

# Understanding the relationships between social media influencers and their followers: the moderating role of closeness

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to better understand the role of closeness and the relationships between social media influencers and their followers, and, more specifically, how social media influencers can effectively manage their human brands.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Two studies were conducted to explore social media influencers. Qualitative content analysis and modeling with path analysis were used to analyze the data.

**Findings** – Results found attractiveness and likeability to positively predict attitudes toward the influencer, word-of-mouth and purchase intentions, whereas similarity only predicted word-of-mouth from the follower. Closeness served as a moderator but had different effects. Closeness positively moderated the effect of attractiveness on purchase intentions; however, it had a negative effect with similarity on purchase intentions. Moreover, closeness moderated the effect of likeability on attitude toward the influencer.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study was limited by the student sample as well as the students' self-identification of a social media influencer. Future research should include experimental design manipulating well-known/followed or fictional social media influencers on different social media.

**Practical implications** – This paper explores the characteristics of social media influencers as well as the potential outcomes associated with influencers on social media. The implications for marketers and advertisers include a better understanding of how consumers engage with influencers on social media.

**Originality/value** – The role of closeness is identified as a moderator of consumers' behaviors toward social media influencers.

**Keywords** Social media, Closeness, Celebrity branding, Influencers

**Paper type** Research paper

Influencers – they're the best thing since sliced bread. But forget bread; they're selling like hot cakes. They're creating huge returns, and they're only set to keep growing!

– Technology, Marketing and Behavior Writer Emily Warna

## Introduction

From unknown to well-known, social media influencers are changing how marketing is conducted and how consumers

interact with products and services by launching themselves on social media as relatable and accessible experts. These social media influencers create a new marketing tool for brand managers. Brand managers considering a digital marketing strategy need to understand the importance of social media and the significant role it plays in communicating with current and potential customers. While companies are shifting their marketing budgets away from traditional mass media advertising channels, such as print and radio, social media has become a cost-effective and viable alternative for brand managers to quickly reach more targeted and specific market segments (Phua *et al.*, 2017). Social media is not only a popular

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channel for companies to advertise their products, but it is also home to a growing population of social media influencers.

Social media influencers are social media users who have built a substantial network of followers by posting textual and visual narrations of their everyday lives and who hold influence over a group of viewers (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017; Abidin, 2016). These influencers, found on most social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and YouTube), use their extensive network to present their human brands, including their ideas, images, expertise and, often, sponsored products (Varsamis, 2018). Social media influencers may be well-known celebrities; however, not all celebrities are social media influencers. Social media platforms enable influencers to earn a profit from the human brands they create.

Social media has empowered users to build and manage a network of followers, enabling some users to monetize the exposure they can offer companies and brands. These companies have also realized the persuasive power social media influencers have over their followers and, as a result, brand managers are investing a growing share of their advertising budgets on paying social media influencers to promote their products and services through influencer marketing (Hall, 2015). Influencer marketing is similar to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing but does not strictly involve explicit recommendations or mentions (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). The influencer marketing industry is projected to be \$6.5bn in 2019 with hundreds of thousands of influencers around the world (Stokel-Walker, 2019). Additionally, according to a recent study conducted by Twitter and Annalect, nearly 40% of respondents reported making a purchase online after seeing the product/service used by a brand influencer, and 49% of respondents said they relied on recommendations from influencers (Swant, 2016). Because of the careful integration of sponsored messages within social media influencers' everyday posts, many users may not recognize the content as paid advertising (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). For example, social media influencers may present paid posts in the form of editorial opinion or use carefully created photographs to capture a product in-use. These tactics allow the influencers to use their established relationships to persuade their followers using seemingly organic content. Despite regulations suggesting social media influencers identify sponsored content, many influencers still do not adhere to the guidelines (Evans *et al.*, 2017). Social media influencers walk a narrow line of integrating their own original content within advertising content and risk potentially isolating their followers and damaging their human brands.

Although social media influencers must build a network of followers, they must also create and manage their personal human brands. Usually, influencers have established themselves as experts in a niche. For example, James Charles, a makeup and beauty influencer, has 14.7 million followers on Instagram. Known for his tutorials on cosmetic application and beauty tips, James was once sponsored by CoverGirl. His rise to becoming a valuable influencer was built on his personal human brand and unique beauty tips to his amassed following. Seemingly impossible just years ago, teenagers, such as James Charles, are gaining millions of followers and negotiating significant contracts with major companies to promote products. However, for these social media influencers to

maintain their personal human brands and online status, it is important to understand why consumers follow influencers and what information and characteristics consumers seek from them.

A well-developed body of literature has focused on celebrity endorsements [for a review, Bergkvist and Zhou (2016), Amos *et al.* (2008) and Erdogan (1999)] and the characteristics of effective spokesperson (Choi and Rifon, 2012); however, there has been very little research in the marketing literature examining the relationship between social media users and social media influencers. How social media influencers engage and persuade followers lacks theorization and empirical validation that warrants further investigation. Given the growing use of influencer marketing and the rapid increase in the number of social media influencers, it is of great importance for the marketing literature to more closely examine the effects of social media influencers and how these influencers can more effectively manage their human brands.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the relationships between social media influencers and their followers, including the role of closeness, and more specifically how social media influencers can effectively manage their human brands. An exploratory study and empirical study were conducted. The manuscript is organized with the exploratory study and results presented, then the conceptual background and the empirical study with corresponding results. Finally, a general discussion including managerial implications is presented.

### Exploratory study

To better understand the relationship between social media influencers and their followers, an exploratory study with open-ended questions was conducted. This study's aim was to identify common themes and variables of interest for further investigation. Importantly, recognizing which characteristics of social media influencers contribute to follower engagement and purchasing behavior would provide a starting point for empirical investigation. The exploratory study addressed the following research questions:

- RQ1. Why do consumers follow/like influencers on social media?
- RQ2. How do consumers identify an influencer on social media?
- RQ3. How do consumers define their relationships with social media influencers?
- RQ4. What types of information do consumers hope to receive from social media influencers?
- RQ5. What characteristics draw consumers to social media influencers?

The sample consisted of 30 completed questionnaires by male and female students enrolled in the college of business at a large public institution in the southeastern region of the USA. A student sample is considered appropriate for exploratory research, as long as the sample is homogeneous (Sternthal *et al.*, 1994). In addition, 92% of millennials find social media influencers to be more trustworthy than celebrities (Chian, 2018).

