companies utilising this advertising approach in 2016 to 63% of them in 2019. These factors make Georgia a fruitful destination for analysing the impact of influencers on the market and finding their effect on brand awareness and image while measuring customers` overall trust in those advertising contents.

According to Geostat (2019), the largest number of internet users in Georgia is in the capital (Tbilisi), where 88% of the population has access to the internet. Furthermore, among different age ranges, the highest percentage of internet usage belongs to 15 to 29-year-olds, where 95% of this age range is active internet users, 75% of whom residing in urban areas. Therefore, we employed a non-probability sampling approach for this study. Respondents are comprised of university students from four universities in Tbilisi with the highest percentage of internet and social media users. A total of 327 questionnaires were distributed, with a response rate of 75%. Gender distribution of the sample includes 55.7% male and 44.3% female respondents. Behaviourally, 59.2% of respondents indicated they log onto social media platforms multiple times a day followed by 28.5% checking their social media accounts once a day. Furthermore, 9.2% of respondents indicated that they log onto their social media accounts once every few days, 1.6% once a week and 1.6% longer than a week. No incentives were offered in collecting the responses.

Consequently, we received 316 responses, which are in the range of the past studies in the research construct. Previous studies collected responses from 179 by Trisna Jaya and Teddy Prianthara (2018) to Lim *et al.* (2017) with 200 and Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) with 323 responses. The confidence interval for our study is 95%, and the error margin is 5.5%. According to Salant and Dillman (1994), this is considered acceptable for business studies.

The questionnaire was constructed to quantitatively investigate the impact of influencers on brand awareness, image and trust. We used existing measures to test the hypotheses developed earlier in this chapter. We distributed the questionnaire and collected the responses via an internet-based survey tool. The survey instrument was divided into five parts according to the construct column, as is presented in Table I. The questionnaire was designed using a 7 level Likert scale.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Validity and reliability

For the internal reliability of the constructs comprising the questionnaire we used reliability alpha. According to many authors Cronbach's alpha level has to be over 0.7. Since past studies such as Trisna Jaya and Teddy Prianthara (2018) considered 0.6 acceptable on the lower boundary, and Chaiyasoonthorn and Suksa-ngiam (2011), Todua (2017), Khoshtaria *et al.* (2021) and Matin *et al.* (2020) set it at 0.7. As per our analysis the level of reliability alpha is as follows: Intrinsic trait – 0.8, extrinsic trait - 0.85, brand awareness – 0.87, brand image - 0.86 and trust in sponsored content – 0.82. As we can observe all the constructs' Cronbach's alphas are above the accepted threshold of 0.7. Thus internal reliability for this study is maintained. Moving along with the testing we utilized exploratory factor analysis to trim those factors potentially reflected the amount of latent variables. Consequently, we check the value of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin, which was – 0.88, well above the threshold of 0.5. Also, Barlett's test of sphericity was significant at $p < 0.00$. Afterwards we checked Eigenvalues for each dimension. The test result identified five dimensions, Intrinsic trait, extrinsic traits, brand awareness, brand image and trust in sponsored content. Each component under the mentioned dimensions is above 0.5 and the noted dimensions explain the cumulative variance at 0.66, toping over 0.5 threshold. Looking at the tests' results it can be concluded that this study achieved internal reliability and validity.

For validating our survey instrument we conducted confirmatory factor analysis through IBM AMOS version 26. For the analysis we concentrate our focus on absolute and comparative fit values namely, observing comparative fit index (CFI) which is 0.952 and incremental fit index (IFI) standing at 0.952, for comparative fit values and chi square (X2/df) 1.987 (bellow 5), root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) 0.055 and goodness of fit (GFI) 0.914 for absolute fit values. As a result for comparative fit values we employed Marsh and Hocevar, (1988), Olobatuyi, (2006), Byrne, (2013) and Torlak et al., (2019) guidelines. All coefficients fit the mentioned standards. As a consequence the model fit is supported through the analysis. Additionally, we conducted discriminant and convergent validity test, which is displayed in the table below (Table 2).

