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Laura Dodd

An analysis of the nature and role of social influencer trustworthiness within the health and fitness sector and how it facilitates brand trust

This paper analyses the concept of trustworthiness as a facilitator of brand trust by adapting Sekhon et al.'s (2014) model of organisational trustworthiness to include variables applicable to the context of the health and fitness sector. The resulting model focuses on Sekhon et al.'s (2014) cognitive and affective antecedents and the impact they have on social influencer trustworthiness. It proposes that there is congruence between influencer trustworthiness and brand trust. Supported by academic literature and current sector practice, analysis identifies the construction of influencer trustworthiness through the application of identified antecedents of trust as a way of generating brand trust.

Keywords: Trust, Trustworthiness, Influencer, Health and Fitness, Social Media, Cognitive trust, Affective Trust

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INTRODUCTION

The UK health and fitness sector is worth £4.7 billion, and is one of the largest and fastest growing industries today (LeisureDB 2017). The accelerated power of blogs and social media platforms is largely accountable for this growth. They have given rise to a new breed of communication, where “consumers now look at fellow consumers to inform their purchase decisions” (Adweek 2015, p.1). Supporting this data, Mintel (2016) identifies ‘Personal trainer/fitness specialists’ and ‘Social media platforms’ among the top sources of information concerning ‘healthy living’ which consumers trust the most, with 92% of consumers more likely to trust an influencer than alternative forms of advertising (Weinswig 2016). Influencer marketing involves “promoting and selling

products or services through people/who have the capacity to have an effect on the character of a brand” (Yodel 2017, p.1).

This phenomenon has seen the emergence of health and fitness professionals and non-professionals alike utilising social media platforms to share their advice. Consequently brands have begun to shift from traditional marketing to investing heavily in “collaborations with the big names in the online space” (Kay 2017, p.1), building and nurturing relationships with consumers (Rogers 2016) to ultimately generate trust.

Trust:

Relationship marketing research highlights the prominence of trust in the construction of strategic partnerships (Spekman 1988). Rotter (1967, p.651) defines trust as

“a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word of another can be relied on”. Like Rotter (1967), Moorman et al. (1993, p.82) outline trust as “a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence”. Both definitions are widely used in Relationship Marketing literature, focusing on confidence as an integral constituent in the formation of trust. Brands within the health and fitness sector are employing social influencers to attempt to create ‘confidence’ in the trustee as they hope that the trust consumers have in the influencer will be reflected onto the brand.

Burke and Stets (1999, p.349) argue that these definitions reduce trust to a “rational expectation and calculation” that ignores the social and emotional bases of trust (Kollock 1994). More recently, writers have explored the multidimensional nature of trust using the ‘Model of Postulated Correlates of Trust’ to propose that trust constructs of probity, equity, reliability and satisfaction, which are associated with twenty-two second order variables (Mitchell et al. 1998).

This multi-dimensional approach is reinforced by Sekhon et al. (2014, p.410) who characterise trust as a “two-dimensional construct”, exploring the idea that trust decisions are based on pre-existing cognitive and affective antecedents.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