## Exploratory study results

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the completed questionnaire data (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016; Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The authors read the questionnaires to become familiar with the responses and then coded the responses using different colors to categorize them. The intent was to identify consistent constructs to conceptualize and develop hypotheses to empirically test. The results of the research questions are discussed below:

- 1 *RQ1*: All 30 of the respondents have at least one active social media account. All respondents have active Facebook and Instagram accounts. Respondents use Instagram (93%) and Twitter (73%) to follow/like influencers on social media sites. Respondents gave a variety of reasons for following/liking social media influencers with information, including following their influencers' day-to-day activities and lifestyles as well as the content that they produce (i.e. fitness, travel, beauty, fashion, etc.) cited as the most common reasons. Other highly cited reasons were trends (ten respondents), entertainment (eight respondents) and motivation (six respondents).
- 2 *RQ2*: When asked how the respondents identify an influencer on social media, 11 respondents stated that a large number of followers indicate that they are an influencer. In addition, eight respondents cited having the verified blue check mark on Instagram identifies an influencer. Other responses included the following: the influencer is selling a product or promoting it through advertising, #ad in the social media posting and the respondents' friends have identified the influencers.
- 3 *RQ3*: When asked how the respondents define their relationships with social media influencers, most respondents stated they are just followers. Several respondents mentioned that the relationships are impersonal and one-sided. One respondent stated, "I know them, but they don't know me." Many respondents mentioned that they just view the social media influencers for their content and see them as entertainment. Three respondents mentioned that they are not committed to the social media influencers. However, one respondent cited her influencers are leaders and another looked up to her influencers, and thus they choose to follow them on social media. Interestingly, a few respondents stated a close relationship with their influencers. One respondent stated, "Ariana Grande and Kylie Jenner are like my best friends who don't know I exist", and another mentioned that her influencer had responded to her comments.
- 4 *RQ4*: The types of information that respondents hoped to receive from their social media influencers fell into two categories: opinions and news. Most respondents followed influencers because their postings provided reviews on products, their opinions on topics and even inspiration for success. One respondent stated that the information needed to be relevant. In regard to news, respondents followed their influencers for updates on their lives and trends as well as sports scores and release dates (fashion and music). A respondent stated that social media influencers can also provide their opinions on current events and trends. One respondent stated, "I didn't have

any expectations on any information from my social media influencers; I interpret what I review on their sites."

- 5 *RQ5*: When asked what characteristics draw the respondents to social media influencers, the responses depended on why they follow them. When the respondents cited information as a driving factor, the characteristics they sought were social influencers who are credible, professional, likeable and attractive. The information could include facts or photos as well as current events. When the respondents stated trends as a reason to follow influencers, they cited the visuals provided by the influencers were important. Because the influencer was famous or successful, the respondents wanted to review their social media postings. When respondents mentioned entertainment, they sought comedy/humor from the social media influencers. Finally, respondents who were motivated by their social media influencers sought influencers who were entertaining, attractive, positive and successful.

The five exploratory research questions resulted in repetitive and overlapping descriptions of appealing characteristics of social media influencers, which included similarity, likeability, attractiveness and closeness. These common recurring themes along with the existing influencer literature drove further examination of these constructs on the relationship between social media influencers and their followers.

## Conceptual background

### Influencer marketing and social media influencers

Although theoretical models commonly found in the celebrity endorser literature remain applicable, adaptations may be necessary to adjust for the emerging use of social media and role of social media influencers (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016; Voorveld, 2019). Source characteristics, such as those of the social media influencer, are known to have significant influence on communication effects (Wilson and Sherrell, 1993). The basis for the selection of the social media influencer characteristics in this study was facilitated by the results of the pretest; however, the marketing literature supports their inclusion and offers a context for their study. Results of the exploratory study identified several social media influencer characteristics for further empirical investigation. Attractiveness, likeability and similarity were found to be reoccurring themes in respondents' answers to open-ended questions. Additionally, the concept of a close relationship between the respondents and their social media influencer suggested a concept not previously explored in the marketing literature.

Influencer marketing is a marketing strategy that relies on companies to invest in identified influencers to create and/or promote branded content for their followers in an effort to induce brand awareness and purchase intentions (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Scott, 2015). Influencer marketing literature has largely focused on celebrity influencers (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Wood and Burkhalter, 2014); however, social media influencers are often known to have some expertise in specific areas, such as such as healthy living, travel, food, lifestyle, beauty or fashion (Lou and Yuan, 2019, p. 1). In some literature, social media influencers are referred to as

micro-celebrities (Khamis *et al.*, 2017) because of the large number of followers they have amassed.

Social media influencers must manage their personal human brands and online presence. Human branding has evolved as a marketing communications tool for individuals to manage their identities to maintain their image in the marketplace (Thomson, 2006). It is important for influencers to manage their human brands effectively to sustain and grow the number of followers they have. Building a network of followers and managing an online presence are important considerations for brand influencers because their popularity and strengths are usually measured by the amount of follower engagement they receive, including the number of likes, comments or shares on a post and the number of influencer followers (Freberg *et al.*, 2011). The celebrity literature suggests there may be beneficial effects to celebrities having a large following on social media. For example, Jin and Phua (2014) found that the more followers a celebrity has, the greater their perceived social influence.

Social media influencers become spokespersons for the brands they represent (Freberg *et al.*, 2011) and are an effective tool in brand endorsements. Celebrities as endorsers are well-documented in the literature (Amos *et al.*, 2008; Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016). Importantly, for marketers, understanding the most effective spokesperson characteristics is essential to selecting an appropriate online influencer. Associative learning theory posits that people learn through associations between two events (Plotnik and Kouyoumdijan, 2012). Based on associative learning, endorsers create positive associative links that transfer favorable perceptions from the endorser to the product (Till, 1998; Till and Shimp, 1998). One application of the associative learning theory in the marketing literature is the meaning transfer model. This model argues that an endorser forms symbolic meaning with the product that consumers can acquire through purchase and consumption of the product (McCracken, 1989). Research has also shown that the transfer of meaning can go from the product to the endorser (Halonen-Knight and Hurmerinta, 2010). The marketing literature on spokespersons have viewed attractiveness, likeability and similarity as important considerations in endorser selection (Ohanian, 1990).

### **Influencer characteristics**

Attractiveness was a common characteristic identified in the pilot study and is supported in marketing endorser selection literature (Kahle and Homer, 1985). Additionally, the marketing literature has given endorser attractiveness much attention (Baker and Churchill, 1977; Kahle and Homer, 1985; Amos *et al.*, 2008). Attractiveness, as it is viewed in this research, refers to the physical attractiveness of the social media influencer. Previous marketing literature has viewed spokesperson attractiveness as an important characteristic that influences advertisement and product evaluations (Friedman and Friedman, 1979; Baker and Churchill, 1977; Till and Busler, 2000). Research results of studies evaluating attractiveness have been mixed, and, therefore, stresses the need for further investigation. Some studies have shown a preference to attribute more positive qualities to people who are attractive compared to unattractive (Joseph, 1982; Till and Busler, 2000). Attractiveness has been shown to influence a person's popularity, persuasive impact and attitudes formed by

others (Petroshius and Crocker, 1989; Ohanian, 1991). Through a meta-analysis of celebrity endorser studies, Amos *et al.* (2008) identified attractiveness as one of the most influential source characteristics on advertising effectiveness measures, including brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

Likeability is the affection that one has for a person as a result of the person's physical appearance, behavior or other characteristics (McGuire, 1985). Considered a persuasion tactic and a scheme of self-presentation (Cialdini, 2009), likeability is known to have positive effects on persuasion (Reinhard *et al.*, 2006). Likeability is important because it is believed to have positive effects when transferred from the influencer to the product (McGuire, 1985). Likeability has also been shown to increase advertising effectiveness (Reinhard *et al.*, 2006; Reinhard and Messner, 2009). Social media influencers are more persuasive when they are likeable (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016). Likeability is an important consideration for social media influencers when managing their human brands.

