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Social Media Influencer Perceived Source Credibility Scale Validation and Consumer Attitudes Toward the Brand: An Exploratory Study in Urban India

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between social media influencers (SMIs) perceived source credibility and the formation of brand attitudes of their followers from an urban Indian sample. SMIs have become a channel in shaping consumers' brand perceptions for products and services across multiple industries worldwide. Using survey data from India, this research delves into the dimensions of SMI perceived source credibility and attitudes towards the brand. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) validated the concept that SMI perceived source credibility is a second order construct that is comprised of SMI perceived expertise, goodwill and trustworthiness. Also, that partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) suggests that SMI perceived source credibility is positively related to followers' brand attitudes in India. These findings complement Hofstede Insights on cultural theory and suggest that culture plays an important role in determining the mechanics of influencer marketing.

Keywords: *Social media, Social media influencer (SMI), Social media marketing (SMM), Instagram, Influencer marketing.*

INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing has become one of the fastest-growing industries in India and across the world in the last decade. The global influencer marketing industry is projected to grow from approximately 6 billion USD in 2020 to 24.1 billion USD by 2025 at a Compounded Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 32 per cent. The Indian influencer marketing industry has kept pace and was valued at 900 crore rupees (112.8 million USD) in 2020, estimated to reach 2,200 crore rupees (275.5 million USD) by 2025, at a CAGR of 25 per cent (Mehra, 2022).

There has been a significant shift from the tried and tested celebrity endorsements to hiring influencers for product placements. In 2021, celebrities held only 27 per cent of the market share of marketing campaigns, while influencers accounted for 73 per cent of the market share. Social

Media Influencers (SMIs) can be found virtually across all industries: from electronic gaming (Jian, Hua & Parviainen 2020) to cosmetics. In 2021, Instagram influencers with 5,000 to 20,000 followers accounted for 44.13 percent of influencer accounts worldwide. The second most popular group was that of nano-influencers with 1,000 to 5,000 subscribers, accounting for 27.86 percent of all influencers. Mid-tier influencers with 20,000 to 100,000 followers represented 22.73 percent of the total, while mega-influencers and celebrities with more than one million subscribers accounted for 0.34 percent (*Instagram influencer distribution worldwide 2021, 2022*).

Previous research has shown that SMIs affect consumer attitude towards the brand thus governing leads and conversions. Brands recognize the power of influencer marketing and have started using this marketing strategy to increase sales. Over 80 percent of the brands that have partnered with influencers are satisfied with the return on investment (ROI) and approximately 90 percent of marketers opine that the ROI from influencer marketing is better or at par with other marketing channels (Mehra, 2022).

Due to the significant growth in overall social media usage, as well as that of SMI's in particular, academic and practitioner research is focused on studying the implications of the role of a SMI in shaping consumer brand attitudes, as well as the mechanisms behind their impact. The current situation with influencer marketing and its implications for the future of marketing calls for urgent additional research.

The purpose of this research is to study the relationship between SMI perceived source credibility and consumer attitudes toward the brand. This is an exploratory study from urban India. The next section reviews the literature on perceived source credibility and its relationship towards consumer brand attitudes.

THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Perceived SMI Source Credibility

Source credibility, “judgements made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator” (O’Keefe, 2002), has been demonstrated to affect consumer attitudes long before social media was in existence (e.g., Whitehead, 1968). McGinnies (1973) found that, a highly credible information source (i.e., communicator) is more effective at persuasion than one who is less credible, *ceteris paribus*. This finding has been substantiated many times. For example, Lirtzman and Shuv-Ami (1986) stated that a highly credible source is commonly found to induce more persuasion toward advocacy of a message than a low-credibility source. Also, Gotlieb et al. (1987) ascertained that it was easier to attract customers when the source was more credible. Bannister (1986) and Suzuki (1978) noted that the degree of perceived credibility of the source influenced the recipient’s intention to use suggestions made by the source and the acceptance or rejection of the suggestions from the source. More recently, Brinol, Petty and Tormala (2004) found that source credibility has also been found to influence the confidence versus doubt people have in the thoughts they generate in response to a persuasive message.

