University of Cumbria

Ozuem, Wilson, Rafangni, S, Willis, M and Rovai, S (2021) Unpacking the concept of influencers: the moderating role of Social Media Influencers in service failure recovery strategies. In: 2021 AMA Summer Academic Conference, August 4-6, 2021, Virtual. (Unpublished)

Unpacking the concept of influencers: the moderating role of Social Media Influencers in service failure recovery strategies

Ozuem, W*, Rafangni, S**, Willis, M* and Rovai, S***

University of Cumbria, UK*, University of Florence, Italy** and Excelia Business School, France***

For further information, please contact Wilson Ozuem (wilson.ozuem@cumbria.ac.uk)

Description

Prior research has advanced several explanations for social media influencers' (SMIs') success in the burgeoning computer-mediated marketing environments but leaves one key topic unexplored: the moderating role of SMIs in service failure recovery strategies. This study adds to the literature by analysing the nature of influencer marketing from the credibility of source perspective to the congruence effects between SMIs' and consumers' perceptions, particularly on the mediating role of influencers on failure recovery processes. Building on actor–network theory, this study conceptualises four distinct pathways unifying SMIs' efforts in the service failure recovery process. The emergent dual funnel model illustrates how the effortful processing of social media content, source credibility and message content moderate service failure severity and speed of recovery. The insights gained from our model contribute to research on the pivotal uniqueness of SMIs in service failure recovery processes and offer practical explanations of variations in the implementation of influencer marketing.

Research Question

The significance of influencer marketing within social media suggests that SMIs cannot be excluded from a brand's communication strategy (Singh et al., 2020). Our findings reveal that influencers' engagement can reduce the perceived severity of service failures and enhance recovery procedures, thus motivating customers to remain with brands. However, the findings also reveal several risks associated with employing influencers as part of recovery strategies that brands must consider, including a perceived mismatch between the influencer and the brand, and the diverse criteria individual customers apply when evaluating their recovery experience and the influencer's contribution. Brands must approach their employment of influencers with caution by considering the behavioural characteristics they deliver through social media and how customers will respond to them. The present research clarifies that there are different socio-technical processes involved in how SMIs approach their audience and how customers react to the influencers' delivery in service failure and recovery situations. For instance, SMIs participate in sharing commercial and non-commercial content, and both have the potential to influence the behaviour of their audience (Stubb and Colliander, 2019; Ozuem et al 2021a). However, the effectiveness of their contributed content and delivery approach can be reduced by service failures. If the volume of commercial content exceeds non-commercial content, or if influencers' content is mainly focused on directly selling the reviewed branded products, then this could generate perceived inconsistencies if customers encounter service failures. This outcome becomes more severe if the influencer does not have a perceived passion beyond the commercial orientation of their involvement, thus weakening his/her character profile (Audrezet et al., 2018) as well as his/her perceived impact on service recovery.

Methodology and Methods

Social constructivism challenges preconceptions regarding knowledge generation and immediate assumptions about how reality is displayed for humanity in general and individuals in particular. Indeed, social constructivism enables a critical stance in relation to our understanding of historical and cultural dimensions; that is, that all phenomena are developed and understood through historical transformation and so are consequently relative to specific times and situations (Ozuem et al 2021b). Not only are phenomena relative to historical and cultural environments, but they are also derived through meanings relating to given times and situations through economic and social relationships, as well as the particular notions of what knowledge entails in a given era/epoch.

Through theoretical coding, empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions were adopted to obtain answers reflecting a spontaneous perspective on how SMIs enhance consumers' responses to service failures in the fashion industry (Schmidt, 2010; Geer, 1988). The main questions asked in the data collection concerned the narration of experiences of online purchase behaviour, a description of the SMIs most visited over time, and an explanation of their impact on the consumer's reactions to service failures. To address the aim of our study, millennials of ages ranging between 18 and 39 years were selected. This was because, being virtually interactive, they follow SMIs (Daniel, Crawford Jackson and Westerman, 2018) and exhibit the highest internet usage and preference for online shopping (Dharmesti, Dharmesti, Kuhne and Thaichon, 2019). A total of 120 millennials were invited to participate, 58 of whom agreed to be interviewed (the participants' socio-demographic

information is summarised in Table 1). These millennials were recruited from, and interviewed in, each of the researchers' countries: France, Italy and the UK. The interviews, which lasted 35 to 50 minutes, were conducted through virtual platforms (Adobe, Zoom, Google Meet, Teams, Skype) to comply with COVID-19 social distancing regulations.

Summary of findings and Key Contributions

This study examines a perspective of SMIs that considers the cycle of their influence on customers through service failure and recovery. The study summarises this cycle, illustrated in the dual funnel model (Figure 2), through four key themes identified following interpretation of interview data: perceived credibility of source, authentic passion, self-congruity and responsibility of influencers. Each of the discussed themes plays a major role in shaping how customers perceive SMIs involved in service failure and recovery efforts. This study finds that the positive effect of SMIs on customers is not immediate or based on short-term interactions with providers' services or the influencers themselves. The findings suggest that negative reactions towards service failure and recovery are reduced if customers have a relationship with influencers prior to the service failure and recovery compared with the reactions of customers who do not have a relationship with the influencer. Therefore, the influence process of SMIs may begin prior to service recovery processes for some customers and begin at the beginning of service failures for other customers.

References

Daniel Jr, E.S., Crawford Jackson, E.C., Westerman, D.K. (2018). The influence of social media influencers: Understanding online vaping communities and parasocial interaction through the lens of Taylor's six-segment strategy wheel. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 18(2), 96-109.

Dharmesti, M., Dharmesti, T.R.S., Kuhne, S., Thaichon, P. (2019). Understanding online shopping behaviours and purchase intentions amongst millennials. *Young Consumers* (In Press).

Singh, J., Crisafulli, B., Xue, M.T. (2020). 'To trust or not to trust': The impact of social media influencers on the reputation of corporate brands in crisis. *Journal of Business Research* (forthcoming).

Stubb, C., Colliander, J. (2019). "This is not sponsored content"–The effects of impartiality disclosure and e-commerce landing pages on consumer responses to social media influencer posts. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 98, 210-222.

Ozuem, W., Willis, M., Howell, K., Helal, G., Ranfagni, S., Lancaster, G. (2021a). Effects of online brand communities on millennials' brand loyalty in the fashion industry. *Psychology & Marketing*, 38(5), 774-793.

Ozuem, W., Willis, M., Howell, K., Lancaster, G., Ng, R. (2021b). Determinants of online brand communities' and millennials' characteristics: A social influence perspective. *Psychology & Marketing*, 38(5), 794-818.