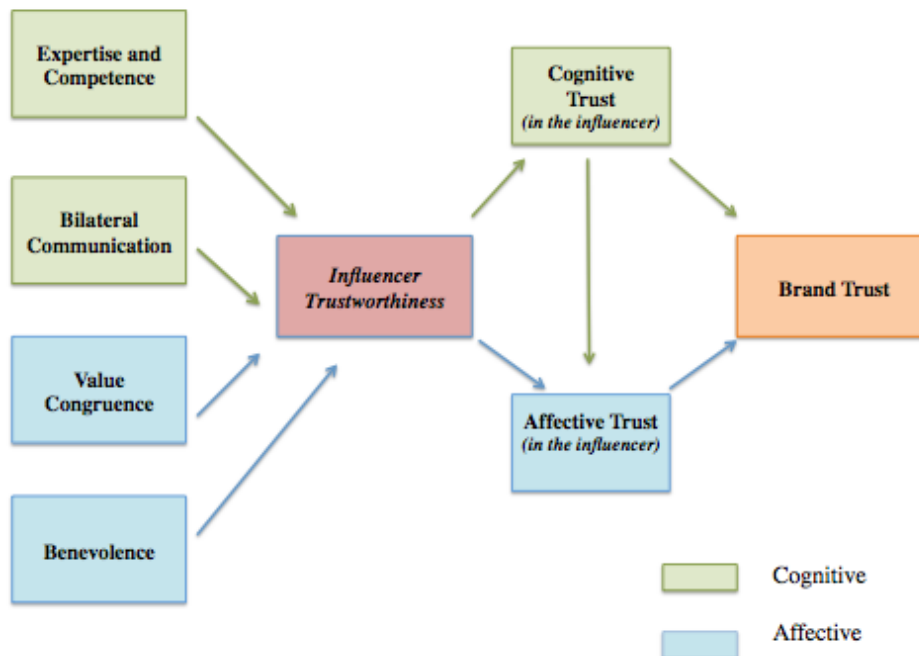


Figure 1. Adapted Model of Organisational Trustworthiness (Sekhon et al. 2014).

Adapted from Sekhon et al.'s (2014, p.410) conceptual framework, this paper argues that health and fitness social influencers must possess both rational and emotional characteristics in order to drive consumer trust towards brands. For example, while it is essential that influencers “possess the right credentials to support claims” (Dholakiya 2017, p.1), successful influencers are those able to add depth to a relationship (Sekhon et al. 2014) by creating an “emotional bond” (Dowell 2014, p. 120) with their followers. The proposed model identifies the key cognitive and affective antecedents of trust and their relative importance in driving consumer trust towards brands.

Based on the implications of Sekhon et al.'s (2014) study, which revealed a positive causal relationship from trustworthiness to trust in an organisation, the model has been adapted placing ‘Influencer trustworthiness’ in the central position of the framework. The model proposes that the relationship between the consumer and brand is facilitated through the construct of trustworthiness in the influencer.

Furthermore, drawing from Johnson and Grayson's (2005, p.503) study that proposes, “a customer's cognitive trust is positively related to a customer's affective trust”, cognitive trust will provide a base for affective trust and will exist before affective trust can materialise (Lewis and Weigert 1985).

Trustworthiness

McCracken (1989, p.311) define trustworthiness as “the perceived willingness of the source to make valid assertions”. However, in relation to social influencers, Sekhon et al.'s (2014, p.411) definition is more pertinent, referring to trustworthiness as

“characteristics of the trustee, upon which consumers form a judgement”. Shainesh (2012, p.270) underpins this, proposing that trustworthiness is made up of various “facets of trust”.

Past studies indicate that ‘trustworthiness’ aids as a positive cue in enhancing attitudes (Cacioppo and Petty 1984). This assertion can be applied to social influencers. Chu and Kamal’s (2008, p.33) study found that ‘bloggers’ with a high-perceived trustworthiness engender positive attitudes towards brands. Thus for brand trust to materialise, the trustworthiness of influencers will be assessed based on key antecedents of trust.

Cognitive Trust

Originating from the “rational choices models” (Sekhon et al. 2014, p.412), cognitive trust arises from “accumulated knowledge that allows one to make predictions” (Johnson and Grayson 2005, p.501). Influencers are therefore assessed based on their “current level of reliability” and “degree of satisfactory experience” (Ganesan 1994 cited by Michell et al. 1998, p.159).

Cognitive trust is especially relevant since health and fitness has the ability to change and alter lives, it is crucial that influencers “possess the right credentials to support claims” (Dholakiya 2017, p.1), to aid the mediation of brand trust from a “short-term transaction orientated goal to a long-term relationship-building goal” (Kotler 1992, p.1).

Frequently regarded as the “foundation for exchange” (Sekhon et al. 2014, p.412), Zakonic (1980 cited by McAllister 1995, p.30) observed that cognitive trust is built first, as “affect often persists after a complete invalidation of its original cognitive basis”. This coincides with the interaction between the consumer and influencer and has thus influenced the proposed framework.

Affective Trust

Affective trust is founded on an emotional investment (Lewis and Weigert 1985) and has the ability to add depth to a relationship (Sekhon et al. 2014). Johnson-George and Swap (1982) state that it is a form of trust based on care and concern for “the welfare of another person” (Massey and Kyriazis 2007, p.1152). However its roots in social psychology (Sekhon et al. 2014) have often led to it being deemed as “idealised” (Darley 1998, p.321).

Affective trust is especially relevant to social influencers, as consumers are essentially required to place their trust in a “self-branded/public image” (Khamis 2017, p.191), in the hope they will be sincere and authentic. Successful social influencers are identified as those able to create an “emotional bond” (Dowell 2014, p.120) with consumers. Ella Woodward (Deliciously Ella) achieves this through her openness and transparency regarding her own illness (Postural Tachycardia Syndrome) with her followers.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the illustrated framework, the following section evaluates how current practices adopted by health and fitness social influencers and brands alike ultimately facilitate brand trust through the construct of influencer trustworthiness.