Following Whitehead (1968), source credibility is conceptualized as being a multidimensional construct consisting of expertise, goodwill and trustworthiness. However, it should be noted that alternative conceptualizations of source credibility have been proposed in the literature. For example, Lou and Yuan (2019) suggested that expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness comprised the three dimensions of source credibility, where attractiveness has been regarded as being physical attractiveness or likeability. In addition, Munnukka, Uusitalo and Toivonen (2016) suggested a four-dimensional construct of source credibility including trustworthiness, expertise, similarity and attractiveness. In that research, similarity refers to likeness of the SMI along demographic or ideological grounds of the source. However, in this paper we follow the more traditional conceptualization of source credibility as consisting of expertise, goodwill and trustworthiness. The following sections will elaborate on these three dimensions.

SMI perceived expertise, the consumer's belief in the competence and knowledge of the source (McGinnies & Ward, 1980) has also been defined as the extent to which a SMI is perceived to be capable of making correct assertions (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). Homer and Kahle (1990) found that in high-involvement consumer decisions, a high-expertise source was more influential (on attitudes and behavior) than the low-expertise source, but in a low-involvement condition, a high-expertise source was less influential than a low-expertise source. Other research suggested that consumers are equally influenced by powerful and weak arguments when the source was perceived to have high expertise (Debono & Klein, 1993). Different individuals are influenced differently based on source credibility (Nafees et al., 2021). For instance, a consumer's ability to direct and balance their actions will determine their reactions to an expert versus non-expert source(s) (Debono & Klein, 1993; Debono & Harnish, 1988).

SMI perceived goodwill has been variously defined as the SMI's intention toward the consumer (Hovland et al., 1953) or the SMI's attitude toward the well-being of the consumer (McCroskey & Young, 1981). McCroskey (1992) and McCroskey and Teven (1999) suggested that goodwill is of unique intrinsic value, described as caring and empathy. McCroskey and Teven (1999) introduced a concept they called perceived caring, also termed goodwill, and proposed that it was composed of three elements: understanding, empathy and responsiveness. Understanding is knowing another individual's ideas, needs and feelings, empathy is the ability of an individual to identify with another individual's feelings and responsiveness is one individual's attentiveness to another individual's communication.

SMI perceived trustworthiness is the consumer's judgement about the honesty and integrity of the source (McGinnies & Ward, 1980). SMI perceived credibility has been proposed to be positively related to an SMI's trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953). In addition, trustworthiness has been found to be more impactful on consumer decision making than expertise (McGinnies & Ward, 1980). However, other studies have shown that trustworthiness alone may not be enough to explain perceived source credibility or may be less important than expertise (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Kellman & Hovland, 1953).

Based on the reviewed literature it is proposed that consumer's SMI perceived source credibility is the driver of the three dimensions, consumer's perceived expertise, goodwill and

trustworthiness and that consumer's perceived expertise, goodwill and trustworthiness are interrelated.

H_{1a}: SMI perceived expertise will be positively related to SMI perceived goodwill.

H_{1b}: SMI perceived expertise will be positively related to SMI perceived trustworthiness.

H_{1c}: SMI perceived goodwill will be positively related to perceived SMM trustworthiness.

Also, that:

H₂: SMI perceived source credibility is a second order factor that manifests in the three dimensions of SMI perceived expertise, SMI perceived goodwill and SMI perceived trustworthiness.

A Description of Indian Culture Based Upon Hofstede's 6D Model

The Hofstede model is a cross-cultural framework describing a country's culture based upon six dimensions (6Ds). These 6Ds include power distance, collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and indulgence, which helps to exemplify unique "preferences for one state of affairs over another that distinguish countries (rather than individuals) from each other" (Hofstede's Insights, 2021). Each of the 6Ds has been conveyed with a social norms metric that runs from 0 (low) to 100 (high).