Table 2. Convergent and discriminant validity

	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
Intrinsic trait	0.803	0.505	**0.711**				
Brand awareness	0.850	0.586	0.636***	**0.766**			
Brand image	0.836	0.635	-0.047	-0.057	**0.797**		
Extrinsic trait	0.876	0.588	-0.062	-0.022	0.650***	**0.767**	
Trust in content	0.867	0.623	***	***	0.685	0.673	0.789

As it can be seen from the table above convergent reliability of all variables is above 0.7 and average variance extracted is between 0.505 and 0.635. Hence, Convergent and discriminant validity has been achieved (Matin *et al.* 2021).

4.2 Hypothesis testing

Based on the test results for the first set of hypotheses: H1a: Perceived intrinsic traits have significant impact on brand awareness (β=0.575, t=7.959, p<0.001). H1b: Perceived extrinsic traits have significant impact on brand awareness (β=0.016, t=0.294, p>0.05). For the second set of hypotheses: H2a: Perceived intrinsic traits have significant impact on brand image (β=0.031, t=0.582, p >0.05). H2b: Perceived extrinsic traits have significant impact on brand image (β=0.606, t=7.423, p<0.001). For the third set of hypotheses: H3a: Perceived intrinsic traits have significant impact on trust in content (β=0.019, t=0.348, p >0.05). H3b: Perceived extrinsic traits have significant impact on trust in content (β=0.606, t=13.726, p<0.001).

As we can observe H1a, H2b and H3b are supported and H1b, H2a and H3a are not supported (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of the hypotheses

Hypnotized paths			Beta	t value	Sig	Result
Brand awareness	<---	Intrinsic trait	0.575	7.959	***	Supported
Trust in content	<---	Extrinsic trait	0.606	13.726	***	Supported
Brand image	<---	Extrinsic trait	0.606	7.423	***	Supported
Brand image	<---	Intrinsic trait	0.031	0.582	.860	Not supported
Trust in content	<---	Intrinsic trait	0.019	0.348	.969	Not supported
Brand awareness	<---	Extrinsic trait	0.016	0.294	.815	Not supported

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research aimed to identify how the characteristics of social media influencers' impact brand awareness, brand image and trust in their sponsored content. The study adopted a deductive approach by reviewing and combining the past literature, exploring this area, in order to construct a model to measure these impacts on social media users.

A survey of close-ended questions was distributed to quantitatively measure the influence of micro-celebrities. The result indicated that influencers could affect brand awareness, brand image and trust in sponsored messages positively. However, this impact is more evident in those social media users who follow these influencers regularly. Since, nearly half of the sample indicated that they are not following micro-celebrities on their social media channels, the companies should be aware of the limits of their influence on customers.

Furthermore, this study illustrated how companies could select social media influencers for marketing their brands. The research model divided the characteristics of micro-celebrities into intrinsic and extrinsic traits, which can assist companies in aligning their marketing plan to influencers' traits and their types of followers more accurately.

This research aimed to discover the relationship between micro-celebrities and brand awareness, image and trust in advertising by testing the model among social media users. The research model was constructed by testing variables such as influencers` gender, personality and attractiveness (Erdogmus & Cicek, 2012; Gräve, 2017; Lokithasan *et al.,* 2019; Abdullahi, 2020) and their number of followers or shares and likes on their posts (Matic, 2011; Chatzigeorgiou,

2017; Scott, 2018, Lokithasan *et al.,* 2019). The model extends the literature by collating and grouping the factors mentioned above into intrinsic and extrinsic traits (Vollenbroek *et al.,* 2014; Chang *et al.,* 2015; Yadav & Rahman, 2017). Additionally, this study extends the aforementioned models by measuring user perception toward intrinsic and extrinsic traits. Previous research evaluated elements such as number of followers, shares and likes on social media by recording SMI`s channels and comparing those numbers from one post to another. This study, however, measures these factors by surveying social media users. As a method of evaluation it adds the user`s subjective view of extrinsic values and measures them against brand awareness, image and trust in sponsored content.

