



Exploring the credibility and self-presentation of Insta micro-celebrities in influencing the purchasing decisions of Bangladeshi users

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ABSTRACT

Social media has and continues to provide ordinary people ubiquitous access to influence others and in the process, achieve online celebrity status. Not surprisingly, micro-celebrities on digital media have become the new promotional tool for product endorsements. Companies too are increasingly shifting from traditional celebrity endorsers to famous online influencers. However, concerns regarding the self-presentation and credibility of these insta-celebrities remain. This study combines the theoretical framework of the self-representation theory related to Goffman and Ohanian's source credibility model which comprises the three facets of attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise leading to purchase intention. This research attempts to examine the connections between online presentation and source credibility of micro-celebrities on Instagram to develop a modified source credibility model in the context of current digital media. Interpretive paradigm via in-depth interviews with 46 active Bangladeshi Instagram users were used to explore the dimensions of source credibility and self-presentations of micro-celebrities that influence the purchase decision of the users. The findings show that credibility can be achieved among the followers if the micro-celebrities follow certain criteria in terms of online behaviour presented in the modified framework of source credibility.

Keywords: *micro-celebrity, Instagram, social media, source credibility, self-presentation*

INTRODUCTION

Technological progress in the form of the internet, smartphones with upgraded cameras and social media platforms have reconstructed the way in which people capture, remember and interact with images of day-to-day life (Vivienne & Burgess, 2013). The emergence of social media has helped people transcend the manner in which they reach a wider group of audience via images, videos and updates. Accordingly, social media usage and the number of users continue to increase steadily and is predicted to grow further in the coming years (Kemp, 2018). More than three billion people use social media monthly and 90% of them access their social media accounts via mobile devices (Kemp, 2018).

Technological progress and shifts in social trends have allowed marketing specialists to move from traditional media such as broadcasting or print to social media as an advertising tool (eMarketer, 2017). Today, customers' general tendency to avoid direct online advertising via banner blindness or advertisement blockers has given rise to a new type of social media advertising strategy (DeVeirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017); advertisements are now directly integrated into the content and design of social media posts. The wide popularity of Instagram as one of the leading social media platforms has enabled companies to market their products to a wider consumer base via a new type of celebrity (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The term "celebrity" continues to evolve and diversify with time; where once only movie stars, singers were called celebrities, fashion models represented by high-end agencies and 'insta-famous' influencers, i.e., micro-celebrities, are also now a core part of this group (Alperstein, 2019).

Social media micro-celebrities

A new type of social media advertising has been gaining popularity in recent years whereby 86% of marketers collaborate with micro-celebrities to promote their brands in the social media (Linqia, 2018). This term was first coined by Theresa M Senft in 2001 while conducting a research explaining how the usage of online tools helped "camgirls" forge a new performance style (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). This motivated people to accentuate their online popularity via digital technologies like images, blogs, videos and social networking sites (Senft, 2008).

Although websites and personal blogs can be used to establish a strong identity online, digital platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Youtube and Twitter have upped the game by accelerating the opportunity to get worldwide recognition. Instagram is now regarded as the most important social media platform for collaborating with micro-celebrities (Linqia, 2018). Micro-celebrities have now become an important marketing and communication tool and are considered as trusted tastemakers in one or more segments (Chahal, 2016). The identities of these celebs are based upon the awareness, acceptance, association, appreciation and aspiration of their followers (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013).

Micro-celebrities incorporate a particular brand in their posts and followers easily accept their recommendations, thanks to their credible digital word-of-mouth and branded entertainment (Eisend & Langner, 2010). Although they are sometimes required to highlight the persuasive nature of the post (e.g., mentioning #ad or #sponsored), users willingly take interest in their feed as the commercial content are integrated seamlessly into the daily stories that micro-celebrities share with their social media followers (DeVeirman et al., 2017).

Selecting the best-suited micro-celebrity

Although the strategy of using micro-celebrities to promote brands might seem effective, brand managers might feel overwhelmed by the wide array of micro-celebrities available. There are thousands of micro-celebrities on Instagram, providing content on different topics and interests, varying in number of followers and characteristics (Swant, 2016). The challenge that advertising specialists face is choosing the most promising micro-celebrity that can create a connection between the brand and the audience (DeVeirman et al., 2017).

The suitability of the micro-celebrity depends on the wants of the audience and the goals of the brand (Chahal, 2016). For example, Volvo collaborated with fashion micro-celebrity, Chriselle Lim for the promotion of their brand, even though her online content had never shown any interest in cars before (Curalate, 2016). Volvo's target was to engage the micro-celeb's millions of followers as potential consumers and strengthen its brand image. However, the campaign received negative reviews, and both Volvo and the micro-celebrity were criticised heavily by the users. Chriselle Lim had to post an apology video in her feed to pacify her upset followers, and Volvo was badly affected for its poor social media strategy (Curalate, 2016). It should be noted that the general assumption of advertisers on the credibility of Instagram micro-celebrities based on the number of followers may damage a brand's reputation (Salzman, 2016); the example of Volvo is a reference to an unsuccessful micro-celebrity strategy (Kurdej, 2017). The lack of consistency between the brand and the online self-presentation of the micro-celebrity may have detrimental consequences and advertisers should be careful in selecting a compatible social media endorser (Sipka, 2017).

