Unraveling the Role of Social Media Influencers' Characteristics in Increasing Consumer CSR Engagement: A Perspective from Social Learning Theory

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Abstract

With the growing importance of CSR practices and the use of social media influencers in promoting companies' CSR initiatives, it is timely to identify the role of social media influencer characteristics in increasing consumer CSR engagement to provide implications in selecting the right social media influencers for their CSR initiatives. This study examined the role of social media influencer (SMI) characteristics that affect perceived credibility of SMIs' CSR messages, foster consumer desire to mimic SMIs' CSR activities, and increase consumer CSR engagement. Further, the moderating role of SMIs' deinfluencing activities was examined. The findings of this study suggest that authenticity, trustworthiness, and expertise of SMIs can increase perceived credibility of SMIs' CSR endorsement, consumer desire to mimic the SMIs' CSR activities and CSR engagement. SMIs' deinfluencing activities increase consumer desire to mimic the SMIs' CSR activities as consumers perceive the CSR message as credible. The study findings advance our understanding of how consumers respond to SMIs' CSR endorsement and increase our insights to promote CSR initiatives by partnering with the right SMIs who can effectively promote their followers' CSR participation.

Keywords: Social Media Influencer, CSR Endorsement, Social Learning Theory, Deinfluencing Activity

1. Introduction

As corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a global norm, companies have been exploring ways to promote their CSR initiatives to encourage consumer participation in their CSR activities and practices. With the rise of social media influencer (SMI) as a marketing channel, companies have become implementing SMIs to promote their CSR messages and encourage consumer CSR participations.

Social media platforms refer to a community where individuals can connect and empower those who share similar interests, individuals are thus more attentive and susceptible to information from friends and credible individuals than from corporations (Turcotte et al., 2015). These "credible individuals" are social media influencers or SMIs, who are just everyday social media users who have the power to influence a large number of other users on social media (Abidin, 2016). The recent research finding that SMIs are the most influential source of corporate information on social media, corporations have started to increase their partnerships with SMI's to better promote their CSR initiatives on social media (Karp, 2016; Kesavan et al., 2013). While the influencers' CSR endorsement has proven to be effective and is a growing practice because of the large reach with lower costs than standard marketing methods, there have been limited studies examining the effect of SMIs' CSR endorsement on consumer responses toward CSR activities. As companies make efforts to find the right SMIs who effectively promote their CSR initiatives, it is timely to identify the role of SMIs' characteristics increasing consumer CSR engagement. In that regard, this study aimed to identify social media influencer characteristics that increase CSR message credibility and a consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activities and the moderating role of SMI's deinfluencing activity in the relationship. This study advances our understanding of consumer responses toward SMI's CSR messages. Implications for selecting the right social media influencers who effectively promote companies' CSR activities and consumer CSR participations are provided.

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2. Conceptual background

Social media influencers have become opinion leaders and generate trends in demand for products in the contemporary globalized markets (Zak & Hasprova, 2020). The nature of social media enables SMIs to reach large audiences and can empower SMIs with the ability to get others to follow and convince them to follow their behaviors (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014).

Bandura (1977)'s social learning theory explains that people tend to imitate their role models' behaviors, attitudes, and values as a learning process. Grounded upon the social learning theory in the influencer marketing context, the concept of consumer mimicry desire is defined as consumers desire to imitate the consumption behaviors of their role model(s) (e.g., social media influencer) to be similar or connected to them (Ruvio et al., 2013). This act is not one of spontaneity but rather a planned intentional behavior where the individual is fully aware of. Applying consumer mimicry behavior into social media influencer marketing, SMIs' recommendations and actions can influence consumers' consumption behaviors if they perceive SMIs as their role models (Ki & Kim, 2019). SMIs' characteristics are key power resources of persuasion, motivating consumers to follow SMIs' suggestions (Ki & Kim, 2019). In addition, consumers' mimicry of SMIs can increase as consumers perceive the SMIs' messages are credible (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022). Thus, the perceived credibility can be a precursor that triggers a consumer's desire to mimic their SMIs. In that regard, this study examined social media characteristics that increase CSR message credibility, consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity, and CSR engagement.