India scores high on the power distance dimension (77). This indicates that Indian society has an appreciation for hierarchy and acknowledges that there is a top-down structure in organizations. Summarizing Indian attitudes this would imply that society is dependent on the boss or the power holder for direction, acceptance of un-equal rights between the power-privileged and those who are of lower socioeconomic status. Power in society is centralized even though it may not appear to be and managers count on the compliance of their employees. On the other hand, employees' value being directed clearly, delineating their tasks and what is expected of them. Attitudes towards managers are formal even if one is on first name basis.

India, with an intermediate score of 48, is a society with both collectivistic and individualist traits. Collectivism means that there is a fairly high need for belonging to a larger social framework and individuals are expected to act in accordance for the greater good of the society. This implies that the opinion of one's family, extended family, neighbors, work group and other such wider social networks have a significant influence on the individual. A collectivist needs affirmation from all societal stakeholders in order to stay happy and feel part of the society. In a collectivist society, an employee-employer relationship is hierarchical and it requires loyalty from the employee in order for the employer to value their services.

Individualism, on the other hand, entails that people are individually responsible for their wellbeing and societal standings and have to keep their interests before their other societal

stakeholders. In an individualistic society, the employee- employer relationship is more of equals.

India scores 56 on the masculinity and femininity dimension and therefore is considered a masculine society. In masculine cultures the focus is on success and achievements, validated by material gains. Work is the center of one's life and visible symbols of success in the work place play an important role in communicating the status of an individual in society. India is moderately masculine as although the society is hierarchical and values material success, the culture also requires that people look after each other and take responsibility for each other's success in society.

India scores 40 on the uncertainty avoidance dimension and thus has a medium low preference for avoiding uncertainty. In India, people prefer to work by established societal norms, without questioning and challenging existing practices. However, people are comfortable working with ambiguity and believe that whatever comes their way has to be accepted. This contradictory approach leaves India with a medium low score on uncertainty avoidance.

With an intermediate score of 51 in the long-term orientation dimension, a dominant preference in Indian culture cannot be determined. In India the concept of "karma" dominates religious and philosophical thought. Time is not linear, and thus is not as important as to western societies which typically score low on this dimension. Countries like India have a great tolerance for religious views from all over the world. Hinduism is often considered a philosophy more than even a religion; an amalgamation of ideas, views, practices and esoteric beliefs. In India there is an acceptance that there are many truths and often depends on the seeker. Societies that have a high score on pragmatism typically forgive a lack of punctuality, a changing game-plan based on changing reality and a general comfort with discovering the fated path as one goes along rather than playing to an exact plan.

India scores low on the indulgence dimension (26), meaning that it is a culture of restraint. In contrast to indulgent societies, restrained societies do not put much emphasis on leisure time, and control the gratification of their desires. People with this orientation have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong.

With Hofstede's 6D model descriptions for India in mind, the following hypothesis is offered:

H₃: SMI perceived source credibility will be positively related to consumer attitudes toward the brand.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data Collection

The data was collected using a Qualtrics panel. Qualtrics was instructed to survey an equal cross section of the population by age such that the proportion of respondents were roughly equal in

