

Qualitative Approaches to Evaluating Social Media Influencers: A case-based LITERATURE review

Kangmin Cho

kangmin.cho@stonybrook.edu

Kichang Jung

Kichang.jung@stonybrook.edu

Michele Lee

michele.lee.1@stonybrook.edu

Yena Lee

Yena.Lee.3@stonybrook.edu

Jaewon Park

JaeWon.Park.3@stonybrook.edu

Neal Dreamson

neal.dreamson@sunykorea.ac.kr

ABSTRACT

With the age of the Internet upon us, many marketing strategies have come to focus on social media influencers. Current research about social media influencers conveys the quantitative values of influencers' capacity, but the numbers are readily manipulated with automated bots and other methods. Therefore, in this case-based literature review, we aim to demonstrate the legitimacy to evaluate influencers' performance from qualitative perspectives. We found ten qualitative factors, such as credibility, appearance, connectedness, and so on, from a review of relevant 37 journal articles identified from keywords searching on academic databases. Then, we redefined and remapped the factors by thematically reviewing 39 promotion video clips from 13 popular social media influencers in lifestyle, which results in 52 indicators. We semantically and systematically classified the indicators with three larger qualitative themes and nine sub-themes: (a) *credibility*: expertise, trustworthiness, and quality content, (b) *engagement*: interpersonal interaction, quality presentation, and personal branding; (c) *connectivity*: participatory activities, collaborating with others, and socially networking. For qualitative approaches to social media influencers, we articulated applicable analysis methods to each sub-theme. In this study, we demonstrated the potential of an alternative to existing quantitative evaluation methods that marketers could consider it in their recruitment and evaluation of social media influencers to find the right social media influencers.

Keywords: influencer; qualitative evaluation; social media; marketing strategy; social marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

Advertising evolves with the world, as companies constantly adapt to changes and match the interests of their target audiences. Social media is increasingly important for business marketing to reach many of these audiences, as there are 2.8 billion social media users around the world [29]. In this rapidly changing environment, a new marketing method called social media influencer marketing takes advantage of such phenomena [35]. Nielsen marketing indicated that influencer marketing yields “returns on investments 11 times higher as compared to digital marketing” [35]. The value of influencer marketing increases from USD 6.5 billion in 2019 to USD 9.7 billion in 2020” and “in 2018, “19% of American consumers purchased goods or services” as per the recommendations of social media influencers [53]. Indeed, social media influencer marketing has led to more cost-efficient marketing, more media coverage, and good customer persuasion [35].

This tendency leads influencers to have more power than before. In their marketing strategy study on the effect of influencers on consumer behavior of Generation Z and Y (n = 459), Kádeková and Holienčinová [27] revealed that 41% of respondents in Generation Z regularly purchase products based on recommendations by influencers, in contrast, in Generation Y, the number was 19% of respondents. They summarized the marketing influencer power with the following statement, “3% of people can produce 90% of the effect.” The most significant prerequisite for success is connecting a brand with the right influencers [30]. In this sense, the number of followers and comments on social networks for a brand is critical [30]. Yet, this quantitative approach could not ensure that the right social media influencers are connected because it does not indicate to what extent brand credibility, attractiveness, and consistency are perceived by customers. In this study, we focus on qualitative approaches because they are rarely studied yet significant in understanding the authentic quality of influencers. Our aim of this study is to demonstrate the legitimacy to evaluate influencers’ performance from qualitative perspectives by suggesting a systematic framework for qualitative evaluation of social media influencers based on a literature review for a case study. To do so, specifically, we respond to the following two questions: What are qualitative factors that determine the quality of social media influencers, and what methods are available to validate the factors in finding the right social media influencers?

2. WHY QUANTITATIVE?

Quantitative research enables the investigators to quickly collect information, focus on facts or a series of information, and result in straightforward analysis [37]. In terms of the forms or methods of evaluating SNS influencers, counting ‘numbers’ is one common way. First, counting the number of followers, Likes/Dislikes,

Subscriptions/Notifications, and real-time viewers/comments in social media shows the degree to which the influencer is visible to the public. For example, researchers categorize influencers with their follower numbers: mega-influencers are those with millions of followers, macro-influencers have between 100k and 1 million followers, and micro-influencers are people with fewer than 100k followers [9, 53]. Second, counting the ‘frequency’ of influencers’ engagement to an account can briefly describe their participation and diligence. That is, being active in an online community and making substantial contributions in posting may construct influencers’ reputations. Therefore, the numbers have a significant correlation in the perception of being an opinion leader, which is a valuable position in advertising products [10]. Third, counting the ‘sales volume’ and ‘time’ considers the advertising effect of influencers that can represent their sales power [53]. After all, the most important factor in choosing an influencer is the ability to sell products. Yet, an indisputable reality is that using quantitative evaluation may not fully reflect the quality of marketing abilities that influencers have: how do we know whether the influencer may have problems in professionalism, creativity, credibility, or past activities?