The research extends the literature by applying the persuasion knowledge model, specifically the agent knowledge factor (Friestad & Wright, 1994), to recognise the influencer/user relationship. Influencers' traits are then examined to test their impact on attitudinal persuasion knowledge (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). We contrasted the noted model with self-perception theory in terms of communicator attributes and evaluated these attributes with regards to the perception of the observer (Bem, 1972). The results followed a more similar pattern to agent`s impact in persuasion knowledge factor; since. influencers, as agents, can positively affect attitudes before the target performs the behavior (act of purchase). However, in terms of brand image and trust persuasion knowledge theory, it implies a level of skepticism in the message which was not observed in the impact of perceived extrinsic traits. The results also confirm the significance of the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the cues that are signaled by the SMI, raising the level of brand recall and recognition among users.

This study attempts to take the matter further by examining the impact of the variables discussed on brand awareness, image and trust in sponsored content. For instance, a link between influencers' intrinsic traits, such as personality and entertainment value, to the level of fit between their channel and the brand is established (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Moreover, the level of fit between an influencer`s channel and theme to the level of trust has been discovered (Hanna *et al.,* 2011, Gan *et al.,* 2019; Wellman *et al.,* 2020). This research adds to the literature by testing this indirect path from an influencer`s intrinsic characteristics, to the level of fit and, finally, the level consumer trust. Although, the result indicated that perceived influencer`s intrinsic traits does not directly impact the level of trust, in the branded content, among their followers.

The study also attempted to address the inconsistent findings with regards to the impact of extrinsic traits on the level of trust. The tension here being whether the perception of influencer`s exclusivity (Veirman *et al.,* 2017) is diminished by having an extensive reach in terms of their number of followers (Stephen, 2016; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Scott, 2018). The result confirms (Stephen, 2016; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Scott, 2018) findings that reach takes priority in elevating levels of trust among consumers. The role that the perceived reach plays in raising the level of trust can be explained by the "Social proof" signal, sent through the peripheral route, in the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The findings also determines that perceived extrinsic traits, such as number of subscribers and level of expertise, is a more useful tool to minimize coping effects in the "target", in persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), as opposed to perceived intrinsic characteristics.

This paper also addresses the conflicting findings of Lim *et al.* (2017) and Trisna Jaya and Teddy Prianthara (2018) and provides empirical evidence of influencers` positive impact on brand image. The result is consistent with Trisna Jaya and Teddy Prianthara (2018) who proposed a link between source credibility, as an element of influencer`s extrinsic characteristics, and brand image. Although, once again, source credibility is evaluated by measuring subjective user perception toward the SMIs.

Likewise, the research extended the literature by testing the indirect link between the influencer`s intrinsic traits to the fit between their channels and the sponsored brand (Alfiero *et al.,* 2016; Pang *et al.,* 2016) and from the fit between the two to the overall brand image (Trisna Jaya & Teddy Prianthara, 2018). This paper found that, when the construct is founded on collating personality, gender and physical attractiveness of the SMI and measuring them under perceived intrinsic traits, the impact is not significant. This can partly be explained by inability of perceived intrinsic traits to reduce the coping mechanism associated with persuasion episode (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and saturation of various social media platforms with SMIs.

Moreover, we aim to add to the literature by evaluating the indirect link between how consumers relate to influencers through similarities such as gender and personality (Hund & McGuiga, 2019; Venus Jin *et al.,* 2019) and the impact of that association to recognition of sponsored brands (Balaban & Mustatea, 2019). The results indicated that there is a direct link between influencers' intrinsic characteristics and brand awareness. The finding emphasises the application of the "Liking" element in the elaboration likelihood model, Petty and Cacioppo,

1986, in SMIs and its impact on reduction of coping mechanisms, during the persuasion attempt, in the target (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Furthermore, intrinsic traits, including gender and personality of the SMI, can act as unconditioned stimuli and trigger features, in the context of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002), and create a hyper-reality elevating user perception toward brand image.