Although micro-celebrities can be considered as stars by their fans, however, they need to be distinguished from traditional media endorsers (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016). Firstly, unlike traditional celebrities, micro-celebrities gain popularity without the support of institutional intermediaries (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2017). Secondly, the audience consider the content provided by the micro-celebrities as genuine, relatable and credible in comparison to traditional celebrities as long as the brand is consistent with their online self-presentation (Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016).

The aim of this research paper is to deduce the credibility of Instagram "micro-celebrities" as a tool of marketing and evaluate the attitudes of the consumers towards these insta-famous celebrities. This paper examines how the self-presentation of "micro-celebrities" affect their credibility, and proposes a modified framework of source credibility that can be used in the context of social media marketing.

This study will be of interest to marketing specialists who are keen on revitalising the brand image of their products and services and reach potential consumers, as well as for micro-celebrities, who want to increase their credibility among their followers and endorse the correct brand to go hand in hand with their online image.

Over the past years, Instagram has been gaining significant prominence in Bangladesh. The application is fast gaining the number two position in the dynamics of social media marketing. Bangladesh has around 2.6 million users in Instagram, among which over 1.95 million users fall in the millennial age group of 18–35 years (Napoleoncat, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Very few studies have been conducted on the advertising effectiveness and likeability of micro-celebrities on social media. The results of such research are equally important for the micro-celebrities and the brand. Unlike regular celebrities such as musicians or actors, micro-celebrities have to completely rely on their social media accounts to connect with their audience (Gräve, 2017); they do not have the avenue to create a positive image through concerts, movies or advertisements through traditional channels. Their actions and presentation of their identities play a significant role in procuring new followers and engaging the existing ones with interesting and relative content (Chung & Cho, 2017).

Previous studies on endorsements have found that the image and presentation of the endorsers are of great significance to the effectiveness of the advertising campaign (Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008; McCracken, 1989). In the same way, a less credible source may easily harm the brand associated in the endorsement (Campbell & Warren, 2012). One research found that the presentation of Youtube 'vloggers' influenced the perceptions of famous brands (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Another research applied the fundamentals of para-social interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956) of Youtube micro-celebrities with their audience in influencing the brand image. One research group examined three studies that confirmed similarities and online attractiveness as determinants of credible source in strengthening the bond between micro-celebrities and their followers (Lee & Watkins, 2016). These factors tend to generate a positive impact on behavioural and affective dimensions of the brand.

In another two studies, researchers studied the impact of Instagram micro-celebrities by manipulating certain elements on their posts (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). The former focused on the theoretical foundation of persuasion-knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994); the awareness of the persuasive intention of the micro-celebrity among the audience affected their attitudes and decreased their interests towards the post significantly. The latter examined the effect of follower count on the attitude towards the micro-celebrity and the endorsed brand; higher number of followers had a positive effect on the image of micro-celebrities based on popularity and likeability creating opinion leadership, whereas lower number of followers reduced the likeability and popularity of the micro-celebrity (De Veirman et al., 2017). Additional findings also revealed brands preferred micro-celebrities with credible personalities and higher number of followers to influence its strong image (Tanha, 2018).

Both the studies contributed to the practical implications of micro-celebrity selection for a brand; however, they also noted that future researches should explore the criteria audience use in believing a micro-celebrity that impact their purchase decisions. De Veirman and others (2017) also stressed on the significance of researching the identity presentation of the micro-celebrities that create a credible image among their followers.

The importance of the selection of celebrities for an advertisement and the fit between the endorser and the brand has been a topic of research for various advertising methods (Karrh, 1998; Balasubramanian, Karrh, & Patwardhan, 2006; Knoll, Schramm, Schallhorn, & Wynistorf, 2015). However, the results are only related to the credibility of the traditional celebrities in brand endorsements and the scenario might be different for social media micro-celebrity advertising.

The presentation of the micro-celebrity's identity and credibility is highly important in social media marketing as this type of marketing strategy is based on regular interactions without strong persuasions (Evans et al., 2017). If the followers notice a lack of congruence between the brand and the micro-celebrity and recognize the commercial intent, the credibility of the micro-celebrity and the brand will decline (Koernig & Boyd, 2009); the online presentation of the micro-celebrity is significant in influencing the brand reputation and the

purchasing decision of the audience (Chung & Cho, 2017). As brand managers and micro-celebrities aim for higher credibility in their content, it is important for them to be aware of the users' perspectives and wants as well as criteria related to effective source credibility. In this study, the author interconnects the self-presentation theory with the source credibility model in relation to social media marketing to understand the brand attitudes, purchase decisions and behavioural intentions of consumers.