In fact, with many samples and numerical information coming from quantified measures, research can demonstrate credibility. Ginevičius et al. [16], for example, evaluated the effectiveness of enterprise marketing activities based on quantitative methods and provided statistically meaningful results in which some factors should be weighted more among the marketing mix (product, price, promotion, and place/distribution). Yet, with the marketing mix they used, we cannot explore consumer trust, community power, connectivity, or creativity in promotion strategies and product presentations. In addition, it does not explain the reasons and meanings of the different weights of factors in multi-criteria. This means that non-quantifiable data such as feelings, changes of emotions, reputations, behaviors, and ethical problems are hardly considered in quantitative methods [3]. Furthermore, quantitative methods are limited to respond to fake followers, quality live feedback from potential consumers, unique features of products or services, trustworthiness of influencers, and their historical backgrounds. In this sense, as Rahman [41] suggested, quantitative evaluation could work as a first step to distinguish or sort out influencers’ leverage.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND THEIR QUALITATIVE CRITERIA

In his analysis of the role of social media influencers with 612 participants, Wielki [53] divided the participants into five categories: idols, experts, lifestylers, activists, and artists. First, *idols* are highly popular, and their primary focus is on themselves, while they cover diverse topics. Second, *experts* hold authorities in a specific field and demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Third, *lifestylers* are involved in information and discussions about lifestyle and leisure activities, and their coverage is diverse, including beauty, health, cooking, and travel. Fourth, *activists* present their interpretations of various issues such as sustainability, feminism, and human rights.

Fifth, *artists* are concerned with creating artifacts using their artistic knowledge and skills. As Wielki [53] argued, the fundamental role of social media influencers is to humanize brands and improve awareness of their presence through direct/indirect interactions with followers. Furthermore, Wielki [53] discovered three critical criteria for the effectiveness of activities taken by influencers: “*trust* in a given person being an authority, the *credibility* of the message communicated, and the *link* between the message and a specific person.”

Like Wielki’s study, we can articulate qualitative factors of social media influencers through a review of literature with 37 articles as presented in Table 1. We found relevant articles published from January 1, 2010, to October 31, 2021, using a combined key word: ‘qualitative + social media influencers + qualitative’ on EBSCOhost’s Business Source Elite database. The retrieval resulted in 24 articles. We reviewed the articles and noticed additional 13 articles uncovered in the database. We identified concepts on determining quality of social media influencers through cross-checking by the five research members. As a result, we found qualitative evaluation factors and verified ten factors through analysis of influencers in a particular field (e.g., lifestyle) and built a conceptual foundation for a systematic approach to a form of qualitative evaluation of SNS influencers.

Table 1. The Qualitative Factors of Influencers in Social Marketing

Factor	Literature
Expertise/credibility	McQuarrie et al. [36]; Lim and Cheung [34]; Kim [33]; Wielki [53]; Hassan et al. [21]; Xiao et al. [54]; Balaban and Mustăţea [4]; Ki and Kim [32]
Trustworthiness	Sekhon et al. [45]; Harris and Goode [20]; Almström et al [56]; Wielki [53]; Vodka et al. [51]; Wiedmann and von Mettenheim [52]
Quality content	Casaló et al. [10]; van Driel and Dumitrica [49]; Sokolova and Kefi [47]; Glucksman [17]
Quality presentation	Casaló et al. [10]; Jun and Yi [26]; Khalid et al. [31]; Glucksman [17]
Public relations	Bergstrom [6]; Bian and Moutinho [7]; Freberg et al. [15]; Damásio et al. [13]; Jarrar et al. [24]
Appearance	D’Alessandro and Chitty [12]; Akhtar [2]; Yuan and Lou [55]; Bauer [5]
Quality communication	Enke and Borchers [14]; Jun and Yi [26]; Khalid et al. [31]; Ryu and Han [44]
Participatory activities	Yuan and Lou [55]; Jun and Yi [26]; Villi and Matikainen [50]
Affability to the audience	Kaplan and Haenlein [28]; McQuarrie et al. [36]; Lim and Cheung [34]; Ruiz-Gomez [43]
Connectedness	van Dijck and Poell [48]; Hanna et al. [19]; Cho and Son [11]; Jin et al. [25]

3.1 Expertise/credibility

Expertise is the influencer’s competence in knowledge, skills, and experiences in a particular product [36, 53]. When influencers promote a creation with correct sources and demonstrate their expertise, audiences perceive the influencer’s credibility [34, 36]. In this sense, people can evaluate the influencers’ expertise and credibility by perceiving whether influencers are trained, experienced, qualified, or informed [4, 21, 54]). Through a survey with 800 participants, the Institute for Public Relations discovered four ways to gain credibility in social media, which includes personal interaction, expertise, invitational rhetoric, and trustworthiness [32, 33]. The four ways

imply that expertise and credibility are not standalone factors that determine the quality of influencers, but they are related with other factors such as trustworthiness.

3.2 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in marketing refers to the relationship between marketers and customers that is “informed by a set of expressed or implied values and previous behaviours,” and it is “a set of behaviours on the part of the trustee that support expectations on the part of the trustor and are essentially a characteristic of the trustee concerned” [45]. Studies found that consumers’ perception of trustworthiness for an online source is directly associated with their purchase intention [20, 52]. The importance of trustworthiness is further found in content analysis, where influencer trustworthiness has significant impacts on “numerous consumer decisions such as purchase intention, attitude towards brands and individuals, and information adoption” [56]. In this sense, influencer trustworthiness also indicates influencers’ confidence and competence in presenting products.