Similarity, also referred to as fit or congruency, refers to the degree of likeness between the follower and the influencer and is an important consideration in influencer selection (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016; Silvera and Austad, 2004). While much of the marketing literature has focused on the endorser – product association, Choi and Rifon (2012) argue that consumers' relationships to the endorser should not be overlooked. Endorsers are known to represent referents that affect consumers' evaluations and behavior and therefore likely motivate consumers' adoption of brands to obtain influencer conveyed meanings (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; McCracken, 1989).

There is a notable body of literature on the importance of similarity for endorsers (Ohanian, 1991; Kapitan and Silvera, 2016). The homophily principle (Rogers and Bhowmik, 1970), which articulates how people form relationships with people more similar to themselves, is often looked at by researchers within a social network context (McPherson *et al.*, 2001; Moon and Han, 2010). Within the endorsement literature, research has found that perceived similarity between the endorser and consumer was related to advertising attitudes (Aaker *et al.*, 2000). Research supports that higher similarity leads to more positive attitude evaluations (Choi and Rifon, 2012; Stanley *et al.*, 2011; Silvera and Austad, 2004; Kamins, 1990; Kamins and Gupta, 1994).

Similarity is also known to affect purchasing behavior. In a study by Woodside and Davenport (1974), similarity was found to increase purchase intentions with consumers who perceived themselves to be more similar with the salesperson. The present research will examine the relationship of similarity between the social media influencer and follower.

### **Interpersonal closeness**

Marketing research has discussed the role of attachment between consumers and human brands (Thomson, 2006; Moulard *et al.*, 2015). Based on psychology, attachment theory helps to explain interpersonal relationships between humans, whether long term or short term (Mikulincer, and Shaver, 2008). Understanding how humans establish attachments with other humans is an important concept to consider in social media relationships between influencers and followers. It has been established that consumers have psychological and



emotional bonds with human brands, including autonomy, relatedness and competence (Thomson, 2006); however, how these relationships influence perceptions and behaviors via social media has not been studied.

Attachment theory provides the framework to understand the role of closeness in relationships and expands this construct to online relationships, in particular, the dimension of relatedness which captures one's closeness to others (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Closeness is defined as "the degree to which relationship partners are cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally interdependent with one another" (Collins and Feeney, 2004). It can reflect the "ease, desire and comfort" in a relationship (Scott and Babcock, 2010). Social relationships are widely considered to have varying degrees of closeness (Aron *et al.*, 1992). For example, the degree of closeness between a mother and her child is different from the degree of closeness shared between two coworkers. Understanding the nature and influence of social relationships is important for marketers and has been a focus of inquiry in the behavioral literature (Gächter *et al.*, 2015; Aron *et al.*, 1992; Oyserman *et al.*, 2002).

Previous research has found that social relationships are valued based on the degree of closeness between the person and their cognitive representation of self. According to Aron and Fraley (1999), "the basic elements of interpersonal closeness is cognitive, an overlap of knowledge structures of self and other, such that in a close relationship each individual includes aspects of the other as part of his or her notion of self" (p. 141). Despite significant work in the area of influencer characteristics and source effects, little attention has been given to the influencer – consumer relationship (Choi and Rifon, 2012). As the prevalence and use of social media networks grow, so too does the need for better understanding social relationships in a digital environment. Interpersonal closeness measures people's sense of being interconnected with another.

### Outcomes of influencer marketing

Brand attitude and purchase intentions are commonly used as indicators of advertising effectiveness (Mehta, 2000). Keller and Fay (2012) argue word-of-mouth (WOM) is an important measure of advertising effectiveness because of the persuasive nature of WOM affecting purchase. To understand how the characteristics of social media influencers can affect the behavioral outcomes of attitude toward the influencer, WOM and purchase intentions, the following hypotheses are proposed.

#### Attitude toward the influencer

While attitude toward the influencer is not a well-defined construct, it is important to understand the opinions of consumers toward social media influencers. Cognitive social psychologists believe attitudes toward something should result in relevant behaviors toward the same thing (Brown and Stayman, 1992). Drawing from the source attractiveness model (McGuire, 1985), communication effectiveness, including positive attitudes formation, may depend on the social media influencers' source characteristics of attractiveness, likeability and similarity. Further, endorsement literature has shown the importance of attitudes on purchase intentions (Laroche *et al.*, 1996; Chan *et al.*, 2013). Recent research on social media influencers has also argued for the importance of attitudes on purchase intentions (Lim *et al.*, 2017). Drawing from the

bandwagon heuristic (Sundar, 2008), positive attitudes toward a social media influencer would elicit a large following. Therefore, examining attractiveness, likeability and similarity on attitude toward the influencer can offer insights on how social media influencers can increase their followers and encourage their followers to buy products they advertise for brand managers. Based on this understanding, the following hypotheses have been formed:

- H1a.* As attractiveness between the follower and social media influencer increases, attitude toward the influencer increases.
- H1b.* As likeability between the follower and social media influencer increases, attitude toward the influencer increases.
- H1c.* As similarity between the follower and social media influencer increases, attitude toward the influencer increases.

#### Word-of-mouth

WOM, or used in the context of social media, eWOM, refers to "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company [...]" (Hennig-Thurau, *et al.*, 2004, p. 39). WOM occurs when people share information with others. Extensive literature has shown that consumers are more likely to believe something when it comes from someone that they know or trust, instead of traditional advertising. Research has found that consumers who follow brands on social media are more likely to share positive WOM about them (Wallace *et al.*, 2014).

Research on WOM on social media platforms suggests that WOM drives potential consumers to new product pages (Green, 2008). It would seem, then, that WOM may also drive potential consumers to influencer's social media pages and increase the number of followers and follower engagement for the social media influencer. Thus, the identification of whether WOM can be predicted by attractiveness, likeability or similarity is important. If so, WOM may be a variable of interest to increase traffic to influencer profile pages, which would, in turn, increase followership. Finding ways to increase followership can be mutually beneficial to the influencer and brand managers. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H2a.* As attractiveness between the follower and social media influencer increases, WOM about the influencer will increase.
- H2b.* As likeability between the follower and social media influencer increases, WOM about the influencer will increase.
- H2c.* As similarity between the follower and social media influencer increases, WOM about the influencer will increase.