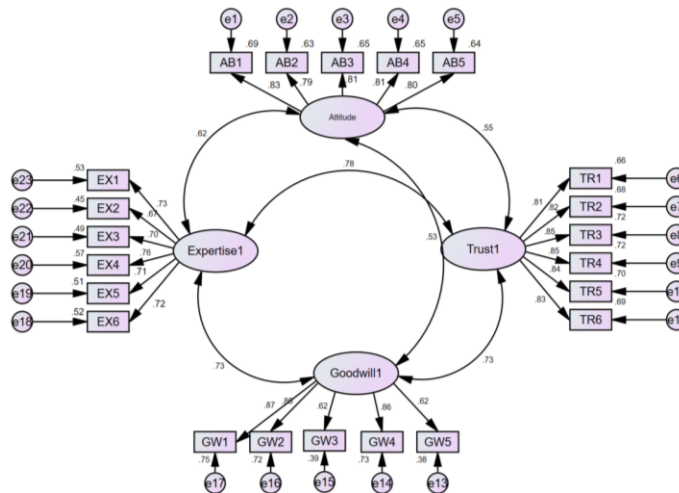
the age categories of 56-74 years old (31%), 40-55 years old (23%), 24-39 years old (23%) and 18-23 years old (24%). In addition, respondents were sampled from Bangalore (12.5%), Chennai (18.8%), Delhi (31%), Kolkata (16%) and Mumbai (21%). Most of the respondents were female (male = 44%, female = 64%). The educational attainment level for the sample included 7% high school, 4% two-year degree or technical education, 33.5% Bachelor’s degree, 54% Master’s degree and 1% Doctoral degree. To test the relationships in the proposed model a survey was developed which asked respondents to share opinions about SMIs and their role in shaping consumer attitudes towards brands. Respondents were asked to consider a favorite Instagram SMI they follow.

SMI perceived expertise was measured using a 6-item scale anchored by “Strongly Agree” (5) and “Strongly Disagree” (1). SMI perceived goodwill and SMI perceived trustworthiness were measured on the same scale. The scales were adapted from (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Consumer attitude towards the brand was measured by asking respondents to think about a brand that an Instagram influencer discussed. All scale items are included in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the two-step procedure recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). Prior to testing the hypotheses, the psychometric properties of the scales were examined using confirmatory factor analysis. The initial model provided a poor fit to the data, so the model was modified by eliminating one item from the goodwill scale (GW6). The results of the modified model are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results



The fit of the modified model was adequate ($\chi^2/df = 2.9$, NFI = .906, CFI = .936, RMSEA = .069). In addition, the modified model was a significant improvement in fit compared to the initial measurement model ($\chi^2_{\text{difference}} = 95.55$, $df = 21$, $p < .001$).

Psychometric Assessment of the Measures

The average variance extracted from the indicators by each latent construct demonstrated convergent validity (consumer attitude towards the brand = .769, SMI perceived expertise = .651, SMI perceived goodwill = .553 and SMI perceived trust = .774). The composite reliabilities were also acceptable (consumer attitude towards the brand = .943, SMI perceived expertise = .918, SMI perceived goodwill = .858 and SMI perceived trust = .771). The correlations between the three dimensions of SMI perceived source credibility were all statistically different from zero ($p < .001$) supporting $H_{1a} - H_{1c}$. The discriminant validity between the latent variables in the model was assessed using the Heterotrait, Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) method recommended by Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt (2015) and Roemer, E., Schuberth, F. and Henseler, J. (2021). The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. HTMT and HTMT2 Ratios