3.3 Quality content

Sokolova and Kefi [47] defined the quality of content as how well a message is delivered and how useful it is according to followers. Influencers’ engagement with product content determines their expertise, credibility, and trustworthiness. To determine the level of quality content, they consider whether the content is structured for audiences to understand. Furthermore, as Casaló et al. [10] suggested, the content presentation is linked with the quality content in promoting aesthetically pleasing, creative, and charming ways using photos, videos, or stories. These multimedia driven presentations are the ways to respond to and adapt to diverse expectations growing from their interactions with followers and advertisers [17, 49].

3.4 Quality presentation

It is known that verbal, written, and interactive presentations are directly associated with brand images, purchase decisions, and brand loyalty, which is evidence that the influencers consider and reflect customers’ diverse needs [10]. When influencers can present products and services in a highly engaging way in connection to brand images and purchase decisions, their presentation can further enhance consumers’ brand loyalty [26]. In addition, influencers must make their products stand out from those of other social media influencers by addressing their audience needs, which is essential to public relations [31].

3.5 Public relations

Social influencers are supposed to shape audience attitudes by promoting a product/brand [15]. Damásio et al. [13] argued that there is a shift in public relations because of “widespread, intense and frequent use of social media” and in particular, they agreed that social media is “a contextual factor that influences both the stakeholders’ behavior patterns and PR practices.” Reversely, social influencers should be able to promote a product or a service by convincing customers of its quality. To do

so, they must fully understand the business intention, the brand image of the product, and how to use it [7, 24]. They should also encourage their audiences to engage with marketing objectives [6].

3.6 Appearance

Bauer [5] argued that people perceive “the influence of idealized images on body image” as “the images of attractive strangers on social media platforms.” However, in their experimental study on beauty marketing, D’Alessandro and Chitty [12] tackled the belief that a body shape (i.e., a thin body) has a high effect on advertisements and discovered that source attractiveness is more related to ethnically relevant models who have realistic body shapes (e.g., medium-thin and medium fat body shapes). In a social media study, likewise, Yuan and Lou [55] argued that influencers’ attractiveness and similarity are effective to encourage followers to be interested in the products. Specifically, in their study on consumers’ perception of 3D virtual influencers, Jang and Yoh [23] discovered that “the majority of interviewees preferred similar looks to real people with low virtuality.” These studies prove that visual attractiveness and marketing are highly correlated.

3.7 Quality Communication

Since people interconnect within online platforms, there is no face-to-face communication to comprehend each social interaction. Thus, influencers need to be strategic for their message sent through tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body language [14]. For example, with their written communication, influencers should precisely and truthfully write product details, which also demonstrates their expertise and increases credibility and trustworthiness [26]. Furthermore, influencers should provide immediate and honest feedback to their followers [31], which builds the influencer’s reputation related to integrity and credibility [44].

3.8 Participatory Activities

Jun and Yi [26] conducted a cross-sectional survey of 282 social media users about their perceptions of SNS influencers. They revealed that influencer interactivity has a positive effect on authenticity and emotional attachment, which also leads to an increase in brand loyalty and trust in influencers. Yuan and Lou [55] demonstrated that a strengthened parasocial relationship with influencers through participatory activities also has a positive effect on “perceived attractiveness of influencers, similarity to influencers, procedural fairness, and interpersonal fairness of their interactions with influencers.” Also, Villi and Matikainen [50] argued that participatory culture is a key feature of social media in that it is “less political and less occupied with notions of power ... therefore, ... media producers and consumers ... see them interacting and collaborating.” These studies prove that participatory activities by influencers have positive effects on strengthening relationships with their followers.

3.9 Affability

Affability to the audience is the ability to be affable, friendly, or approachable. According to Kaplan and Haenlein [28], influencers use their social networks to express their opinions, inform followers about their network, share their expertise, and express their passions. In this sense, influencers share and form their stories in photos and visuals, which instantly attract mass audiences and help them attain fame [36]. According to Lim and Cheung [34], influencer marketing is helpful with so-called *word of mouth*, which is consumer-to-consumer interaction that highly influences the choice of recommendation. For Ruiz-Gomez [43], such digital fame in social media is formed through self-branding on platforms through drawing the attention of a specific audience and building functional relationships with supporters.

3.10 Connectedness

Along with understanding the target audience and topics to promote, influencers must acknowledge how the platform works when they upload posts — which means understanding the connections to the social media marketing ecosystem and its unique relationships [11]. van Dijck and Poell [48] argued that social media enables human connectedness while pushing automated connectivity. The latter is a given or hidden link between users and products via social media platforms, while the latter is participation, and “the boundaries between human connections and commercially and technologically steered activities are increasingly obfuscated” [48]. In this context, understanding its algorithms and deciding what contents should be connected to which user groups are essential skills for better accessibility and successful marketing on social media [19]. Practically, connectedness leads to higher purchase decisions [25].

4. QUALITATIVE EVALUATION OF INFLUENCERS

To create a systematic framework for qualitative evaluation of influencers using the ten factors, the research team evaluated 39 video clips on YouTube, which recently hit the highest view numbers in the genre of ‘lifestyle’ from 13 professional influencers either mega-influencers (n=5) or macro-influencers (n=8). Since lifestylers can cover diverse and general content of lifestyle from beauty, clothing, appliances to travel, we expected that the evaluation demonstrates a general reflection of the ten factors. Table 2 presents the details of the influencers.