#### Purchase intentions

Companies may align with social media influencers to promote their brands, and thus purchase intentions, or willingness of a

consumer to buy a certain brand, can impact consumers' relationships with their influencers. The celebrity endorsement literature has found that celebrities and spokespersons have had an impact on the respondents' intentions to purchase (Lafferty *et al.*, 2002; Ohanian, 1991; Kahle and Homer, 1985). Previous research finds support for favorable attitudes positively affecting purchase intentions (Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000; Lutz *et al.*, 1983). Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) conducted in-depth interviews with social media users and found that social media influencers are effective at influencing purchase behavior. The halo effect theory would argue that the positive perception followers have of social media influencers would lead to a positive effect on the perception of the products endorsed by the social media influencer (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Therefore, it is expected that favorable perceptions of attractiveness, likeability and similarity will yield favorable effects on social media influencer engagement. It is posited that:

- H3a. As attractiveness between the follower and social media influencer increases, purchase intentions will increase.
- H3b. As likeability between the follower and social media influencer increases, purchase intentions will increase.
- H3c. As similarity between the follower and social media influencer increases, purchase intentions will increase.

#### **Closeness as a moderator**

Closeness measures people's sense of being interconnected with another and is believed to affect the processing of social information and perceptions of closeness with another. Closeness is measured to better understand the relationship between self and other (Aron *et al.*, 1992). The level of closeness (low vs high) in patient – physician relationships has been used to evaluate the outcome of a patient's intentions to remain with the physician (Spake and Bishop, 2009). In addition, closeness has been tested as a moderator for social comparison on self-evaluations (Brown *et al.*, 1992) and has been studied in more recent literature as a moderator in other types of relationships (Deri *et al.*, 2019; Polenick *et al.*, 2015; Li and Liang, 2007). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H4a. Closeness will moderate the effect of the relationships between attractiveness and attitude toward the influencer WOM, and purchase intentions.
- H4b. Closeness will moderate the effect of the relationships between likeability and attitude toward the influencer WOM, and purchase intentions.
- H4c. Closeness will moderate the effect of the relationships between similarity and attitude toward the influencer, WOM and purchase intentions.

#### **Mediation analysis**

Attitude toward the Ad is a well-studied construct (Brown and Stayman, 1992; Muehling and McCann, 1993). Although it is not the goal of this paper to assess fundamental arguments regarding attitude toward the ad, it is a common belief that

attitudes act as an antecedent to behaviors (MacKenzie *et al.*, 1986). The theory of planned behavior posits attitudes toward the behavior precede intentions, which in turn precede behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, this study examined the role of attitude toward the influencer as a mediator in predicting purchase intentions. Thus, attitude toward the influencer should act as a mediator when assessing attractiveness, likeability and similarity on purchase intentions. Specifically, the following hypotheses are posited:

- H5a. Attitude toward the influencer should mediate the association between attractiveness and purchasing intentions.
- H5b. Attitude toward the influencer should mediate the association between likeability and purchasing intentions.
- H5c. Attitude toward the influencer should mediate the association between similarity and purchasing intentions.

#### **Methodology**

An online survey was developed and distributed via Qualtrics to 301 respondents. The majority of the respondents who completed this study were students in upper level business courses at two large state universities (one in the south and one in the west) and received extra credit for their participation. Other respondents were asked to volunteer to participate via snowballing technique, which has been adopted in prior academic research (Brady *et al.*, 2012). The students were asked to complete the online survey themselves and then to recruit up to five friends to participate in the survey in exchange for extra credit points. A total of 74 respondents who answered "no" to the question if they follow a celebrity or influencer via a social media platform were removed from analysis. In total, 26 respondents failed an attention check question, resulting in a final sample of  $n = 201$  for analysis (55% female; 69.2% Caucasian, 11.9% Hispanic/Latino, 10% African American;  $M_{age} = 22.61$ ,  $SD_{age} = 4.61$ ).

After clicking on the survey link and agreeing to participate in the survey, individuals began the survey. First, the respondents were asked to define their social media usage (what sites and time spent). Next, respondents were provided with the following definition for a social media influencer, "a person, who has established a sizable network of people following them on social media (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017) and were asked if they follow any social media influencers. If they responded "no", they were taken to the end of the survey. Those respondents who answered "yes" were then asked to name a social media influencer that they follow on social media. After providing the name of the influencer, the respondents categorized their influencer and stated the social media platform they followed them on the most. The majority of the respondents most often connect with their influencers on Instagram (58.5%), but YouTube (24.6%) and Facebook (9.4%) were also prominent platforms for followers to connect with their influencer (6.3% Twitter, 1.3% Snapchat). Next, the respondents rated their influencers' similarity, likeability,

attractiveness and closeness. Then, the dependent variables of attitude toward the influencer, WOM and purchase likelihood were measured. The survey concluded after the respondents provided demographic information.

## Measures

### Independent variables

#### Attractiveness

Perceived attractiveness (e.g. “not beautiful” to “beautiful”) was assessed with an established five-item, seven-point semantic differential scale (Ohanian, 1990). In a previous question, respondents were asked to name their favorite influencer. The stem for the attractiveness scale was, “Please indicate the strength of the following characteristics of the influencer named above.” This scale was internally consistent within the sample ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ).

#### Closeness

Interpersonal closeness was assessed with a single-item pictorial measure for perceived interpersonal connectedness (Aron et al., 1992). This item was modified to fit the present study, with the stem as “Please select the picture below which best describes your relationship with your named influencer.” The respondents were provided with seven images of two touching/overlapping circles depicting the variation of closeness between themselves and their named influencer; the left circle was labeled “Self” and the right circle was labeled “Other.” Respondents were asked to select the image that best described their relationship with the influencer.

#### Likeability

Influencer likeability (e.g. “cold” to “warm”) was assessed using a four-item, seven-point semantic differential scale (Whittler and Dimeo, 1991). Respondents were asked to respond to these items in relation to the influencer they named in a previous question. This scale was internally consistent ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

#### Similarity

Similarity to the influencer (e.g. “I find that the influencer is like me”) was assessed with a three-item, seven-point Likert scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) (Bower and Landreth, 2001). This scale was modified by using the word “influencer” in place of the word “model” in the original scale. This scale was internally consistent ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ). The means and standard deviations of all independent measures are provided in Table 1.