Goffman and the theory of self-presentation in electronic life

In interacting, people are assumed to be “performing” in every life to highlight the image they want to convey of themselves to the audience. This process of behaviour altering to focus attention on certain attributes is labelled as “impression management” (Goffman, 1974). Maintaining a consistent routine of performance is mandatory if one wishes to conceptualize a stable self-perception; inconsistency may prompt the audience to challenge the credibility of the performer, thus disrupting the development of the unique identity of “self” (Goffman, 1964). The behaviour of the performer differs in the backstage since no performance is required. The preparation of the actor “backstage” can be utilised to present an effective “front”. The concept of “mask” is also used by an individual to create a different notion of oneself that one strives and aspires to achieve (Goffman, 1959). The distance between the actor and the audience helps to make it manageable to highlight certain aspects of the individual's self at the “front” while simultaneously concealing other attributes. However, this theory does not lead to the implication of a constructed new different identity, rather the mask marginalizes certain characteristics of the same individual. The concept of idealisation has been proven to be a motive behind the usage of a metaphorical mask by individuals in the enactment of their performances that highlight one's ideal intentions rather than adhering to the authenticity of self (Hogan, 2010).

Source credibility model

Several theories have strived to explain the factors comprising a suitable celebrity endorsement. The most known and relevant models include source credibility model (Hovland, Janis & Kelly, 1953); source attractiveness model (McGuire, 1985); and meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989). The source attractiveness model bridges a link between the familiarity, similarity and likeability of an endorser or celebrity with the effectiveness of a message (McGuire, 1985); and the meaning transfer model is used to evaluate how potential consumers form associations via meanings with the endorser and then transfer it to the product or brand (McCracken, 1989). This paper will emphasise on the source credibility model due to its comprehensive and detailed attention to the characteristics and suitability of its application to the online context.

According to Lou and Yuan (2019), source credibility is a term that is used to imply an endorser's knowledge and positive characteristics that affect the consumer's acceptance of a message. The source credibility model studies the determinants that contribute to the credibility perception of the endorser. The main factors that are used in source credibility model to measure the effectiveness of source or communicator are attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise (Ohanian, 1990). The expertise level refers to the extent to which the communicator is considered to be a valid source of information, whereas trustworthiness indicates the perceived integrity, honesty and believability of the endorser (Erdogan, 1999). Micro-celebrities with a high level of credibility affect consumer behaviour and attitudes positively and are considered as desirable brand endorsers (Mishra, Roy & Bailey, 2015). Previous studies have contended that the match-up between the product and the traditional celebrity endorser as a higher source credibility; however, it is significant to relate the online identity of the micro-

celebrities with the source credibility model to understand the behavioural intentions of the consumers.

Hovland et al. (1953) have mentioned in their message learning study that speakers with higher credibility are deemed to be more persuasive than speakers with lower credibility. Further, factors, context or sequence that enhance persuasion or increase message acceptance were also developed by other researchers. Heesacker, Petty and Cacioppo (1983) have also argued that message-relevant thinking can positively influence source credibility and persuasion. One study that analysed the effect of attractive and unattractive celebrities endorsing attractiveness-related and attractiveness-unrelated products (Kamins, 1990) showed that an attractive source endorsing an attractiveness-related product was considered more credible in comparison to a less attractive celebrity communicating the same product. Another study revealed that the combination of expertise and trust with effective marketing campaigns led to fewer negative perceptions making the source more credible (Kamins & Gupta, 1994). In another article, an extensive conceptual model was used to denote the positive impact of suitability and credibility of the communicator and advertising on relevant brand dimensions (Mishra et al., 2015).

This paper explores the factors that increase the influence of Instagram micro-celebrities and make them appealing and trustworthy to the social media users. Thirteen sub-credibility factors that have been widely used by different researchers (Till & Busler, 2000; Pornpitakpan, 2003) were used in this study. These determinants are not only relevant to the visual content of digital platform, but also include factors of trust within the social media environment. The sub-credibility determinants of the source credibility model include:

- Attractiveness: familiarity, similarity, likeability (Ohanian, 1990)
- Expertise: experienced, knowledgeable, expert, skilled, qualified
- Trustworthiness: trustworthy, reliable, dependable, honest, sincere (Ohanian, 1990)

Communicators of messages on social media platform have the power to alter consumer behaviour and brand attitude by influencing the credibility of the information and message. Research has shown that the level of trustworthiness of online endorsers can positively affect the scrutiny level of readers in decoding the message by ensuring reliability and validity (Wu & Wang, 2011). Therefore, the source credibility model was used in this study to analyse the self-presentation and credibility of Instagram micro-celebrities on consumer purchasing decision and behaviour.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research focused on in-depth interviews that were conducted with 46 Bangladeshi active male and female Instagram users aged between 18 and 35; samples were drawn from students, professionals and housewives. To note, Instagram is quite popular among housewives in Bangladesh who utilize it as a useful pastime to connect with relatives and friends. This age cohort is the largest Bangladeshi user group on the Instagram platform and most suitable for this study; from the 2.6 million users, 75% of the population fall under the chosen age group (Napoleoncat, 2018). Respondents (21 males and 25 females) were selected based on their active usage of Instagram (at least once a day or several times a week) and the author's own Instagram network was also used to generate groups within the sampling criteria. Nearly all of the (95%) of the respondents were studying in a university or already possessed an undergraduate or postgraduate university degree. In-depth interviews were carried out face to face to create rapport with the respondents as a method of assessing their body language to

better understand their answers. However, electronic media such as, Skype and Facebook messenger were also used to conduct interviews. The duration of each interview was between 15 to 18 minutes.