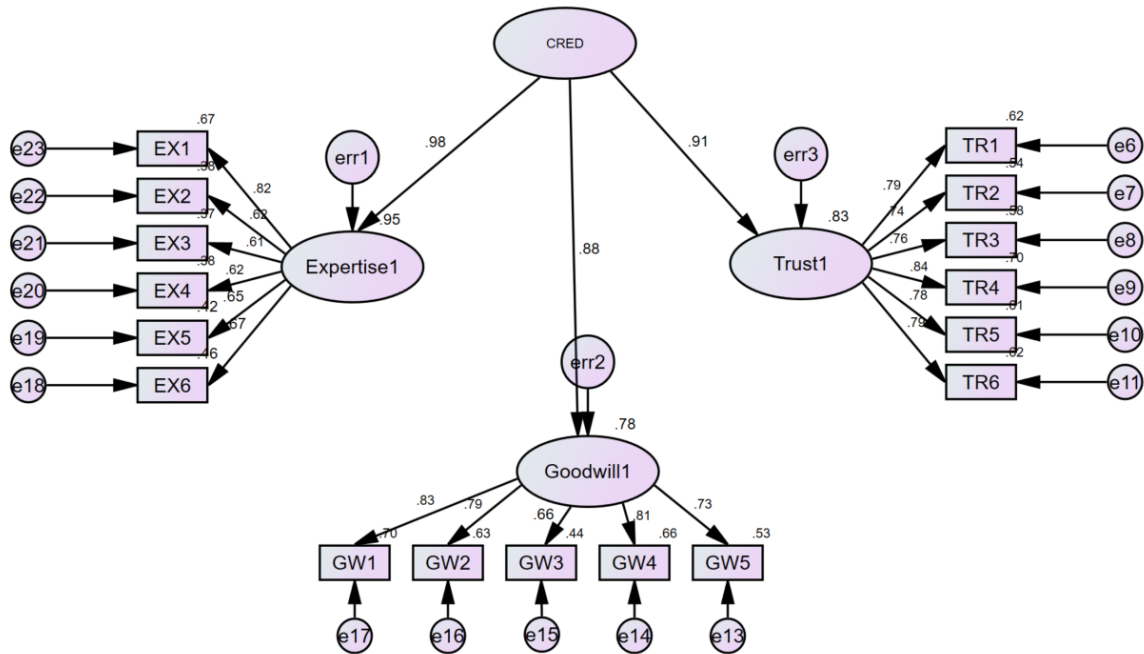
HTMT				
Attitude				
Expertise	0.6322			
Goodwill	0.6112	0.8136		
Trust	0.5332	0.8660	0.8169	
	Attitude	Expertise	Goodwill	Trust
HTMT2				
Attitude				
Expertise	0.6164			
Goodwill	0.5823	0.7956		
Trust	0.5252	0.8565	0.8140	
	Attitude	Expertise	Goodwill	Trust

As Table 1 shows, the highest correlation ratios fall between the conservative criterion (HTMT (2) < .85) and the more liberal criterion of (HTMT (2) < .90) for the establishment of discriminant validity. Therefore, the results suggest that the measurement model fit is adequate, convergent validity has been demonstrated, composite reliabilities were good and discriminant validity was established.

SMI Perceived Source Credibility

The second hypothesis proposed that the variance in SMI perceived Expertise, Goodwill and Trustworthiness could be explained by a second order factor, SMI perceived Source Credibility, consistent with the literature. Figure 2 presents the results from a second order confirmatory factor analysis.