### Dependent variables

#### Attitude toward the influencer (*attitude\_influencer*)

The attitude toward the ad scale is a four-item, five-point semantic differential scale (e.g. “bad” to “good”) used in advertising and appeals literature to assess attitude toward an

advertisement (Holbrook and Batra, 1987). For this study, the scale was modified to reflect attitude toward the influencer and was internally consistent ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

#### Purchase intentions

This scale was developed to assess the likelihood consumers would purchase a product from a celebrity or influencer (Yi, 1990). The stem of this scale was altered so that it states, “Rate how likely you are to purchase products that your named influencer promotes on social media.” This scale is a three-item, seven-point semantic differential scale (e.g. “it is unlikely” to “it is likely”). Finally, this scale had internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

#### Word-of-mouth

Positive WOM (e.g. “I would recommend this influencer to others”) is a three-item, seven-point (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) Likert scale designed to assess the likelihood in which one is to spread positive WOM about a product or service (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016). This scale was modified to assess likelihood to spread positive WOM about the influencer and was internally consistent ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). See Table 2 for descriptive statistics for the dependent variables.

## Results

### Relationships among study variables

First, raw correlations among all independent and dependent variables of interest were computed, specifically, the correlations between attractiveness, closeness, likeability, similarity, attitude toward the influencer, purchase intentions and WOM (see Table 3).

### Hypothesis testing

Research has found that variables within the present research should be assessed individually as they may each predict the outcome variables in different ways (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016). Thus, a series of path models were set up in Mplus 8.2. The first path model examined only main effects. Specifically, the three outcome variables were regressed on the three predictor variables. Thus, the independent effects of attractiveness, likeability and similarity were assessed when predicting attitude toward the influencer, purchase intentions and WOM controlling for overlap among the predictors and outcomes [1] (see Figure 1). It was found that both likeability ( $p = 0.003$ ) and similarity ( $p < 0.001$ ) had a significant, unique and positive association with WOM. Further, attractiveness ( $p < 0.001$ ) was uniquely, significantly and positively associated with purchase intentions. Finally, likeability ( $p < 0.001$ ) was uniquely, significantly and positively associated with attitude toward the influencer. However, attractiveness ( $p = 0.010$ ) was uniquely, significantly and negatively associated with

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of independent variables

Measure	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Attractiveness	5.314	1.628	1	7
Closeness	2.430	1.479	1	7
Likeability	6.163	1.118	1	7
Similarity	4.151	1.387	1	7

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics of dependent variables

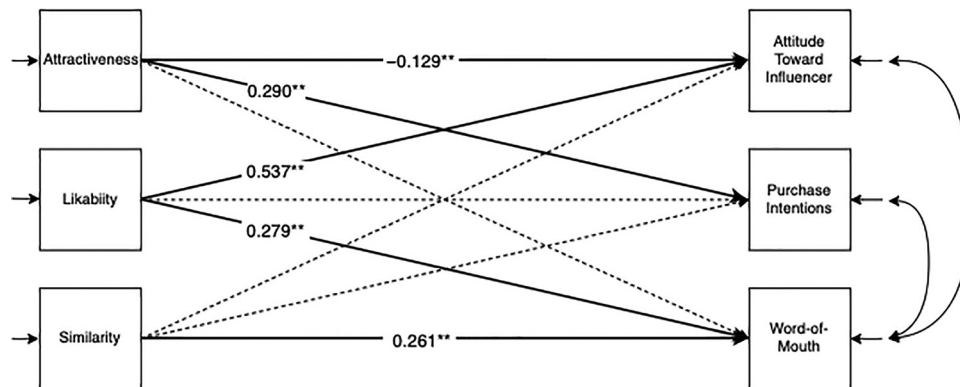
Measure	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Attitude toward influencer	6.47	0.947	1	7
Purchase intentions	5.068	1.738	1	7
Word of mouth	6.257	0.897	1	7

**Table 3** Relationships between all dependent and independent variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Similarity	1						
2. Likeability	0.145*	1					
3. Attractiveness	0.165*	0.555**	1				
4. Closeness	0.297**	0.011	-0.108	1			
5. Attitude_Influencer	0.147*	0.472**	0.171*	0.138	1		
6. Purchase intentions	0.167*	0.183**	0.360**	0.105	0.204**	1	
7. Word of mouth	0.325**	0.288**	0.221**	0.116	0.424**	0.314**	1

Notes: \*\* $p < 0.00$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

**Figure 1** General path model for all main effects



Notes:  $p < 0.05$ \*,  $p < 0.01$ \*\* . Solid lines indicate significant main effects, dotted lines indicate non-significant main effects

attitude toward the influencer. This finding is likely because of issues surrounding multi-collinearity among the predictors, especially likeability and attractiveness (see Table 3). Further, there are drawbacks to partialling out variance out of intent variables in a regression (Lynam et al., 2006), which can create misleading results. Thus, it is important to note that, in raw correlations, all three predictors were positively correlated with all three outcomes (see Table 3).

### Moderation analyses

Next, path models with interactions between closeness and the three independent variables of interest (attractiveness, likeability and similarity) were set up to predict attitude toward the influencer, purchase intentions and WOM. Specifically, three separate path models were set up to examine each independent variable with closeness and the interaction between the two. These analyses were conducted separately because regressing three dependent variables on seven predictors (per dependent variable) would result in 24 total variables in the model, which is likely to produce unreliable results. Thus, it was estimated the predictive effects of each independent variable, closeness, and the interaction between the two, on the three dependent variables (attitude toward the influencer, purchase intentions and WOM) simultaneously. The three path

models can be seen in Figures 2, 4 and 6. All variables were standardized prior to conducting interactions and all figures and simple slopes were analyzed at one standard deviation above and below the mean.

### Attractiveness

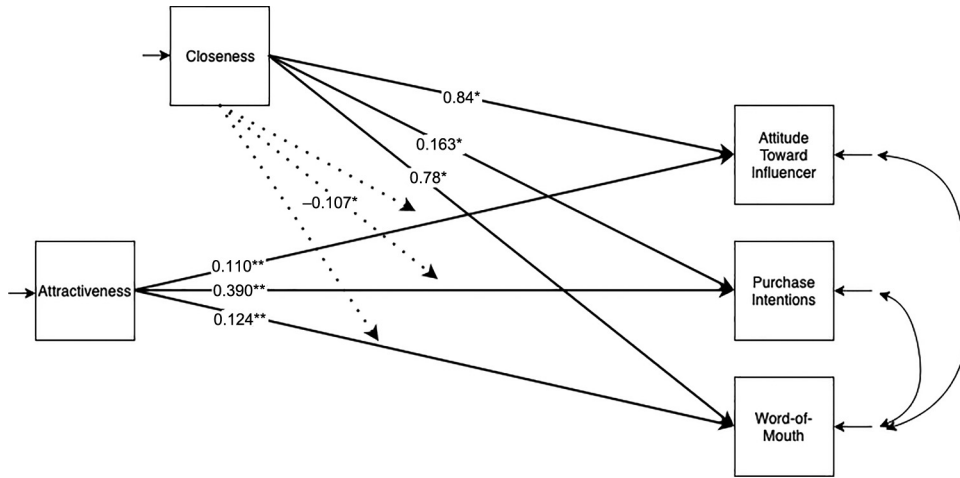
Attractiveness had a significant, unique and positive main effect on all three dependent variables (attitude toward the influencer, purchase intentions and WOM). Closeness also had a significant, positive and unique main effect on WOM and purchasing intentions. In addition, there was a significant closeness  $\times$  attractiveness interaction such that when influencers were attractive, and closeness was not an important determinant of purchasing intentions. However, when influencers were unattractive, closeness attenuated the negative effects of low attractiveness. Nevertheless, simple slopes analyses (see Figure 3) demonstrated that attractiveness still increases purchasing intentions regardless of whether closeness is high ( $\beta = 0.26$ , 95% CI = 0.10, 0.42,  $p < 0.001$ ) or low ( $\beta = 0.56$ , 95% CI = 0.36, 0.21,  $p = 0.952$ ). No other significant effects emerged.