Data analysis

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim via the analysis software Nvivo version 11 considering its significance as the benchmark analysis software for qualitative data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Thematic analysis (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) using the process of “compiling, disassembling, reconstructing, interpreting and concluding” was applied to deconstruct the transcribed interview data into codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and reassemble them inductively as key themes and supporting sub-themes emerged. As the foundation of this qualitative study relies on subjectivity (Ullah & Akhter, 2016), by accessing the feelings and thoughts of the respondents, an extensive exploration of connections between validity and reliability issues were minimized.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Among the 46 respondents, 87% were regular active users who used the application on a daily basis; 9% used it several times per week and the rest, 4% claimed that they only used Instagram just a few times a month. Respondents who were only active a few times a month on Instagram did not follow any micro-celebrities and only used the application to check on updates from relatives and friends. Among the 96% active users, 61% of them reported to have been following their selected micro-celebrities for more than a year, 36% have been following for months and 3% have been following for weeks.

The researcher explained the concept of “micro-celebrities” to the respondents at the beginning of the discussion. While a majority of them considered micro-celebrities as individuals who have a fan following of more than 20,000 users in Instagram, Respondent 18 (female) stated that an individual with 5000 followers can also be considered as a micro-celebrity if that individual has been collaborating with small companies to promote products and have an impact on the followers regarding their purchase intention. Respondents who log into Instagram everyday stated that the majority of accounts they follow are of Instagram micro-celebrities; they enjoyed looking at the content that display different lifestyles of each micro-celebrity with Respondents 15 (male), 19 (male), 27 (female) and 45 (female) additionally claiming that the varied interesting photos of these celebs are a good choice of passing time as well. The discussion revolved around a lot of micro-celebrities popular among Bangladeshi users; the micro-celebrities mentioned in the findings and their areas of interest are listed below.

Table 1. Micro-celebrities and their areas of interest

Name	Interest	Insta Id	Followers
Sia	Fitness	diaryofafitmommy	1.1 million
Salman Muqtadir	Lifestyle & Fitness	salman_tbf	822k
Tawhid Afridi	Traveller	tawhid_afridi	446k
Raba Khan	Comedian & Lifestyle	rabakhan	412k
Shoumik Ahmed	Fashion & Fitness	Shoumik_who	322k
Ridy Sheikh	Dancer & fitness	ridysheikh	305k
Sumaya Meem	Makeup Artist	beautybookbysumaya	100k
Asmaul Tisha	Fashion	kingtisha_08	66k
Iftekher Rafsan	Foodie	thechotobhai	54k
Nowshin Prova	Foodie	provaeats	37.3k
Aniqa Alam	Traveller & Fashion	the.anika.alam	21k

Theme 1: Visual composition of the Instagram content

76% of the respondents stated that the quality of posts is one of the significant factors contributing to the establishment of the status of micro-celebrity, with 60% of the respondents claiming that the high-quality photos are one of the main reasons that influenced them into becoming an Instagram follower of a micro-celebrity. Further, 84% of the respondents agreed that profiles that display strong followership represents a micro-celebrity.

Respondents emphasised that micro-celebrities need to post high-quality photos with engaging content and have thousands of followers in order to gain the attention of other users. Accordingly, 45% of the respondents stated that the first thing that grabs their attention is the uniqueness, class and beauty of the photo; if the photo itself is not stylish enough for their preference, they just scroll over the image. Respondent 27 (female) shared:

“I like following Tisha (Table 1) because of her very classy pictures and unique clothing taste and honestly I won’t mind buying the products she promotes as long as it is related to fashion.”

This implies that the respondent chooses to follow this micro-celebrity due to the visual effects and sophistication of the picture, and interest in similar field. Therefore, as long as the micro-celebrity Tisha endorses fashion brands, she will be deemed credible by the respondent.

Respondents also look for interesting commentary or text under the photo to keep them further engaged. Respondent 9 (female) explained that sometimes, the captions beneath the photo describe the core message which the micro-celebrity is trying to convey to the audience. As described by Respondent 2 (female):

“One of the reasons I follow Prova (Table 1) is because she mentions all the details of the restaurant she visits and the food she eats in her caption – the taste, the price, the quality, the ambience, everything! I’ve visited a lot of restaurants based on her reviews and her details have always been correct!”

The above statement explains that the respondent preferred a detailed caption where all the information about the product or service is provided. Thus the respondent does not need to browse through other sources as a majority of the information related to the posted content is already provided. The authenticity of the information also prompts the audience to trust the micro-celebrity more hence increasing their credibility.

According to 42% of the respondents, the locations of the pictures also play an important role. Respondents 14 (male), 33 (male) and 41 (female) love travelling and follow

micro-celebrities who travel across different countries and share their experiences of different cultures through beautiful pictures; the beauty of the destinations shown in the pictures help them decide their next travel destination. For example, Respondent 41 (female) conveyed:

“Have you seen Anika’s (Table 1) pictures? So beautiful! I wish I could just dive into the picture and visit those places! I get inspired to travel just by seeing her pictures, plus she herself is so beautiful”

Something similar regarding the visual content was shared by Respondent 3 (female):

“I am a foodie and follow micro-celebrities, for example, Prova and Rafsan (Table 1), who eat at a lot at restaurants and post images of the food. The tag of location in the picture is useful as it helps me to decide where I am going to dine out next when I am out with friends or colleagues. However, I would not engage in looking at the caption or the location tag if the photo itself does not catch my attention at the first place.”