In line with the proposed framework and existing academic literature, implications and recommendations can be drawn from the analysis grounded on current successful practice.

Expertise and Competence

Chu and Kamal (2008) deem expertise critical to persuading and influencing consumer attitudes. Expertise is the ability to complete a task (Moorman et al. 1993), while competence can be conceptualised as the ability to deliver what is promised (Abrams et al. 2003).

Abrams et al. (2003) highlight that for a consumer to trust an influencer they must be confident in their ability and willingness to deliver solutions as promised. Since social influencers' expertise typically lacks tangibility, transformation photographs shared by health and fitness influencers (Figure 2 & 3) including Kayla Itisnes provide physical evidence of their ability to achieve desired outcomes by following their advice and lifestyle choices.

Similarly, influencers such as 'GraceFitUK' and Alice Liveing use their own physique (Figure 4 & 5) to encourage consumers to purchase the products they claim to use. Relating to organizational trustworthiness Mayer et al. (1995) term this approach as 'signaling', however as previously explained, this can be applicable to social influencers.

Raj and Babu (2017, p.413) state that since products endorsed are facilitated through an influencer, reputation is frequently "used to predict the trustworthiness of a trustee" and is key in the construction of trust. This makes personal attributes such as comments, likes and follower statistics arguably more salient in assessing the expertise and competence of an influencer.



Fig

7)

Figure 4 GraceFitUK (Instagram 2017)

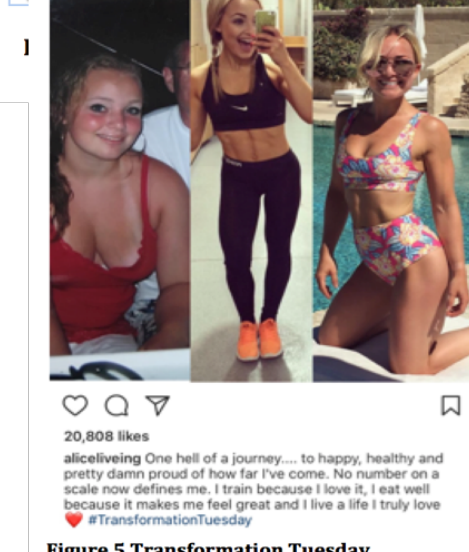
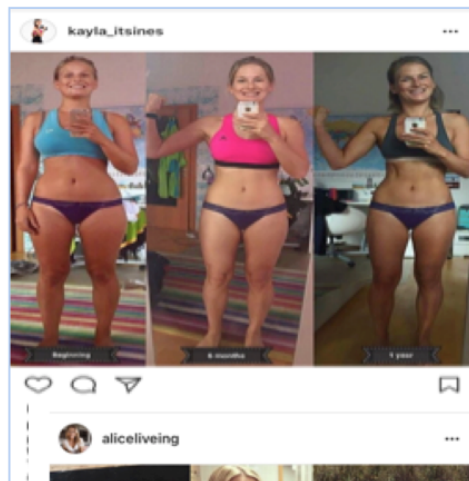


Figure 5 Transformation Tuesday (Instagram 2017)

Bilateral Communication

Many scholars view communication as a “major precursor of trust” (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p.25). Anderson and Narus (1990, p.44) define it broadly as “the formal as well as informal sharing of meaningful and timely information”. This definition arguably diminishes communication to a “one-way flow” (Sekhon et al. 2014, p.414). Solomon and Flores (2003) recognise that for communication to become effective, the goal must be to open up to one another in what Sekhon et al. (2014, p.414) term “bilateral communication”.

Scholars such as Whitener et al. (1998) imply that communication alone is not sufficient enough in the development of trust. Through exploring the concept of “openness” (Whitener et al. 1988, p.516) the importance of sharing, explaining and discussing ideas can be seen as pertinent. This style of interaction makes influencers appear more personable.

Social networking sites have seen new functions added to their platforms (Israele 2017) permitting this statement to be applied to the communication between social influencers

and their followers. Features including live streaming, allow viewers to engage directly with social influencers on a new level in real time open conversations (Olenski 2017). Influencers including 'SugarySixPack' and 'TheFoodMedic' exploit these features to "respond compellingly to feedback from the audience", answering questions and concerns (Abeel 2017 cited by Olenski 2017). The informal nature of this communication makes the influencers appear more human and their advice more personal.