Table 2. The Selected Influencers' Demographical Data

Content	Subscriber	Total video	History
Life lessons (e.g., shaving)	2.81M	49	Since April 1, 2020
College life, fashion, and travel	452K	47	Since January 10, 2014
Game playing and techniques	133K	610	Since September 24, 2016
Second-hand clothing and fashion tips	434K	343	Since October 22, 2012
Photographing, hair styling, makeup,	720K	300	Since March 28, 2015
Make-up products and skills	5.76M	158	Since February 12, 2015
Trendy daily items	289K	39	Since August 16, 2016
Driving techniques	4.86 M	250	Since September 13, 2007
Appliances (e.g., laundry machines and laundry techniques)	248K	169	Since September 16, 2018
Travel (places and foods)	208K	500	Since September 11, 2013
Electronic appliances	296K	345	Since April 9, 2017
Style musings, tutorials, and lifestyle advice	2.82M	762	Since March 1, 2010
Beauty products and make-up	1.23M	93	Since March 9, 2008

By applying the ten factors, we evaluated each influencer's video clips, pages, and other available information, including their profiles, comments, posts, playlists, and networks, using the three themes of video content analysis: (a) determining transcription tensions by exploring verbal and non-verbal interactions, (b) defining the unit of analysis as per the ten factors, and (c) representing context to ensure that the identified indicators aligned with the meaning of the ten factors to verify the coherence [42]. Also, we addressed any findings which did not belong to any of the factors. As a result, we were able to find 52 indicators presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The Evaluation Outcomes of 13 Influencers

Indicator	Interpretation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clarify their expertise by providing their career background or professional influencer experience in a field - Present diverse types of products in the same category and detailed information - Demonstrate how to use it or fix it - Visit local shops with friends - Have publications (books, articles, and artworks) in a field - Introduce current trends or provide a general review of market trends 	Credibility is evidenced by influencers' professional backgrounds, career history, and expertise in a field and their capacity to present knowledge, information, and skills.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Viewers acknowledge the influencers' time and effort on comments and chats - Viewers acknowledge the influencers' specific/professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes on comment and chat - Influencers ensure that viewers do not follow their demonstration unless a safe environment is arranged - Viewers leave comments to show their interest in buying products as per the influencers' review of the product(s) - Viewers participate in a product review and post their review to the community 	Trustworthiness is shown in viewers' feedback and their written/oral communication between influencer and audience.

Table 3. The Evaluation Outcomes of 13 Influencers

Indicator	Interpretation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Present products in diverse perspectives (e.g., top-view, bottom-view, and side-view) - Test products by themselves or with their acquaintances (friends and experts) - Communicate with their acquaintances regarding product use and details - Encourage viewers to leave questions on the comment or ask questions in real-time - Use an intro and credit page to present their professionalism in a consistent manner - Use subtitles in multi-languages (depending on audience groups) 	<p>Quality presentation is demonstrated through technical communication (written, verbal, and non-verbal) and strategic communication (scientific, emotional, and persuasive) in product testing / reviewing and promoting personal branding.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide practical lessons that viewers need to know - Promote products with newly discovered features and applications - Review competitive products - Encourage viewers to request the influencer to conduct specific demonstrations - Present product competitiveness in markets using statistics or anecdotal data 	<p>Public relations, highly related to expertise and credibility in content presentation and communication, are to manage effective communication with viewers to convey quality information and facilitate engagement.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dress up/put make-up like a character who uses products (e.g., a mechanic, a housewife, a college student, and a game player) - Look like a typical person of target audiences/consumers who appear highly confident (e.g., voice tones, body languages, and jokes) - Present themselves like a person who is ready to use a product (e.g., no make-up before a make-up tutorial) - Share their personal stories to ensure that viewers perceive them as a reliable, friendly, and unique person and a leader in a field - Give jokes or share personal/relevant episodes to get attention 	<p>Appearance is highly related to personal branding in that influencers build not only physical appearance, including grooming, clothes they wear, and how they speak but also memorable personality and unique selling points (e.g., a sense of humor, storytelling, and selfies).</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Respond to viewer comments in an immediate manner and give ‘thank you’ messages in a friendly manner - Post extra information and personal stuff to a different platform - Provide additional information using hyperlinks or referring to other platforms - Respond mostly to positive comments in a prompt manner and clarifying questions (no responses to negative comments) - Give ‘likes’ to almost all comments 	<p>Quality communication is to interact with viewers by responding to viewers’ participatory actions in verbal, non-verbal, visual, and written ways.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use role-play and situational dialogues (e.g., dad-kid) - Invite friends and actual customers to join shopping or demonstration sessions 	<p>Affability is demonstrated through ‘quality communication’ and ‘participatory activities.’</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hold a live streaming event and organize a Q&A session - Communicate with viewers through regular posts and provide additional information - Interview real customers on a street or in a shop or by inviting them to their studio - Use products together with viewers or participants (e.g., playing an online game with viewers) - Participate in commenting as long as conversations are product-related - Offer a short activity that viewers can instantly follow (e.g., drawing realistic eyebrows, using shortcuts to initiate a specific function, finding unknown parts) - Offer an additional session to share current trends and consumer reports 	<p>Participatory activities are organized and significant parts of influencers’ specialized role for viewers’ interactive engagement in promotion presentations.</p>