### Likeability

Likeability had a significant, unique and positive main effect on all three dependent variables (WOM, purchase intentions and attitude toward the influencer). Further, there was a significant closeness  $\times$  likeability interaction in predicting attitude toward the

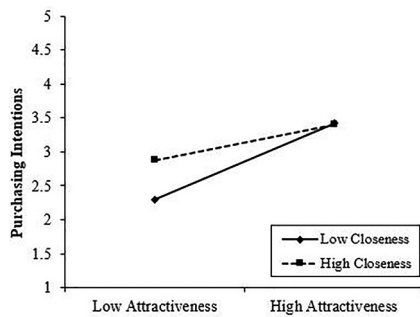


**Figure 2** Path model for attractiveness, closeness, and attractiveness\* closeness on attitude toward the influencer, purchase intentions, and word-of-mouth



**Notes:**  $p < 0.05^*$ ,  $p < 0.01^{**}$ . Solid lines indicate main effect, dotted lines indicate the moderation effect of similarity\* closeness

**Figure 3** Simple slope analysis of attractiveness on purchasing intentions moderated by closeness



influencer. Simple slopes analyses (see Figure 5) demonstrated that likeability increases purchasing intentions regardless of whether closeness is high ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $95\%CI = 0.22, 0.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) or low ( $\beta = 0.68$ ,  $95\%CI = 0.47, 0.89$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). No other significant effects emerged.

#### Similarity

Like the general model, similarity predicted WOM. There was no main effect of similarity with attitude toward the influencer or purchase intentions. However, there was a significant closeness  $\times$  similarity interaction with respect to purchase intentions, such that when both similarity and closeness were low, individuals reported significantly less purchasing intention. Simple slopes analyses revealed (see Figure 7) that similarity had no impact when closeness was high ( $\beta = 0.01$ ,  $95\%CI = -0.20, 0.21$ ,  $p = 0.952$ ). However, similarity did matter when closeness was low, showing a significant positive

slope ( $\beta = 0.26$ ,  $95\%CI = 0.07, 0.45$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ). No other significant effects emerged.

#### Mediation analysis

Pursuant to the final hypothesis, three separate mediation analyses using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2013) in SPSS version 22 were conducted – one for attractiveness, likeability and similarity. For each regression, attitude toward the influencer was the mediator, and purchase intentions was the outcome.

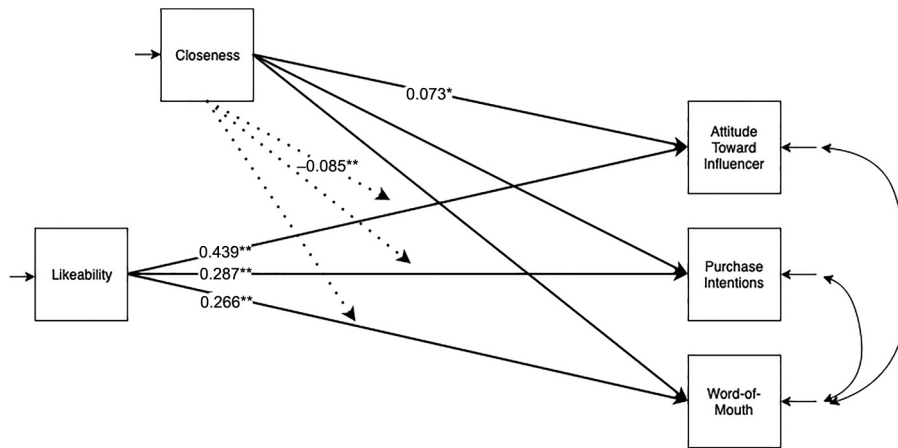
#### Attractiveness

The results demonstrated that there was a significant main effect of attractiveness with attitude toward the influencer ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $95\%CI = 0.03, 0.31$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ), attractiveness with purchasing intentions ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $95\%CI = 0.20, 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and attitude toward the influencer with purchasing intentions ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $95\%CI = 0.02, 0.28$ ,  $p = 0.028$ ). The mediation model indicated no mediation ( $B = 0.03$ , lower bound  $CI = -0.0001$ , upper bound  $CI = 0.058$ ), such that attitude toward the influencer did not account for the relationship between attractiveness and purchasing intentions.

#### Likeability

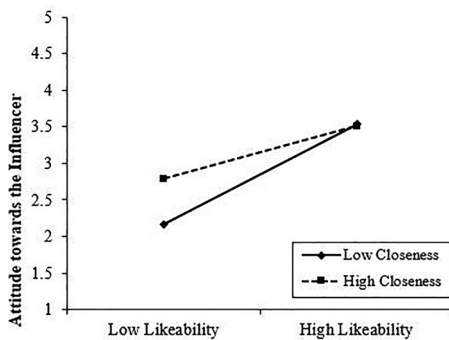
The results demonstrated that there was a significant main effect of likeability on attitude toward the influencer ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $95\%CI = 0.35, 0.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, there was no main effect of likeability on purchasing intentions ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $95\%CI = -0.04, 0.27$ ,  $p = 0.157$ ), and there was no main effect of attitude toward the influencer on purchasing intentions ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $95\%CI = -0.003, 0.31$ ,  $p = 0.055$ ). Mediation analysis revealed, however, that attitude toward the influencer did partially mediate the relationship between likeability and purchasing intentions ( $\beta = 0.07$ ,  $95\%CI = 0.003, p = 0.16$ ).

**Figure 4** Path model for likeability, closeness, and likeability\* closeness on attitude toward the influencer, purchase intentions, and wordof-mouth



**Notes:**  $p < 0.05^*$ ,  $p < 0.01^{**}$ . Solid lines indicate main effect, dotted lines indicate the moderation effect of similarity\* closeness

**Figure 5** Simple slope analysis of attractiveness on purchasing intentions moderated by closeness



### Similarity

The results demonstrated that there was a significant main effect of similarity with attitudes toward the influencer ( $\beta = 0.15$ , 95%CI = 0.009, 0.29,  $p = 0.037$ ), similarity with purchasing intentions ( $\beta = 0.14$ , 95%CI = 0.002, 0.28,  $p = 0.046$ ) and attitude toward the influencer with purchasing intentions ( $\beta = 0.18$ , 95%CI = 0.05, 0.32,  $p = 0.009$ ). The mediation model indicated no mediation ( $\beta = 0.03$ , 95%CI = -0.003, 0.16), such that attitude toward the influencer did not account for the relationship between similarity and purchasing intentions. See Table 4 for a review of the findings.