Both excerpts show that the respondents are attracted by the beautiful pictures and then only move forward to other details. Therefore, micro-celebrities need to upload pictures that are visually effective; the posted picture has to be beautiful or captivating in itself to gain the attention of the audience; failing which, the audience will lose interest to engage further with the post.

Although all the other dimensions of a post are important and intertwined together, the photo itself plays the most crucial role in the online communication between the Instagram micro-celebrities and users. The significance of visual content as a channel of communication and emotional connection at the initial stage of online perception and interaction is well recognised (Granitz & Forman, 2015).

Theme 2: Online self-presentation of source

In accordance to Goffman’s (1959) framework of impression management, the majority of the respondents admitted that they are conscious of their audience and prefer presenting themselves in a particular manner on Instagram; they would upload photos that showcase the positive and vibrant part of their lives. They admitted that positive photos generate positive feedback from the followers that enhances their self-esteem. Previous studies have also demonstrated that positive online responses amplify one’s self-confidence (Chua & Chang, 2016; Lang & Barton, 2015). The respondents also like following micro-celebrities who present high-quality positive images that inspire and persuade them in portraying a confident self as well. They like being inspired from the success and lifestyles of famous insta-celebrities, while being aware that the images on the screen may not be the real reflection of their lives behind the screen. An appreciable self-presentation in social media assists in gaining peer acceptance and developing relationships with others (Chiang & Suen, 2015) as claimed by Respondent 10 (male):

“I would not have followed Raba (Table. 1) if she had posted depressing pictures instead of happy posts. I have even purchased books based on her recommendations due to her confident and vibrant personality and honestly, I really do not bother how she actually is outside Instagram.”

This is supported by Respondent 22 (male) who added:

“I feel inspired by Shoumik (Table 1) to maintain a fitness regime. Gosh! It’s like he’s in the gym all day! I know that can’t be true but still I have also joined the gym he goes to and bought the protein powder which he suggests.”

Both excerpts suggest that the respondents were inspired by the online self-presentation of the micro-celebrities. Micro-celebrity Raba created a happy persona of herself on Instagram while Shoumik, on the other hand, has hinged on the persona of a fitness-junkie. Audience look forward to posts related to their field of interest and would prefer purchasing products that are congruent with their online identity. Identities formed by micro-celebrities on the online platform are highly important as they engage social media users and build strong networks (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013).

During the discussion about special effects and visual filters on Instagram images, Respondents 10 (male), 23 (female), 25 (female) and 38 (male) stated that they do not prefer the usage of excessive filters as it diminishes the reality of the picture, with Respondent 5 (female) explaining that looking natural is now the new appealing factor in Instagram. The remainder respondents showed no objection towards the use of filters as long as the image is attractive and engaging. Lang and Barton (2015) found that individuals prefer using filters regularly to appear more attractive to their audience. Some respondents also stated that they preferred if products ads are placed in a subtle manner in the photos and will usually unfollow profiles that have too many advertisements or direct advertisements. To this regard, Respondent 7 (male) commented:

“I would opt to buy something if I think the micro-celebrity is personally using it, and not because of those direct ads. I like how Salman (Table. 1) shares products related to his style.”

Respondents were also asked about the endorsement of products that were unrelated to the micro-celebrities’ areas of interests. Some of the responses include:
Respondent 14 (male):

“Well, I won’t take advice from Tawhid (Table 1) on men’s current fashion wear; he is always on the run and wearing very rugged clothes.”

Respondent 45 (female):

“No, if you are good at something, better to stick to that zone. Sumaya (Table 1) is good at giving makeup tutorials and skincare tips. I don’t expect her to promote motorbikes in her profile.”

Respondent 13 (female):

“I do not think that would work at all, even if the micro-celeb has a lot of followers.”

These responses show that endorsers will be trusted as an effective source if the product is in agreement with their personality (Kamins, 1990). Any mismatch between the online self-presentation of the micro-celebrities and the endorsed brand, will diminish their credibility.

Theme 3: Elements of source credibility

When asked the question of why they followed these micro-celebrities, more than half of the respondents cited “beautiful photos”, while 28% replied that they were inspired from the lifestyles of these people and obtained useful recommendations from these celebrities. Respondent 16 (female) stated that the posts and stories of her favourite micro-celebrity, who is a mother herself sharing her fitness journey along with raising 3 children, helped her to sail through her postpartum phase smoothly. She explained:

“Sia’s (Table 1) workout and meal plans helped me a lot to get my body back after my daughter was born. I was confident with my body image again.”

The lifestyle choices and recommendations of the micro-celebrity Sia, who is a fit mother, encouraged the respondent to make healthier and smarter choices to gain back her confidence level. Users prefer following micro-celebrities with whom they can feel connected and prefer authentic and trustworthy information that resonates with their lives.

In agreement to the majority of the respondents, Respondent 45 (female) stated that in order for an individual to be a micro-celebrity, one has to be physically attractive. When asked to further describe the characteristics that a micro-celebrity should possess, the following terms were included: charming, witty, funny, sophisticated, unique, elegant, appealing, genuine, fashionable, smart and successful. Respondents also shared that when they follow a micro-celebrity, they expect to see regular updates, content and posts; if the micro-celebrities are not active (posting content every other day, at least) then the users would prefer unfollowing them.