Table 3. The Evaluation Outcomes of 13 Influencers

Indicator	Interpretation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use a platform as primary and other platforms as secondary, and use the media in an integrative way to promote and sell products and services in diverse ways. - Have their e-commerce site that sells products they promote on their social media - While videos, including live-streaming, remain the central platform, other platforms are used to add additional information and promote themselves in an integrated way - Use multimodal and multi-platform communication (e.g., an extended length of video clips on YouTube, short stories and photos on YouTube community, Facebook, Instagram, v/Blogs or TikTok, and quick messages on Twitter) 	<p>Connectedness is evidenced by managing multiple platforms in an integrative way in which the same product is promoted across platforms in diverse forms.</p>

5. CREDIBLE, ENGAGED, AND CONNECTED INFLUENCERS

The 52 indicators indicate the semantical interrelatedness and interconnectedness of the ten factors: influencers' 'expertise' and 'trustworthiness' are evidenced by viewers' perceptions of 'quality content' and 'quality presentation'; 'Quality presentation' is highly associated with 'appearance' and 'quality communication'; Yet, 'quality communication' is inclusive of 'quality presentation', and 'appearance' becomes part of 'presentation' and is highly related with 'personal branding' that is overlapped with 'quality presentation'; furthermore, 'credibility' and 'expertise' also appear in 'quality presentation' and 'quality content', and 'affability' becomes part of 'quality communication' and 'participatory activities'; lastly, 'participatory activities' appears significant for viewers' engagement in promotion, and the activities do not remain with viewers but expand into collaborating with fellow influencers; and as the influencers not only hold multiple platforms, but also they are users of other social media, their 'connectedness' refers to the management of multiple platforms to maximize viewers' engagement in their promotion and sales activities. Consequently, the intricate and intermingled ten factors are semantically and systematically classified with three larger qualitative themes: *credibility, engagement, and connectivity* and nine sub-themes, as presented in Table 4. Furthermore, we identified relevant analysis methods applicable to each sub-theme to make a form of qualitative evaluation of social media influencers.

Table 4. A Proposed Qualitative Evaluation Framework

Theme	Subtheme	Definition	Method
Credibility	Expertise	The influencer demonstrates good knowledge of the product/service based on trained, experienced, qualified, and researched rather than informed. The influencer also promotes diverse types of products/services by addressing the business's intention of product or brand image and the accurate method of use.	Conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon [22])
	Trustworthiness	The participants are highly engaged in the influencer's information presentation and content analysis, which is evidenced in synchronous and asynchronous communication tools.	Directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon [22])
	Quality content	The promotion content is highly structured, using multimedia for audiences to understand. In any form of content presentation, the influencer demonstrates their critical engagement in the product/service by addressing the diverse needs of users/viewers.	Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke [8])
Engagement	Interpersonal interaction	In any communication method, the influencer demonstrates that they have their way of communicating with people, particularly in a friendly and persuasive way. The influencer also demonstrates their responsiveness to participants' requests.	Conversation analysis (Sidnell [46])
	Quality presentation	The influencer produces diverse forms of posts in a polite, understandable, and engaging way and provides immediate and honest feedback about the product.	Qualitative interaction analysis (Nielsen [38])
	Personal branding	The influencer presents themselves with a unique and charming appearance that most audiences prefer, or the influencer looks like a representative of a consumer group.	Personal branding technique (Gorbatov et al. [18])
Connectivity	Participatory activities	The influencer demonstrates the regularity of interactivity with participants (viewers, fellow influencers, or businesspersons) by offering diverse participatory activities.	UX (User Experience) metrics (Pavlisca [40])
	Collaborating with others	The influencer demonstrates their collaborative engagement with others, including experts, fellow influencers, and followers.	Team taxonomy (Noble and Letsky [39]).
	Socially networking	The influencer develops and implements strategies by being aware of key features of platforms or channels and changing their role in diverse media.	Qualitative network analysis (Ahrens, [1])

5.1 Credibility

The qualitative aspects indicate that a credible influencer works as an opinion leader who can influence consumers and affect their purchase decisions. That is, they can establish authority in a field, influencing their audience on everything from industry/market trends to current events and consumption behavior. As articulated in Table 4, they should demonstrate their expertise in given/chosen products/services in their promotional performance. Furthermore, they should demonstrate trustworthiness in participants' feedback and present quality content through their critical engagement

in both products and users. First, the sub-theme of expertise can be evaluated by using *conventional content analysis*, and its coding categories that the company provides can be applied to written and verbal data that influencers produce. Second, the sub-theme of trustworthiness should be observed in participants' communication and feedback, and initial codes from a theory of social trust is used as guidance, which is known as *directed content analysis*. Third, the sub-theme of quality content is associated with influencers' critical engagement in both product details and the diverse needs of users. Thus, the nuanced account of influencer statements on promotion needs to be analyzed, using *thematic analysis* in qualitative research.