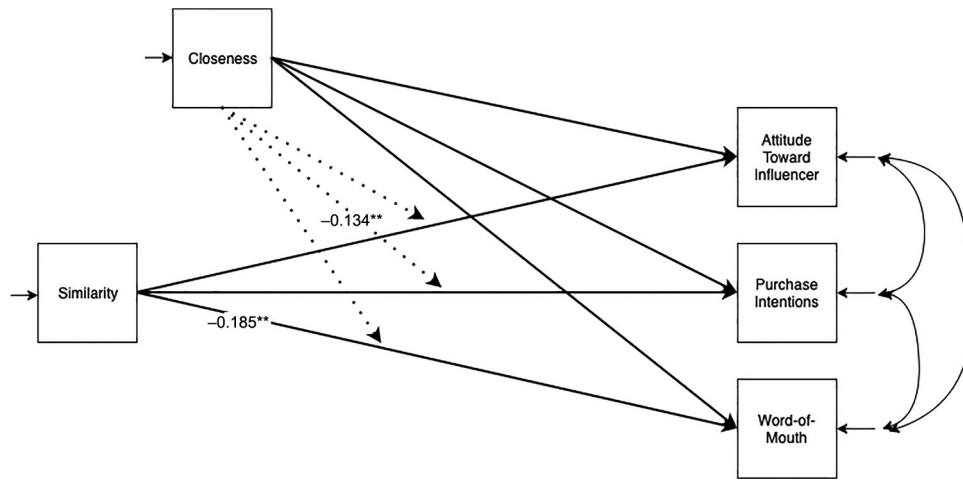
### General discussion and implications

Social media has fundamentally changed the way consumers get their information and how they interact with brands and companies. Consumers are turning to social media for

information and relationship building with brands in new ways (Hair *et al.*, 2010; Booth and Matic, 2011). Consequently, companies are shifting their marketing budgets away from traditional marketing channels and pursuing relationships with social media influencers (Phua *et al.*, 2017). Influencer marketing is considered an effective strategy that uses the influence of key individuals to increase consumer brand awareness and purchasing behavior (Ahmad, 2018). The rapidly growing number of social media influencers, and the transformation of regular individuals into social media influencers, create the need to better understand how consumers engage with social media influencers. Further, more research is needed on how social media influencers can effectively manage their human brands. The focus of this research is on the role of influencer characteristics of attractiveness, likeability and similarity and how perceptions of closeness affect attitudes and behavior. The increase in the number of social media influencers online, as human brands, supports the importance of this research. This research expands the knowledge about consumers' perceptions of influencers on social media, including the role of closeness on consumer and influencer relationships.

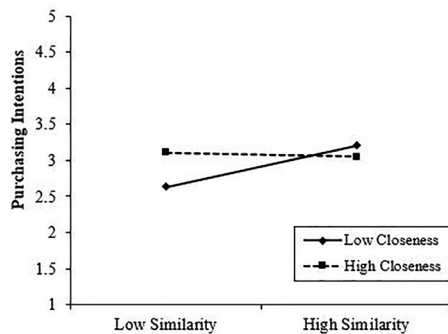
The intentions of the first three hypotheses were to ensure consistency with previous research. Attractiveness is important for both social media influencers and brand managers to consider. In the full model, attractiveness predicted positive attitudes toward the influencer and purchase intentions. This finding is consistent with previous literature on attractiveness (Amos *et al.*, 2008). Further, in the path model, attractiveness also predicted WOM. This is also supported by the positive and significant correlation between the two variables. The more attractive followers find the influencer, the more likely they are to have positive attitudes toward the influencer and likely to buy products promoted by that influencer. Although attractiveness did not predict positive WOM in the full model because likeability captured much of this effect, attractiveness does significantly predict WOM.

**Figure 6** Path model for similarity, closeness, and similarity\* closeness on attitude toward the influencer, purchase intentions, and word-of-mouth



**Notes:**  $p < 0.05^*$ ,  $p < 0.01^{**}$ . Solid lines indicate main effect, dotted lines indicate the moderation effect of similarity\* closeness

**Figure 7** Simple slope analysis of similarity on purchasing intentions moderated by closeness



This finding supports the assertion that attractiveness is a powerful predictor of purchase intentions, underscoring the importance of this characteristic. However, attractiveness does not appear to predict positive WOM in the full model, suggesting likeability is a stronger predictor of WOM. Another possibility is that willingness to spread positive WOM is diminished by qualities of the influencer. These qualities may overshadow the influencer’s attractiveness. Future research could examine this possibility.

The findings of the full model suggest likeability is an important construct for attitude toward the influencer and WOM. This is consistent with previous literature on likeability (Reinhard *et al.*, 2006). Although likeability did not have a significant effect on purchase intentions in the full regression model, likeability and purchase intentions did have a small but positive and significant relationship. In the path model of likeability (including the moderator of closeness) on the three outcome variables, likeability still predicts attitude toward the

**Table 4** Summary of the findings

Hypotheses	Supported?
<b>H1: Main effects on attitude toward the influencer</b>	
(a) Attractiveness	No
(b) Likeability	Yes
(c) Similarity	No
<b>H2: Main effects on word-of-mouth</b>	
(a) Attractiveness	No
(b) Likeability	Yes
(c) Similarity	Yes
<b>H3: Main effects on purchase intentions</b>	
(a) Attractiveness	Yes
(b) Likeability	No
(c) Similarity	No
<b>H4: Closeness moderates effect on attitude toward the influencer, word-of-mouth and purchase intentions</b>	
(a) Attractiveness	Partial
(b) Likeability	Partial
(c) Similarity	Partial
<b>H5: Attitude toward the influencer mediates the association between purchase intentions and</b>	
(a) Attractiveness	No
(b) Likeability	Yes
(c) Similarity	No

influencer and WOM but also significantly predicts purchase intentions. This suggests likeability is still an important consideration for purchase intentions and is expanded to the role of social media influencers. This effect of likeability on attitude toward the influencer in the full model likely emerges because attitude of the influencer is an antecedent to purchase intentions. Therefore, likeability is an important construct for both influencers and brand managers.