3. Hypothesis development

Previous research examined how social media influencers can create positive CSR behavioral outcomes and found social media influencers' trustworthiness, expertise, uniqueness, and originality contributed to encouraging a consumer to participate in a CSR activity (Cheng, Chen, & Hung-Baesecke, 2021). Applying the concept of consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity, this study proposes authenticity, trustworthiness, CSR relevancy, and expertise of influencers can affect the perceived credibility of CSR message, fostering consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activities and consumer CSR engagement. In addition, this study proposes SMI's deinfluencing activity may moderate the relationship between perceived credibility and mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activities (see Figure 1).

Authenticity matters to the consumer when consumers determine whether they can trust, relate to, and think they could be friends with the influencer (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022). If an influencer can show that they are authentic, meaning that they are not pushing products that they do not know and/or have never tried, then consumers believe them to be more credible in the products that they are showcasing and are more inclined to make a purchase because they trust that they will look or feel just like the influencer. Authenticity can increase when influencers provide fact-based information about products or services (Balaban, 2021). Authenticity is linked to one's beliefs, perspectives, and expectations relating to context and ideology-driven concept (Wang, 1999; Leigh et al., 2006). In approaching a SMI as authenticity of source, the SMI is the authenticity of the person who generates a credible message and affects the consumer acceptance of a message (Lee, 2020). Authenticity of SMIs plays an important role in developing the influencer's message persuasiveness and credibility (Audrezet et al., 2020, Lee & Estin, 2021a, 2021b). Thus, the following hypothesis was examined.

H1: Authenticity of SMI is positively related to perceived credibility of CSR message.

Trustworthiness is the eagerness of the source of influencer to make their statements truthful and honest for their followers (Chekima, 2020). Influencers tend to receive a higher level of trust from consumers than corporations (Chen, 2023) as they are likeable figures. The greatest challenge in CSR communication is to deliver sincerity and trustworthiness of CSR initiatives (Skard & Thorbjørsen, 2014). Consumers are only inclined to mimic the SMI endorser who can lead them to believe that the CSR practice is credible and satisfactory (Till & Nowak, 2000). They can recognize when a SMI is only pushing "an agenda" for the payout or when it is a cause that they truly care about. In the context of fear arousing communications, the trustworthiness of the communicator increases persuasiveness and effectiveness of the message when the communicator was perceived to be highly trustworthy (Miller & Baseheart, 1969). To increase trustworthiness of SMIs' CSR messages, SMIs need to prove they can be trusted and that they don't just promote to build a corporate reputation. CSR messages delivered by trustful SMIs can positively affect the company as they start to cultivate relationships with the public and gain consumer support and trust. Consumers positively respond to influencers' messages and products they promote when influencers showcase factors like credibility and trust (Chetioui, Benlafqih, & Lebdaoui, 2020). With that premise, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H2: Trustworthiness of SMI is positively related to

perceived credibility of CSR message.

CSR fit or CSR relevancy is the observed link between a CSR domain and a company's products, image, positioning, and/ or target group (Zhou & Ki, 2018). Applying the CSR relevancy concept to social media influencer context, consumers perceive the credibility of the SMI's CSR message when they see the relevance of the SMI traits to CSR content (Yang et al., 2022). If a SMI had previously been discussing with their followers about social responsibilities that they care about or look for in a brand and then they partnering up with a brand which supports the similar issue, the SMI's supportive actions and messages can be credible, encouraging the followers' participation in the CSR activity. To the contrary, consumers may be negative when they feel that the influencers repeat the organizations' messages while not bringing their own opinions or thoughts when the influencers partner with the organization (Korpiala, 2022). The incongruence between SMIs and CSR messages may decrease the SMI's message credibility (Skard & Thorbjøorsen, 2014). Thus, the perceived credibility of the SMI's CSR message can be increased when consumers see the relevancy of SMI to the CSR activity the SMI promotes.