5.2 Engagement

The theme of credibility ultimately aims to increase user engagement in social network marketing. In essence, user engagement appears as a critical factor in evaluating an influencer's sustainability and interactivity. The potential of high user engagement helps contribute to the value of the brand's image and the attraction of new customers, and influencer marketing is highly effective in driving up such engagement [53]. User engagement is a method to increase relationships between a brand and consumers, which affects brand performance like purchases and recommendations between consumers and potential consumers [53]. As articulated in Table 4, we can verify the theme of engagement through the three sub-themes: interpersonal interaction, quality presentation, and personal branding. First, the sub-theme of interpersonal interaction appears in their diverse forms of communication with participants. It should focus on language-in-use to understand how influencers and participants work together and construct meanings from their social interactions drawing on recordings (both video and audio). A qualitative interaction analysis method called *conversation analysis* can be applied. Second, the sub-theme of quality presentation evaluates communicative contents and interactive formats for strategic customer engagement that reflect values for product/brand awareness, association, and loyalty. The values can be evaluated by applying qualitative interaction analysis in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability. Third, the sub-theme of personal branding is to achieve career benefits in three different ways: strategic in a defined direction, differentiated in conveying unique characteristics against the competition, and technology-driven imagery and storytelling to the target consumer [18]. Such features are often applied in *personal branding techniques*.

5.3 Connectivity

The themes of engagement and credibility of social media influencers are distinguished from other e-commerce in that those occur in digitally networked environments. More fundamentally, this means that influencers should have the ability to encourage their followers to consider ideas, products, or services through trusted connections with them [6]. In this sense, the theme of connectivity is understood as 'the socio-technical affordance of networked platforms,' which connects between content and user and between user activities and advertisers [48]. This also means that effective social media influencers should demonstrate connectivity with their followers, potential

followers, fellow influencers, and other experts. In addition, they need to be active participants in the entire social media ecosystem. In practice, they should design and implement participatory activities, collaborate with others, and participate in social networks. First, the sub-theme of participatory activities is designed based on user experience in their behavioral and attitudinal perspectives, which is called *UX metrics*. This metric focuses on how satisfied a user is with a product or a brand the influencer promotes. Specifically, engagement and conversion are considered categories of a UX metric: Engagement is inclusive of attention minutes, happiness rating, flow state, and so on, whereas conversation encompasses brand attributes, likelihood to recommend, trust rating, and so on. Second, the sub-theme of collaborating with others is focused on the quality of collaboration between participants. A *team taxonomy* can be organized to address relevant dimensions that determine quality collaboration, including “distribution, roles and functions, team structure, team member dependencies, information and information flow, and decision making” [39, p. 6]. Third, the sub-theme of social networking is to evaluate strategies influencers developed and implemented for effective performance across platforms. Their performance can be measured using *qualitative network analysis* to address insider perspectives of personal and social networks such as community sentiment, locality, and diversity [1].

6. CONCLUSION

The fundamental identity of social media influencers is not an employee, although their promotional performances are primarily sponsored. They are agents who advocate consumer rights and interests. In essence, “social media influencers as third-party actors who have established a significant number of relevant relationships with specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web” [14]. This capacity of social media influencers is limitedly addressed in quantitative aspects such as the numbers of viewers, subscribers, and contacts. Furthermore, their broad range of professional and personal networks is rarely considered. In this sense, this study is to demonstrate the legitimacy of qualitative evaluation of social media influencers to discover their authentic capacity and potential in the market. The three themes of credibility, connectivity, and engagement discovered in this study imply that marketers need to approach social media influencers not only as performers but also active network participants because ‘credibility’ is maintained and reproduced by their ‘connectivity’ with their followers and followers’ ‘engagement’ with connectivity as well as the influencers. Furthermore, the type of influencers can vary, as demonstrated with the nine sub-themes. This means that marketers need to be aware that one influencer is less likely to research the marketing goals and thus they better organize multiple influencers by understanding their credibility, connectivity, and engagement. Therefore, for the future study, the practicality of the three themes and nine sub-themes needs to be explored to determine to what extent they are effective to find the right social media influencers.

7. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All the authors have contributed equally except the corresponding author, and we list our names in alphabetical order. The corresponding author is Neal Dreamson.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is an outcome from a project titled, *Global B2C Social Commerce Development: Global Influencer Marketing Service* funded by [2020 Global Start-Up Campus] Global Industry-University joint Research Cooperation Project, Incheon Technopark, the Republic of Korea. The industry partner was On Life Ltd., Inc (Yooseok Jung), and Incheon Technopark's officer in charge was Yona Kim.