If influencers are more likeable, they will probably gain more followers given that their current followers already have positive attitudes. These positive attitudes are likely to drive followers to spread positive information about the influencer to close others. This spreading of information could lead to brands becoming aware of the social media influencer and result in mutually beneficial business deals with companies. For brand managers, likeability is an important characteristic for their influencer to have if they are looking to promote their product or service through the influencer. Likeable influencers are then likely to continue to gain followers, which would make them more attractive to brand managers who are seeking to target wider and specific audiences. However, the pressure to have more followers may result in influencers to buy followers or even fake brand deals, which could hurt credibility if discovered (Cole, 2019).

Similarity is important for positive WOM but does not appear to be important for attitude toward the influencer or purchase intentions in the full model study. The findings were consistent with previous literature that similarity leads to positive evaluations (Choi and Rifon, 2012) as seen with positive WOM, but the findings do not support its importance on attitude toward the influencer or purchase intentions (even in the path model). Although future research should delve more deeply into the relationship between similarity and purchase intentions, the findings of this research suggest similarity is less important for the influencer than attractiveness or likeability on positive attitudes toward the influencer and purchase intentions.

The role of closeness is particularly interesting and how it interacts with attractiveness, likeability and similarity to predict the three outcome variables. It is believed that the role of closeness in the relationships between followers and influencers has not been examined. The findings suggest closeness acts as an important moderator for when an influencer is lacking one of the other positive qualities (attractiveness, likeability and similarity). In other words, closeness may act as a buffer for when an influencer is lacking in a particular trait.

Closeness moderated the effect of attractiveness, such that if an influencer is unattractive and the followers identify as being close to the influencer, purchase intentions are still high. This finding has meaningful implications for influencers and brand managers. Brand managers should not focally target business deals with attractive influencers. The reason to avoid such focus is that influencers who people identify as being interpersonally close are just as important in influencing purchase intentions for the product or service. However, being attractive and close does seem to have a synergistic effect on purchase intentions. One potential explanation for this lack of a significant interaction in some cases has to do with the lack of variance associated with both independent and outcome variables. This lack of variance was especially pronounced in likeability, attitude toward influencer and WOM. Thus, the incremental increase of the moderating variable of closeness may have been restricted through a ceiling effect. Future research should find ways to recruit a wider variety of influencers and followers such that the range is broader.

Nevertheless, when an influencer is unlikeable, attitude toward the influencer can still be positive if followers identify as feeling interpersonally close to the influencer. Thus, it is important to understand the distinction between likeability and

closeness. Closeness is a cognitive manifestation of identifying one's self or aspects on one's self in the other (Aron *et al.*, 1992).

Similarity and closeness appear to have an inverse relationship, such that followers with high similarity are more likely to have high purchase intentions when closeness is low. Although not predicted, research on Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) may explain the findings regarding similarity. ODT has demonstrated that people have two needs: assimilation (and inclusion) and differentiation from others (Leonardelli *et al.*, 2010). Thus, the more similar one feels, the greater the desire for differentiation. In this case, it appears when followers feel similar to the influencer, they desire differentiation by having a decrease in purchase intentions for products endorsed by the influencer. These two competing goals may make followers less likely to have intentions of purchasing a product or service advertised by their influencer who they also identify as close.

Finally, some research has examined how the role of attitude toward the ad acts as an antecedent, and in this case, as a potential mediator for attractiveness, likeability and similarity on purchase intentions. Although the literature is established that attitudes are an antecedent to behaviors (MacKenzie *et al.*, 1986), it was not significant for the mediator of attitudes for the relationship between attractiveness or similarity on purchase intentions, and only partial mediation for likeability. This lack of significance is likely because of a lack of variance between attitude toward the influencer and purchase intentions. This relationship would be significant, if there was a greater range between these two variables. Future research could explicitly look to understand the relationship between attitude toward the influencer and purchase intentions.

It is concluded that closeness can be powerful in increasing positive attitudes and purchase intentions in certain cases. However, closeness can also serve as a cautionary tale, and that influencers will need to be careful on ensuring their followers do not see high similarity between them and feel close to them as this has a negative relationship to purchase intentions. Therefore, an effective influencer will need to balance these variables closely in developing their relationships with followers to maximize attitudes, WOM and purchase intentions.

## Limitations and future research

This study exploring consumers' attitudes and perceptions of social media influencers is not without limitations, but the findings do provide additional opportunities for research. First, the primarily college student sample limits generalizability to the general public. While millennials have been found to follow more social media influencers than other generations, extending the study to a more diverse age group would strengthen the contribution.

The role of closeness as a moderator and its effects on attractiveness, likeability and similarity are interesting, so participants were asked to choose an influencer they follow instead of requesting the participant choose from a selection of top followers. This resulted in high means for the dependent variables (attitude toward the influencer, WOM and purchase intentions). Future research could provide a list of top influencers for participants to choose from. Although a higher



percentage of participants may be lost because some participants may not follow any of the provided influencers, greater variance in these outcome variables could be captured.

Some marketing researchers have examined the impact celebrities and influencers have on attitudes, WOM and purchase intentions with the framework of the source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990). Some researchers have called for new models and approaches to assessing source characteristics (Lemanski and Hyung-Seok, 2012; Voorveld, 2019) but future research could examine the role of closeness with other variables in the source credibility model, such as expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise (Till and Busler, 2000) and trustworthiness (Wang and Scheinbaum, 2018) have been shown to positively predict attitudes, WOM and purchase intentions.

Other notable considerations are the role of products/services featured and posted by influencers and consumer resentment of these postings (Boerman *et al.*, 2017). Researchers could also examine closeness with the role of influencer – product “fit” (Till and Busler, 2000). Another limitation of this research is that data collection was limited to self-report attitudes and behavioral intentions. Future research could contain manipulations regarding an influencer to assess effects on closeness as this variable is not yet fully understood in the social media context. Finally, future research can further examine the role of closeness in attitudes, WOM and purchase intentions across other contexts and social media platforms. The concept of closeness has largely been overlooked in marketing and, based on these findings presented, could be a fruitful endeavor for influencers and brand managers to consider as they grow and adapt their profiles.

## Conclusion

This research examined the role of likeability, attractiveness and similarity and the effects of closeness on attitudes, WOM and purchase intentions. This study found that closeness serves an important role in attitude toward the influencer and purchase intentions and should be carefully considered by brand managers and social media influencers. In the future, research assessing the impact of closeness on other known predictors of attitudes and behaviors and advertising effectiveness would assist social media influencers in their effort to more effectively manage their human brands and brand managers in their effort to better identify effective social media influencers. The growth of social media sites and the persuasive personalities of social media influencers are reshaping consumer relationships with brands in ways that are changing today’s consumer–brand dynamics.

## Note

1. It is important to note that the authors controlled for basic demographics (age, gender and ethnicity) as well as intensity of following. Finally, dummy variables were coded for the different influencer platforms and controlled for those as well. None of these control variables significantly altered the results. Thus, they will not be discussed further, and the research will focus on the theoretical variables of interest.

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