H3: CSR relevancy to SMI is positively related to perceived credibility of CSR message.

SMI's expertise is defined as the degree to which the endorser is to have adequate knowledge, experience, or skills to promote the product (AlFarraj et al., 2020). If influencers are not able to get knowledge on the product, then consumers will lose their trust in the influencer and deem them as untrustworthy. Influencers who have more knowledge and are perceived as an expert can be more persuasive (AIFarraj, 2020), making the influencers' message further credible. Influencers are found to be quality contributing to taste leading because they are able to judge and define good taste through the specific field which they are experts in (Chen et al., 2023). The more the influencer knows about the product, the more positive feedback they get from the consumers or followers to continue to follow the influencer. Once consumers perceive SMI's expertise, they make the initial decision to trust the influencers' opinions (Masuda, Han, & Lee, 2022). For CSR promotion, the SMI's intention is to trigger the consumers to engage in the CSR initiatives the SMI endorsed. Consumers believe that they are doing the correct thing by referring to the SMI who is an "expert" in the field. The efficacy of a message can be determined by the degree of the communicator's expertise (Ohanian, 1991) and the high level of a SMI's expertise can build strong perceptions of the SMI's message credibility (Schouten et al., 2020). Thus,

H4: Expertise of SMI is positively related to perceived credibility of CSR message.

Consumers want their influencers to appear to be honest, knowledgeable, stand out from others as they are "one of a kind", and to offer content containing credible opinions and good taste. As an influencer is perceived as an expert in the market and their reviews and promotion are credible, consumers have a more willingness to mimic the influencer (Abdullah et al., 2020). Credibility of SMIs can positively affect the followers' desire to mimic the influencers' CSR activity as they believe the corporate's CSR activity is credible and satisfying (Cheng et al., 2021). Cheng et al. (2021)'s study explains that consumers mimic due to the desire to mimic their role models' consumption behaviors in order for them to be able to be similar or connected with their role model. As consumers perceive the SMI as a credible source and they have a desire to comply with the SMI's messages and actions, consumers will act when they notice good reasons to do so (Scheer & Stern, 1992). The overall success of a SMI endorsement of CSR initiatives significantly depends on whether the SMI is an inspiring role model who displays a desirable lifestyle, a unique attitude, and/or a new trend for peer consumers to follow due to their characteristics (Cheng et al., 2021). Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H5: Perceived credibility of CSR message is positively related to mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity.

An influencer's ability to be mimicked is all in relation to how relatable and accessible they and the product or service are. As consumers continue to see the influencer as their "friend", opinions that the influencer shares are more likely to be adopted and mimicked by the consumers (De Veirman et al., 2017). Consumers' CSR engagement can be further increased by inspiration from or affection toward the SMI's CSR endorsement as the consumers look for even more CSR information through search and evaluation of alternatives (Huang & Copeland, 2020). Consumers' desire to mimic SMIs generates favorable behavioral responses to SMIs' CSR messages (Ki & Kim, 2019). When consumers continue their efforts in CSR activity, they feel as though they have a social bond to the SMI and even to the company promoting CSR activity. Thus, the following hypothesis was examined.

H6: Consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity is positively related to consumer CSR engagement.

Social media influencers often criticize the practices of other influencers' product promotion for only profit rather than the quality of the products and services (Faithfull, 2023). The influencers are called deinfluencers who use their social media platforms to

critique the consumption, false advertising that other influencers promote (Palasciano, 2023). When traditional influencers promote a product, deinfluencers are challenge the promotion and consumption (Faithfull, 2023). Social media influencers' deinfluencing activities are a growing trend in social media platforms while promoting social responsibility and sustainability issues. SMIs' deinfluencing content can be persuasive as it is shown to be from SMIs' genuine intentions to help their followers make a right decision and behave for the social causes. The SMI's deinfluencing activity may increase perceived credibility of the message as consumer view the activity from the SMI's genuine intentions and consumers will be more motivated to mimic the SMIs' CSR activities. Thus, this study proposes that a SMI's deinfluencing activity can moderate the relationship between the SMI's message credibility and consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity.