Figure 2. Second Order Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

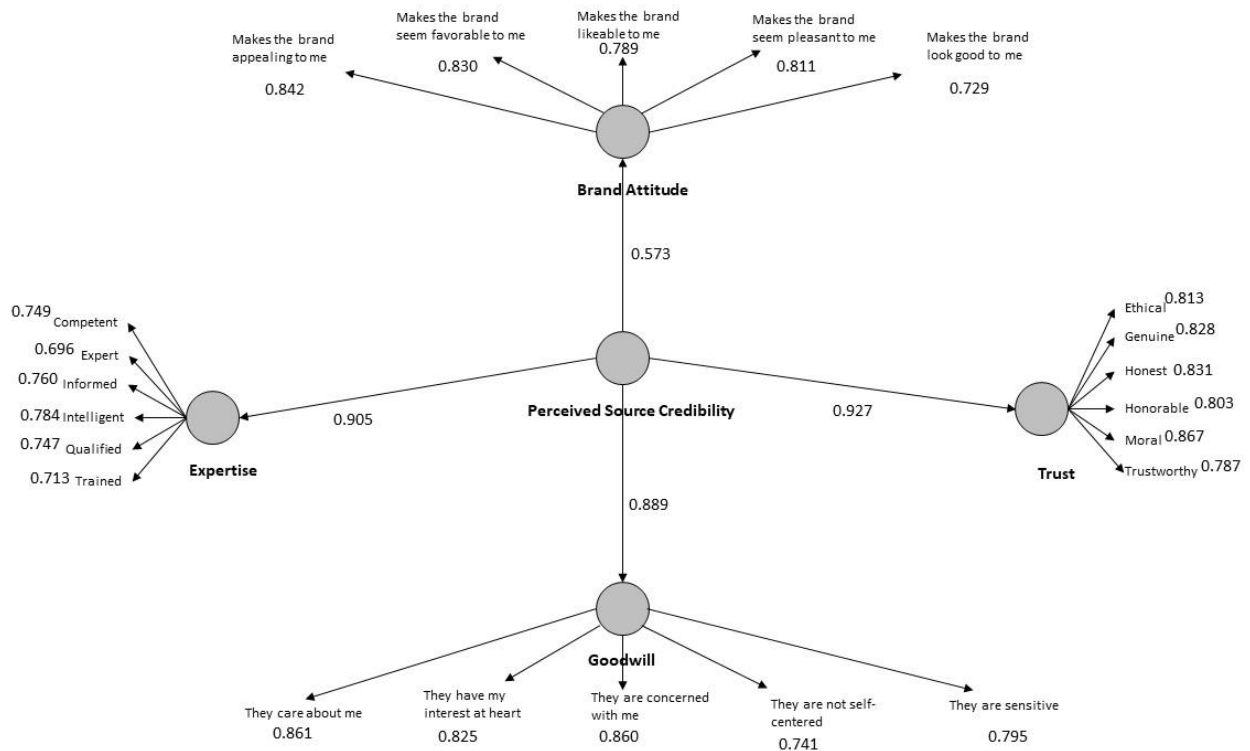


The model fit was adequate ($\chi^2/df = 2.5$, CFI = .904, RMSEA = .093). As Figure 2 shows, SMI Perceived Source Credibility explained much of the variance in SMI perceived Expertise, Goodwill and Trustworthiness (all $p < .001$). Therefore, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Model

A partial least squares (PLS) structural equation model was run as the sample size was small compared to the number of estimates that had to be made. The results are shown in Figure 3. As the model shows, almost 33% of the variance in consumer attitude towards the brand was explained by the model. Therefore, H₃ was supported.

Figure 3. Factor loadings from the PLS Structural Model



DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This research had two objectives. The first objective was to validate a model of SMI perceived source credibility. The second objective was to explore the relationship between SMI perceived source credibility and consumer attitudes toward the brand. Previous research on perceived source credibility, prior to the advent of SMIs, suggests that it is a multidimensional construct consisting of SMI perceived expertise, SMI perceived goodwill and SMI perceived trustworthiness. The data were collected using a Qualtrics panel of consumers from urban India. Confirmatory factor analysis established the convergent validity and reliability of the measures. Using the heterotrait, monotrait ratio of correlations method, the discriminant validity of the constructs was demonstrated.

A second order confirmatory factor analysis validated that SMI perceived source credibility was a second order construct which explained most of the variance in the first order dimensions SMI perceived expertise, SMI perceived goodwill and SMI perceived trustworthiness. Finally, a partial least squares structural equation model indicated a positive relationship between SMI perceived source credibility and consumer attitude towards the brand.

This study makes the following contributions. First, it is one of the first research effort to extend the literature on the dimensions of source credibility to the domain of social media in general, and influencer marketing in particular. For practice, this study suggests that marketers closely

examine SMI's perceived source credibility and culture dimensions as they engage influencers for promoting their brands.

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APPENDIX A

The SMI perceived expertise items included: “intelligent,” “trained,” “expert,” “informed,” “competent,” and “qualified.”

The SMI perceived goodwill items included: “they care about me,” “they have my interest at heart,” “they are not self-centered,” “they are concerned with me,” “they are sensitive,” and “they are understanding.”

The SMI perceived trustworthiness items included: “honest,” “trustworthy,” “honorable,” “moral,” “ethical,” and “genuine.”

The consumer attitude towards the brand items included: “makes the brand appealing to me,” “makes the brand look good to me,” “makes the brand seem pleasant to me,” “makes the brand seem favorable to me, and “makes the brand likeable to me.”

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