The factors considered to be the most significant in order to become a famous micro-celebrity according to the interviewed respondents are: beauty, one-of-a-kind and distinctive. Surprisingly, intelligence and level of success were not given much priority as one would have expected. Additionally, the respondents claimed that authentic information, transparency and interesting posts provided by micro-celebrities are important factors in building trust with users. In this regard, users prefer trusting celebrities who pay attention to the comments and queries of their readers and who constantly communicate with their followers; posts that have detailed captions also reflect the effort a micro-celebrity is putting in for their readers. Some excerpts include:

Respondent 14 (male):

“Although Tawhid (Table 1) has thousands of followers, but he still answers any question about travelling if we inbox him.”

Respondent 18 (female):

“Ridi (Table 1) always appreciates her fans, she posts about them in stories and even tag the followers who send her nice messages; she has a warm vibe.”

Users prefer micro-celebrities who are approachable and amicable. By being communicative and friendly, micro-celebrities like Tawhid and Ridi have been able to become popular and create a bond of trust with their followers. It is important for micro-celebrities to be efficient in replies and provide good recommendations to be considered as credible by their fans. Although the interactions may appear unbalanced but the level of reciprocity generates positive reviews from the audience. However, some respondents admitted that not all posts can be trusted as the micro-celebrities generate revenue or commission for advertising certain products. As such, others have mentioned that posts comprising advertisements of products are

not a problem as long as the product is relevant and beneficial to the users and the information provided is useful and honest.

For example, Respondent 17 (female) stated:

“I don’t mind advertisement of products within posts; however, if I find something useful and relevant, I will look for further information from other sources than only basing my trust on a micro-celebrity. The post has to be highly convincing for one to purchase a product only on the basis of word of mouth of that celebrity.”

On the other hand, Respondent 8 (male) clarified:

“I don’t pay much attention to posts with advertisements and only prefer following profiles that provide fitness tips, healthy diet plans and other life hacks.”

A number of respondents claimed that they just skim through the pictures of the micro-celebrities if it does not contain any advertisement or information about anything. For example, Respondent 34 (female) stated:

“I usually do not get much time to browse for new products in my areas of interest, therefore, posts of micro-celebrities that contain advertisements are a good way to come across a new product available in the market.”

When asked about the credibility of the micro-celebrities directly influencing their behavioural intentions, more than 50% of the respondents shared that the content needs to be interesting and really persuasive in a subtle manner. Users need to feel that the micro-celebrities are internally motivated (liking or personally using the product) rather than being motivated externally (commission or fees) when promoting a relevant brand with their online image. For example, Respondent 45 (female) commented that make-up artist Sumaya posts tutorial videos of her using the products she endorses so that her fans can create a similar look like hers. When micro-celebrities post pictures of them personally using a particular product or service, users find the source more credible. More than 80% of the respondents continuously emphasised on the fact that the endorsed product needs to be fitting with the online image of the micro-celebrity. For example, micro-celebrities who display interests in beautification or attractiveness should endorse beauty or cosmetic products as users will then believe that the same products can also enhance their own attractiveness. Celebrities are considered as sub-brands of advertising companies and therefore, customers associate certain brand characteristics with certain celebrity personalities which help to enhance credibility (Seno & Lukas, 2007).

An attempt was also made to analyse the reasons behind the why and how micro-celebrities become famous. A majority of the respondents (45%) attributed it to the celebrities being professionals or experts in a certain trade or field (for example, fitness models, food reviewers, travel-buff, adrenaline junkies, chefs, mothers raising several children, make-up artists, teachers, etc.) while 30% cited that they provide helpful information. However, there were a few negative responses such as:

Respondent 11 (female):

“Maybe it is just luck?”

Respondent 12 (male):

“I really do not understand how certain people with no potential become famous!”

Respondent 42 (female):

“Followers can be purchased as well!”

Although some respondents admitted that they do not trust Instagram micro-celebrities, a majority of them agreed on the fact that they do provide engaging and helpful content. Almost 65% of the respondents took a neutral stand with regard to advertising posts of micro-celebrities and consider it a useful way of coming across something interesting and new. On the contrary, 13% felt annoyed or disturbed by too much advertising content and tend to filter through those posts. 30% of the users trusted the opinions of the micro-celebrities, but preferred recommendations over direct advertisements. However, even if they are convinced about a product recommendation, users still search for validity and information from other reliable sources.

Theme 4: Online self-presentation – New element of source credibility

Some respondents mentioned that when Instagram first entered the Bangladesh market, the concept of micro-celebrities was just emerging and followers trusted every content that was posted. However, as remuneration and commission came into the picture, the credibility of the micro-celebrities started to diminish in the eyes of the users. Some respondents also mentioned that they would rather unfollow micro-celebrities who place direct ads on their profile without any personal context or reference; when a celebrity values a particular brand or product, his or her followers are likely to carry the same opinion (Townsend, 2015).