H7: SMI's deinfluencing activity moderates the relationship between the perceived credibility of CSR message and consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity.

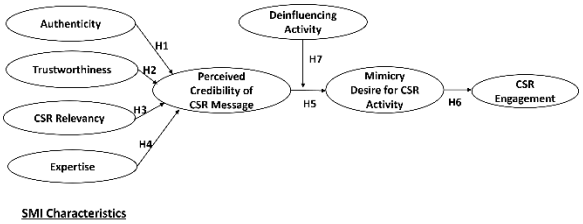


Figure 1. The research model

4. Methods

This study collected data using Prolific, an international survey research company. Online survey questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics and invitations were sent to 409 U.S. customers with a screening question whether they follow at least one social media influencer who has promoted corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the past 12 months. The definitions of social media influencers and CSR activities were provided to obtain the appropriate sample for the study. The survey participants were then asked to name the social media influencer they would answer for the survey questions. A total of 202 completed responses were obtained and used for further analysis.

All questions were used on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from '1' as 'Strongly Disagree' to '7' as 'Strongly Agree'. Among the study participants, 51% were female, and most were aged between 18 and 45 (82%). Moreover, most of the participants were single (62%), were Caucasian (60%), and had an associate degree or above (63%). Items measuring authenticity (4 items), trustworthiness (3 items), and expertise (3 items) were adapted from Lee and Eastin (2021)'s study. The CSR relevancy to SMI was measured with three items adapted from the previous study (Chen et al., 2023). Four perceived credibility items were adapted from Belanche et al. (2021)'s study. Mimicry desire for the SMI's CSR activity was measured with four items adapted from Ki and Kim (2019)'s study and three items measuring CSR engagement were adapted from the previous study (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). Social media influencers' deinfluencing activity was measured using two questions, 'the influencer posts what not to buy under the guise of critiquing overconsumption and saving money' and 'the influencer shares the things that people should stop buying'. Using Amos 28.0, this study evaluated measurement model and tested the study hypotheses.

5. Results

5.1. The measurement model

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the measurement model. The model fit indices supported the model had a good fit (χ^2 = 485.921 with 97 df at p = .000, CFI = .939, RMSEA = .075). Construct validity of the model was evaluated using convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was assessed by examining whether 1) all items loaded on the intended constructs at the p-value < .001 with standardized factor loadings exceeded .70; 2) each construct's composite reliability exceeded .70; and 3) all constructs' Average Variance Extracted (AVE)s were above the recommended level of .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All constructs in the study satisfied those criteria. Discriminant validity among the constructs was evaluated by comparing the AVE and the squared correlations between the two constructs of interest. AVEs for all constructs were greater than their squared correlations, confirming discriminant validity. All the measures in this study met the requirements for testing the hypotheses using structural equation modeling (see Appendix1).

5.2. Hypothesis testing

Structural equation modeling was conducted to test the study hypotheses. The model fit indices were in the acceptable range (χ^2 = 546.108 with 64 df at p

< .001, CFI = .927, RMSEA = .081). The results showed that the effects of authenticity (H1: Γ = .485, t = 7.086, p < .001) and trustworthiness (H2: Γ = .175, t = 3.530, p < .001) of SMI on perceived credibility of CSR message were positive, supporting hypotheses 1 & 2. The effect of CSR relevancy to SMI on perceived credibility of CSR message was not significant (H3: Γ = .060, t = 1.513, p = .130), thus hypothesis 3 was not supported. The SMI's expertise was positively related to perceived credibility of CSR message (H4: Γ = .404, t = 6.291, p < .001), supporting hypothesis 4. The effect of perceived credibility of SMI's CSR message on consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity was positive (H5: β= .664, t = 8.791, p < .001). The effect of consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity on consumer CSR engagement was positive (H6: β= .875, t = 10.916, p < .001). Thus, hypotheses 5 and 6 were supported (see Table 1).