Value Congruence

Morgan and Hunt (1994, p.25) address 'shared values' directly as "the extent to which partners have beliefs in common" concerning behaviours, goals and policies. Conversely, other scholars have explored this further in terms of similarity (Doney and Cannon 1997) and identification (Sekhon et al. 2014).

Sekhon et al.'s (2014) research proposes that greater trustworthiness will be apparent when there is an alignment of values. There are similarities between their study and the 1993 study conducted by Sitkin and Roth who highlight the importance of value congruence during the development of trust. Whilst they relate this to the alignment of an employee's values with those of the organisation, given the growth in influencer marketing, value congruence is perhaps now evident through influencer-organisational associations.

In relation to the context, Adidas recruited a team of social influencers (Connelly 2017) including Zanna Van-dijk and Robin Arzon whose values of fitness, health and positivity are congruent with Adidas's "strong and empowering branding" (Zanna Van-dijk 2016). Similarly, Lucy Bee utilise Joe Wicks, as his values of achieving a healthier lifestyle "from the inside out" through eating organic, unprocessed foods (Lucy Bee 2017) are consistent with the values Lucy Bee aims to uphold. This method coincides with the framework constructed by Dwyer et al. (1987) who highlight the importance of shared values as part of the relationship development process.

Benevolence

Morgan and Hunt view benevolence as the lack of opportunistic behaviour (Morgan and Hunt 1994), associated with the degree to which consumers' interests are put ahead of self-interest (Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002). Benevolent social influencers are recognised as those that adopt a long-term approach (Degun 2017) to their relationships, avoiding simply "advertising anything for the sake of it" (Harrison 2017). Zanna Van-dijk (2017) and Chessie King (2017) harness this, endorsing products solely out of care for their audiences and the topics discussed. Zanna Van-dijk uses her reach to spread "positive empowering educated vibes", while Chessie King aims to "infect the world with energy and happiness".

Leading on from this, Hasio et al. (2010 cited by Kim and Park 2013) state that the perceived benevolence on product referrals will affect trust. Although Kumar et al. (1995 cited by Ting 2011) agree with this view, they stress the importance of honesty as a fundamental construct to the formation of trustworthiness.

Supporting the association of trust with a partner's honesty, Geyskens and Steenkamp (1995 cited by Buttle 1996) argue that trust involves the belief that the partner will fulfil its promised role obligations. The Federal Trade Commission (2017) state, influencers must "clearly and conspicuously" declare any connections they may have with brands (Figure 6 & 7). Lu et al. (2014) found that posts not initially labelled as 'sponsored', led consumers to feel betrayed by the influencer. It is imperative that influencers demonstrate these concepts in order to develop trust with their followers.



Figure 6 Sponsored Post (Instagram 2017)



Figure 7 Sponsored Post (Instagram 2017)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many academics have concluded that trustworthiness impacts both the cognitive and affective dimensions of trust (Lewis & Weigert 1985; Michell et al. 1998; Sekhon et al. 2014). Recommendations are therefore orientated around emphasising cognitive and affective trust building methods. Influencers should initially seek to be open and honest thereby establishing strong cognitive antecedents to drive the initial trust building, before an "emotional connection" and thus affective trust can be established.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the wealth of research surrounding the role trust plays in managing long-term marketing relationships (Morgan and Hunt 1994), little attention has been paid to the role of 'trustworthiness' (Sekhon et al. 2014). The proposed framework has therefore been drawn based on a model initially constructed for the UK finance industry.

Additionally, while the antecedents of trust identified in the adapted model can be applied to health and fitness social influencers, no primary research was conducted to arrive at this framework: therefore results have not been tested and consequently cannot be confirmed or generalised. This critique also applies to the proposed correlation between influencer trustworthiness and brand trust, which lacks the

grounding of sufficient academic theory. Other factors that may contribute to brand trust should be considered to allow for a more rounded analysis.

CONCLUSION

Despite its limitations, the adapted framework can be valuable to exhibit how influencer trustworthiness mediates brand trust. Comprising key variables put forward by Sekhon et al. (2014) the model illustrates their importance in generating cognitive and affective trust. The significance of these antecedents in the formation of trust is clear from previous literature and secondary research. As marketing enters a new era of communication and traditional forms of advertising become increasingly less effective, it is vital brands and influencers work in unity to apply this research to advance relationship-building strategies, focusing on utilising 'influencer trustworthiness' as a facilitator of brand trust.

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