Users consider attractiveness and trustworthiness as major characteristics of Instagram micro-celebrities; features and appearances of the micro-celebrity can influence like-minded users (Thoumrungroje, 2014). However, other factors are also significant in retaining followers. Expertise is an important characteristic in the Ohanian (1990) source credibility model, but a majority of users prefer “proficiency” instead of “expertise” in the credibility context of micro-celebrities. Users do not require extraordinary capability of their followed micro-celebrity; however, being good at something is a trait admired by them. A positive relationship with the followers and long-term familiarity increases the source’s credibility; in this regard, previous experiences with the micro-celebrity and prior knowledge about his or her proficiency and trustworthiness. Opinions derived from strong connections are significant to network members, to such a point where the expectations generated by individuals affect the content of the posts (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013).

Online self-presentation has also emerged as an important factor in the consideration of a micro-celebrity. The first impression created by the post of a micro-celebrity amongst the followers is viewed holistically; therefore the micro-celebrity needs to create a suitable online image to connect with the target group of followers (Long-Crowell, 2016). It should be noted that after following a new micro-celebrity, it takes a reasonable amount of time and consistency to maintain the online image of the micro-celebrity so that trust can be built with the users. When asked about purchasing intention, a majority of the respondents suggested that efficient and communicative micro-celebrities who cater to the taste and preferences of their followers with strong content and relevant brand endorsements are considered to be a reliable source of credibility for purchasing decision, and are unlikely to abuse their position of power by providing false information of products. Some respondents further added that three to five ads

per month is acceptable, but anything more than that makes the profiles of the micro-celebrities look like an advertisement page and will not be deemed as trustworthy. Further, the credibility of the micro-celebrity affects the credibility of the endorsed brand (Spry, Pappu & Cornwell, 2011); in other words, the success of the brand depends on the perception and performance of the micro-celebrity (Nicolau & Santa-Maria, 2013).

With regard to the required factors of source credibility, the respondents highlighted that the micro-celebrities need to more persuasive and hardworking than the traditional celebrities to gain the trust of their followers and elevate their market position. They also perceived authentic content and informative messages as important criteria for source credibility. The online self-presentation of the micro-celebrities featured prominently in the discussions and were heavily commented on in relation to their reliability. The respondents also stated that the number of followers depend on various factors—micro-celebrities being friendly towards their followers, openness and honesty, inspiring content, competent, consistency in communication, approachability and interactive user engagement.

After analysing the data collected from the discussions, additional dimensions (applicable to online micro-celebrities) emerged in addition to the traditional dimensions of the Ohanian (1990) source credibility model (refer to Figure 1). The “expertise” dimension is replaced with “proficiency” as users believe that micro-celebrities do not require any certification or qualification, but rather they need to be proficient and possess relevant skills in user interaction. A new dimension, online self-presentation, is also added in the context of social media as an integral part of the source credibility measurement. Although some factors within each dimension are interrelated, each of the four dimensions has its own crucial role in determining the credibility of micro-celebrities.