Finally, the study tests the level of an influencer`s reach (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Marwick & Boyd, 2011) on brand awareness by collating and categorising the reach under extrinsic traits (Vollenbroek *et al.,* 2014; Chang *et al.,* 2015; Yadav & Rahman, 2017). The study, however, did not find the impact of the combination of reach and expertise, as perceived extrinsic characteristics construct, on brand awareness significant.

Furthermore, the research offers managers and marketers an insight into their attempts to find suitable influencers for their products or brand on social media. Marketers can utilise this research to connect with their target customers by finding the best fit between their brand and an influencer with optimum intrinsic and extrinsic traits (Alfiero *et al.,* 2016; Pang *et al.,* 2016). This paper can then assist marketers in selecting influencers using a holistic perspective incorporating the evaluation of intrinsic and extrinsic traits. Marketers encounter user resistance to the persuasion attempt on regular basis (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This resistance is a result of coping mechanism activation by the target, when an agent initiates the persuasion attempt. This research can assist managers by offering new paths to reducing the effect of coping mechanisms among social media users. The results indicate these mechanisms, and the subsequent resistance to the sponsored content, can be reduced by utilising influencers' traits. Using the elaboration likelihood model, marketers can utilise SMI`s intrinsic characteristics by sending peripheral cues, such as "Liking", while extrinsic traits, if well managed, can lead to the signaling of other cues in the peripheral route; including, "Authority" and "Social proof" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Signaling the noted cues can result in the reduction of resistance and, consequently, higher levels of acceptance and trust in the sponsored content.

This research also can assist managers in their selection of influencers, with regards to their product life cycle. For instance, whether the product, or brand, is in the introduction or early growth phase and requires elevated brand awareness (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Marwick & Boyd, 2011) through SMIs possessing aligned perceived intrinsic traits with the target audience, or in the maturity phase, which requires a push in brand image for differentiation (Alfiero *et al.,*

2016; Pang *et al.,* 2016; Trisna Jaya & Teddy Prianthara, 2018) through perceived extrinsic characteristics with suitable reach and expertise.

The study highlights the significance of selecting suitable influencers, who possess the necessary intrinsic traits, to create a perception of authenticity among customers (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012; Balakrishnan *et al.,* 2014; Audrezet *et al.,* 2017). This is in addition to their reach and coverage (Hund & McGuiga, 2019; Venus Jin *et al.,* 2019) and helps users to establish a level of trust in their influencers, as their brand ambassadors, and as a result the product or service.

6. CONCLUSION, RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research seeks to investigate intrinsic and extrinsic traits among SMIs and measure their impacts against brand awareness, image and trust in the sponsored content. The study adopted a deductive and quantitative approach by collating factors from previous literature and designing intrinsic and extrinsic constructs. The research adds to the literature by incorporating elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), self-perception model (Bem, 1972) and persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and applying them in the context of SMIs. Furthermore, the study extends the literature by investigating an unexplored market. The data is collected from a sample of social media users in Georgia, a market which is not explored previously.

Perhaps the most noteworthy limitation of this research relates to the subject of the survey. The respondents were asked about micro-celebrities and their effects. Therefore, traditional celebrities were not included. To further the scope of the literature, (Casaló *et al.,* 2020), a comparative research project analysing the differences between traditional celebrities and social media influencers can contribute to the subject matter.

Furthermore, the model for the research can be expanded to include a construct for consumer buying behavior; since, this study limited the scope to customer perception toward brand image and did not include purchase intention.

Even though the research construct is tested and confirmed in the Georgian market. It can also be useful, for future studies, to test the model in various countries (Giovanis & Athanasopoulou, 2018) and for evaluating the effect of influencers in different cultures. Moreover, the study

contains a sample of 316 respondents. Hence, we suggest testing the model utilising probability sampling with a larger sample size.

Lastly, since nearly half of respondents, in the sample, did not show enough interest in micro-celebrities, it might be of interest to survey social media users to discover the reasons behind their lack of curiosity or their negative emotions towards influencers (Casaló *et al.,* 2021).

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