9. REFERENCES

- [1] P. Ahrens, "Qualitative network analysis: A useful tool for investigating policy networks in transnational settings?" *Methodological Innovations*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2018.
- [2] A. Akhtar. (2019, Oct. 8). 11 scientific reasons why attractive people are more successful in life. Insider [Online]. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/beautiful-people-make-more-money-2014-11>
- [3] F. Almeida, D. Faria and A. Queirós, "Strengths and limitations of qualitative and quantitative research methods," *European Journal of Education Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 9, pp. 369-387, 2017.
- [4] D. Balaban and M. Mustăţea, "Users' perspective on the credibility of social media influencers in Romania and Germany," *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 31-46, 2019.
- [5] J.K. Bauer, "The Effects of Instagram Influencers and Appearance Comparisons on Body Appreciation. Internalization of Beauty Ideals and Self Esteem in Women," Portland State University, Paper 908, 2020.
- [6] G. Bergstrom. (2020, Sep. 12). What Are Opinion Leaders? The Balance Small Business [Online]. Available at: <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/who-are-opinion-leaders-and-why-do-they-matter-2295976>
- [7] X. Bian and L. Moutinho, "The Role of Brand Image, Product Involvement, and Knowledge in Explaining Consumer Purchase Behaviour of Counterfeit: Direct and Indirect Effects," *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 45, No. 1/2, pp. 191-216, 2011.
- [8] V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 77-101, 2006.
- [9] Bullock L (2018, January 09). How to evaluate and partner with social media influencers. Social Media Examiner [Online]. Available at: <https://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/partner-social-media-influencers/>

- [10] L. Casaló, C. Flavián and S. Ibáñez-Sánchez, “Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership,” *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 117, pp. 510-519, 2020.
- [11] E. Cho and J. Son, “The effect of social connectedness on consumer adoption of social commerce apparel shopping,” *Fashion and Textiles*, Vol. 6, Article 14, 2019.
- [12] S. D’Alessandro and B. Chitty, “Real or relevant beauty? Body shape and endorser effects on brand attitude and body image,” *Psychology & Marketing*, Vol. 28, No. 8, pp. 843-878, 2011.
- [13] M.J. Damásio, P. Dia and J.G. Andrade, “The PR pyramid: Social media and the new role of public relations in organizations,” *Revista internacional de relaciones públicas*, Vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 11-30, 2012.
- [14] N. Enke and N.S. Borchers, “Social media influencers in strategic communication: A conceptual framework for strategic social media influencer communication,” *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, Vol. 13, No. 4, pp. 261-277, 2019.
- [15] K. Freberg, K. Graham, K. Mcgaughey and L.A. Freberg, “Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality,” *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 90-92, 2011.
- [16] R. Ginevičius, V. Podvezko and A. Ginevičius, “Quantitative Evaluation of Enterprise Marketing Activities,” *Journal of Business Economics and Management*, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 200–212, 2017.
- [17] M. Glucksman, “The rise of social media influencer marketing on lifestyle branding: A case study of Lucie Fink,” *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 77-87, 2017.
- [18] S. Gorbato, S.N. Khapova and E.I. Lysova, “Get noticed to get ahead: The impact of personal branding on career success,” *Front Psychology*, Vol. 9, 2019.
- [19] R. Hanna, R. Rohm and V. Crittenden, “We’re all connected: The power of the social media ecosystem,” *Business Horizons*, Vol. 54 No. 3, pp. 265-273, 2011.
- [20] L.C. Harris and M.M.H. Goode, “Online servicescapes, trust, and purchase intentions,” *Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 24, No. 2-3, pp. 230-243, 2010.
- [21] S.H. Hassan, S.Z. Teo, T. Ramayah and N.H. Al-Kumaim, “The credibility of social media beauty gurus in young millennials’ cosmetic product choice,” *Plos one* [Online], Vol. 16, No. 3, 2021.
- [22] H.F. Hsieh and S.E. Shannon SE, “Three approaches to qualitative content analysis,” *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 15, No. 9, pp. 1277-1288, 2005.
- [23] H.S. Jang and E. Yoh, “Perceptions of male and female consumers in their 20s and 30s on the 3D virtual influencer,” *The Research Journal of the Costume Culture*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 446-462, 2020.
- [24] Y. Jarrar, A.O. Awobamise and A.A. Aderibigbe, “Effectiveness of influencer marketing vs social media sponsored advertising,” *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana*, Vol. 25, No. 12, pp. 40-54, 2020.

- [25] S.V. Jin, A. Muqaddam and E. Ryu, "Instafamous and social media influencer marketing," *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, Vol. 37, No. 5, pp. 567-579, 2019.
- [26] S. Jun and J. Yi, "What makes followers loyal? The role of influencer interactivity in building influencer brand equity," *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, Vol. 29, No. 6, pp. 803-814, 2020.
- [27] Z. Kádeková and M. Holienčinová, "Influencer marketing as a modern phenomenon creating a new frontier of virtual opportunities," *Communication Today*, Vol. 9, pp. 90-105, 2018. Available at: <https://communicationtoday.sk/download/22018/06.-KADEKOVA-HOLIENCINOVA-%25E2%2580%2593-CT-2-2018.pdf>
- [28] A. Kaplan and M. Haenlein, "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media," *Business Horizons*, Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 59– 68, 2010.
- [29] S. Kemp. (2017, Jan. 24). Digital in 2017: Global Overview. We are social [Online]. Available at: <https://wearesocial.com/special-reports/digital-in-2017-global-overview>
- [30] S. Kemp. (2020, Jan. 30). Digital 2020: Global Digital Overview. Datareportal [Online]. Available at: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-global-digital-overview>
- [31] N.L. Khalid, S.Y. Jayasainan and N. Hassim, "Social Media Influencers - Shaping consumption culture among Malaysian youth," SHS Web of Conferences, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 1-12, 2018.
- [32] C.W.C. Ki and Y.K. Kim, "The mechanism by which social media influencers persuade consumers: The role of consumers' desire to mimic," *Psychology & marketing*, Vol. 36, No. 10, pp. 905-922, 2019.
- [33] C.M. Kim. (2016, Mar. 4). Four ways to gain credibility in social media. Institute for Public Relations [Online]. Available at: <https://instituteforpr.org/four-ways-to-gain-credibility-in-social-media/>
- [34] B.C. Lim and C.M.Y. Cheung, "Word-of-Mouth: The use of source expertise in the evaluation of familiar and unfamiliar brands," *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 39–53, 2014.
- [35] X.J. Lim, A.R.M. Radzol, J.H. Cheah, A. Hashim and M.W. Wong, "The impact of social media influencers on purchase intention and the mediation effect of customer attitude," *Asian Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 19-36, 2019.
- [36] E.F. McQuarrie, J. Miller and B.J. Phillips, "The Megaphone effect: Taste and audience in fashion blogging," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 136–158, 2013.
- [37] B. Miller. (2020, Jan. 24). 15 advantages and disadvantages of quantitative research. Green Garage [Online]. Available at: <https://greengarageblog.org/15-advantages-and-disadvantages-of-quantitative-research>