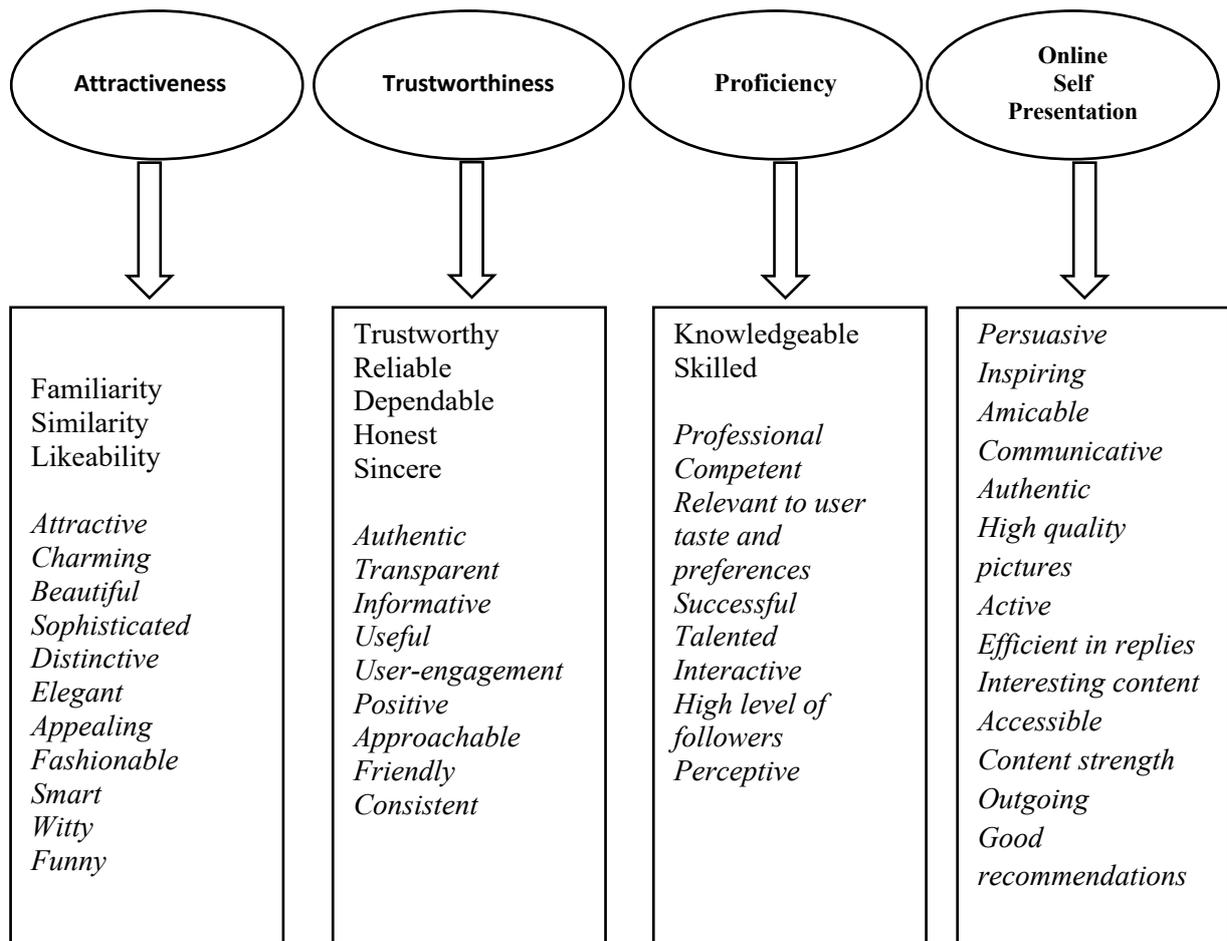


Figure 1. Modified online source credibility model

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this paper are both practical and theoretical. Having integrated Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory and Ohanian's (1990) source credibility model to form a modified source credibility framework for the trending micro-celebrities of Instagram, it explored how online micro-celebrity endorsements can influence the buying behaviour of followers. Although previous research has been conducted on both theories separately, there is very little academic literature that interconnects these theories under one concept.

The study shows that micro-celebrities in digital media have become the new form of marketing tool in the modern era; more specifically, it explored the patterns of consumer behaviour related to the followed micro-celebrities and the factors that influence their buying behaviour. Credible micro-celebrities are perceived as those who are proficient and knowledgeable in their areas of interests and endorse products that are consistent with their online image. The self-presentation theory was used to explain this effect whereby the micro-celebrities need to look or even pretend to be internally motivated rather than being driven by commercial benefits. Brands that fit with the online self-presentation of the micro-celebrities are accepted positively among followers and source credibility is higher. In other words, a higher level of source credibility reflects positive indications of users' behavioural intentions. Although not all users place their full trust on the advertisements of these insta-celebrities when making a purchase decision, they do acknowledge the recommendations provided by these celebrities in the information search stage; browsing of more authentic sources after the initial recommendations helps the consumer to make a final informed purchase decision.

The themes that emerged from the interviews and the modified source credibility model are practically relevant within the context of current social media marketing and emboldens the author to provide concrete suggestions and advice for micro-celebrities, as well as brand managers. Generally, micro-celebrities should endorse brands that match their interest, image and personality, especially if they are just starting out in their career and have not yet formed a trustworthy bond with their followers, or if they are willing to increase their number of followers. An offer with higher endorsement fees to promote a brand that does not match the online self-presentation of the micro-celebrity may seem lucrative, but it would be better to decline the collaboration. Otherwise, the credibility and online reputation of the micro-celebrity might be jeopardized in the long term which would result in decreased number of followers and user engagement rate (Koernig & Boyd, 2009).

While a previous study contended that the number of likes on micro-celebrities' posts can determine the opinion leadership (De Veirman, et al., 2017), inconsistencies between the micro-celebrity and the brand can cause a downward spiral in the marketing strategy. The failure of Volvo's micro-celebrity strategy and the findings discussed in this study are examples of such inconsistencies. Micro-celebrities need to incorporate authentic information in their posts and display high levels of social interactions with their audience to gain their trust. However, the level of authenticity can always be manipulated by the guidelines provided by marketing specialists and brand managers.

The findings and the modified source credibility model are also significant for brand managers as any discrepancies between the endorsed brand and the online image of the micro-celebrity will not only diminish the credibility of the micro-celebrity but also negatively affect the behavioural intentions of users. Simply put, the inconsistency will cause both direct (purchase decision) and indirect impacts (via micro-celebrity's image) on the brand. On the other hand, using a congruent micro-celebrity will affect the brand image and behavioural intentions positively. The credibility of the micro-celebrity is not only determined by the self-presentation theory, other factors like attractiveness, trustworthiness and proficiency also play a strong role (as shown in Figure 1).

Marketers should be selective in their choice of insta-celebrity to market their products to Instagram users by using the modified online source credibility model to give them a better understanding of the wants of their consumers. Although users do not require micro-celebrities to be experts in a particular field, they still prefer the micro-celebrities to be proficient and skilful. As users do not trust micro-celebrities that use their content as direct paid advertisements, companies should be careful in selecting micro-celebrities as marketing channels to promote their products. Advertising specialists need to convince their selected micro-celebrity to create personal posts when endorsing a brand by reflecting on a personal story or using a personal context as reference and address the followers directly to enhance the credibility of the brand. Choosing highly congruent and credible micro-celebrities or at least posting highly credible content will be beneficial for the brand image, micro-celebrity's image, behavioural intentions and purchase decisions as reported by potential consumers.

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