Table 1. Results of hypotheses 1-6 testing

Hypothesized Paths	**Parameter Estimates (t-value)**
H1: Authenticity-> Perceived Credibility	.485 (7.086)*
H2: Trustworthiness> Perceived Credibility	.175 (3.530)*
H3: CSR Relevancy-> Perceived Credibility	.060 (1.513)
H4: Expertise-> Perceived Credibility	.404 (6.291)*
H5: Perceived Credibility-> Mimicry Desire	.664 (8.791)*
H6: Mimicry Desire-> CSR Engagement	.875 (10.916)*

Note: *p< 0.01

5.3. The moderating effect of deinfluencing activity

The study sample was divided into two groups depending on responses' having either a high score (> 3.51) or low score (<= 3.5) determined by a median split on two question items measuring SMI's deinfluencing activity. The lower-scoring respondents (47.5%, n=96) comprised the group answering survey questions on SMIs with the low-level deinfluencing activity, and the higher-scoring respondents (52.5%, n=106) comprised the group responding survey questions on SMIs with the high-level deinfluencing activity. The moderating effect of the level of deinfluencing activity on the hypothesized paths was tested using the chi-square differences between the constrained model (in which equality constraint imposed on the hypothesized path was moderated across groups) and the unconstrained model (with free parameter estimation). The results showed the moderating effect on the relationship between perceived credibility of CSR message and consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.209$ at p = .040). The effect of perceived credibility of SMI's CSR message on consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity was higher for the group answering SMIs with the high level of deinfluencing activity (β = .646 at p < .001) than for the group answering SMIs with the low level of deinfluencing activity (β = .565 at p < .001). Thus, the results supported hypothesis 7.

The variance (R^2) for perceived credibility of SMI's CSR message was .97, supporting that 97% of variance in perceived credibility of CSR message was explained by SMI's authenticity, trustworthiness, and expertise. Mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity and CSR engagement had variances of .44, and .77 respectively, indicating that 44% of variance in mimicry desire was explained by the perceived credibility which was influenced by the three SMI's characteristics and 77% of variance in CSR engagement was explained by three characteristics, perceived credibility, and mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity.

6. Discussion

With the growing importance of CSR practices and the rise of social media influencer marketing, this study examined how social media influencers' characteristics affect perceived credibility of a SMI's CSR message, foster consumer mimicry desire for a SMI's CSR activity, and increase CSR engagement. Further, the moderating role of a SMI's deinfluencing activity was examined to determine how it influences the relationship between perceived credibility of CSR message and consumer mimicry desire for SMI's CSR activity. This study makes several important findings that advance our understanding of how consumers respond to SMIs' CSR endorsement through the lens of social learning theory and increase our insights to promote CSR initiatives by partnering with the right SMIs who can effectively encourage their followers' CSR participation.

The study findings support that authenticity, trustworthiness, and expertise of SMI's can increase perceived credibility of SMI's CSR endorsement. Consumers determine the SMI's CSR endorsement is credible as they perceive that the SMI comes off very genuine, is honest in giving reviews on products, and is knowledgeable in their field by observing the SMI's activities. This suggests that companies should invest in long-term beneficial working relationships with appropriate SMIs and sponsor them to develop trustful and reliable content. Once consumers determine the

SMI generated content is credible sources, the SMI's CSR endorsement can be further empowered and effective. On the other hand, SMIs should also choose with care which CSR initiatives to endorse for their branding and impression management as to make sure they are staying true to their social media platform (Smith et al., 2018).

The finding of this study suggests that perceived credibility of a SMI's CSR endorsement further increases consumer desire to mimic the SMI's CSR activity. The result supports Bandura (1977)'s social learning theory which explains the mechanism of an influencer in inspiring target audiences and forming their desire to imitate the influencer behavior and actions. Companies should select SMIs to endorse their CSR initiatives who not only demonstrate a credible and attractive online persona but also inspire peer consumers to mimic them (Cheng et al., 2021). Consumers are found to mimic SMIs' recommendations when consumers perceive that the SMIs are credible sources and are their role models, thus as a way to feel connected (Ruvio et al., 2013). SMIs can become role models through their perceived authenticity, trustworthiness, and expertise in their field.