- [38] M.F. Nielsen, "The method of qualitative interaction analysis," in Proceedings of the XIVth Scandinavian Conference of Linguistics and the VIIIth Conference of Nordic and General Linguistics, Reykjavík, 1994, pp. 23-46.
- [39] D. Noble and M. Letsky. (2003, Dec. 1). Cognitive-based metrics to evaluate collaboration effectiveness. Information Superiority Working Group [Online] Available at:
http://www.dodccrp.org/events/6th_ICCRTS/Tracks/Papers/Track6/106_tr6.pdf
- [40] P. Pavliscak. (2014, June 2). Choosing the right metrics for user experience. UX matters [Online]. Available at:
<https://www.uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2014/06/choosing-the-right-metrics-for-user-experience.php>
- [41] M.s. Rahman, "The advantages and disadvantages of using qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods in language "testing and assessment" research: A literature review," *Journal of Education and Learning*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 102-112, 2016.
- [42] K.E. Ramey, D.N. Champion, E.B. Dyer, D.T. Keifert, C. Krist, P. Meyerhoff, K. Villanosa and J. Hilppö, "Qualitative analysis of video data: Standards and heuristics," in 12th International Conference of the Learning Sciences, ICLS 2016: Transforming Learning, Empowering Learners, Proceedings, International Society of the Learning Sciences (ISLS), Singapore, 2016, pp.1033-1040.
- [43] A. Ruiz-Gomez, "Digital fame and fortune in the age of social media: A classification of social media influencers," *International Journal of Communication Research*, Vol. 19, No. 19, pp. 8-29, 2019.
- [44] E.A. Ryu and E.K. Han, "Social media influencers' reputation: Developing and validating a multidimensional scale," *Sustainability*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 631-649, 2021.
- [45] H. Sekhon, E. Ennew, H. Kharouf and J. Devlin, "Trustworthiness and trust: Influences and implications," *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 30, No. 3-4, pp. 409-430, 2014.
- [46] J. Sidnell. (2016, Mar. 03). Conversation Analysis. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics. [Online]. Available at:
<https://oxfordre.com/linguistics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.001.0001/acrefore-9780199384655-e-40?mediaType=Article>
- [47] K. Sokolova and H. Kefi, "Instagram and YouTube bloggers promote it, why should I buy? How credibility and parasocial interaction influence purchase intentions," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Service*, Vol. 53, 2020.
- [48] J. van Dijck and T. Poell, "Understanding social media logic," *Media and Communication*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 2-14, 2013.
- [49] L. van Driel and D. Dumitrica, "Selling brands while staying "Authentic": The professionalization of Instagram influencers," *Convergence*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 66-84, 2020.

- [50] M. Villi and J. Matikainen, "Participation in social media: Studying explicit and implicit forms of participation in communicative social networks," *Media and Communication*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 109-117, 2016.
- [51] J. Vodka, L. Cakanova, M. Pekar and M. Novysedlak, "Influencer marketing as a modern phenomenon in reputation management," *Managing Global Transitions*, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 211-220, 2019.
- [52] K.P. Wiedmann and W. von Mettenheim, "Attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise – social influencers' winning formula?" *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 2020.
- [53] J. Wielki, "Analysis of the role of digital influencers and their impact on the functioning of the contemporary on-line promotional system and its sustainable development," *Sustainability*, Vol. 127, pp. 1-20, 2020.
- [54] M. Xiao, R. Wang and S. Chan-Olmsted, "Factors affecting YouTube influencer marketing credibility: a heuristic-systematic model," *Journal of media business studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 188-213, 2018.
- [55] S. Yuan and C. Lou, "How social media influencers foster relationships with followers: The roles of source credibility and fairness in parasocial relationship and product interest," *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 133-147, 2020.
- [56] J. Almström, L., Egertz and B. Truong, "Influencer marketing: What if everything revolves around the consumer's self-esteem," Jönköping University [Online], 2019. Available at: <http://hj.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1320638/FULLTEXT01.pdf>