The study results indicate that consumers' CSR engagement can be increased as their desire to mimic SMIs' CSR activity. When company promotes CSR messages partnering with the right SMIs and establish their influence on social media with their followers, they are able to emphasize the social value and sustainability component of their companies (Grover, Kar, & Ilavarasan, 2019). In that sense, the right SMI's CSR endorsement can be amplified to reach larger audiences while fostering consumer CSR engagement. This further establishes the relationship between consumers and the CSR company as social capital to facilitate the company's success in upcoming CSR initiatives (Cheng et al., 2021).

With the recent deinfluencing trend in social media platforms, this study examined whether SMIs' deinfluencing activity could moderate the effect of perceived credibility of CSR message on consumer desire to mimic SMI's CSR activity. The finding supports that SMI's deinfluencing activity increases consumer desire to mimic the SMI's CSR activity as consumers perceive their CSR message is more credible than SMI's with less deinfluencing activities. In light of the deinfluencing trend, companies need to examine how they implement deinfluencing content for their CSR promotion and partner with deinfluencers in social media platforms.

7. Limitations and future studies

While this study contributes to providing valuable insights into social media influencers' characteristics that make SMI's CSR endorsement more effective, it has several limitations. First, the study respondents answered survey questions on different SMIs in different topic categories, thus, the study results may not be applied to a certain product or a certain topic category. Another limitation of the study relates to measuring SMI's deinfluencing activity. As SMI's deinfluencing activity is a growing trend, there may be a variety of deinfluencing activities that the survey questions were not addressed.

Future studies are encouraged to examine a wider variety of deinfluencing activities and how consumers respond toward SMI's deinfluencing activities. Experimental studies based on the current study model to examine the effectiveness of SMI's CSR endorsement and consumer CSR participation in different contexts and industries of CSR activities are also suggested for future research. Taking a qualitative approach in examining more detailed insights on consumer motivations to mimic SMIs' CSR activities is encouraged to future research. In the analytical approach, future research may test interaction effects among the hypothesized relationships in the study for revealing hidden effects.

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Appendix 1. Measurement model evaluation

Construct	Loading	CR	AVE
Authenticity		.93	.77
The influencer seems kind and good hearted.	.84		
The influencer is sincere.	.91		
The influencer comes off very genuine.	.92		
The influencer is down-to-earth.	.82		
Trustworthiness		.83	.66
The influencer gives meaningful insights into the products even though it is a sponsored product.	.80		
The influencer gives very honest reviews on brands.	.86		
The influencer promotes product he or she actually uses.	.69		
CSR Relevancy		.93	.82
The influencer traits match the CSR activity the influencer promotes.	.87		
The influencer is relevant to the CSR activity the influencer promotes.	.92		
The influencer is a good fit for the CSR activity the influencer promotes.	.93		
Expertise		.90	.74
The influencer is skilled in their field.	.87		
The influencer is very knowledgeable in their field.	.90		
The influencer demonstrates a natural ability in their field.	.82		
Perceived Credibility		.87	.63
The influencer is trustworthy.	.86		
The influencer is honest.	.86		
The influencer is an expert on the topic.	.70		
The influencer is knowledgeable	.77		
Mimicry Desire		.93	.76
I am inspired by the social media influencer and I want to follow and practice CSR initiatives the influencer suggested.	.86		
I would not hesitate to take into account the influencer's suggestion to practice CSR initiatives.	.92		
I would feel confident in following the influencer suggestions to participating in CSR initiatives.	.87		
I would rely on the recommendations about participating in CSR initiatives made by the influencer.	.85		
CSR Engagement		.87	.69
I believe I would like to share the story about the CSR activity to others online.	.79		
I believe I would 'like' or 'comment' on the post of the CSR activity on the brand's social media platforms.	.77		
I believe I would like to give my strongest support to the CSR activity.	.93		

Note: CR-Composite Reliability, AVE-Average Variance Extracted