

An Empirical Research on Social Media Marketing and Consumer Responses: Leveraging the Power of Online Opinion Leaders

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ABSTRACT

The emerging corporate marketing activities of endorsing online opinion leaders to promote brands and products have created a new era for digital marketing. In China, online opinion leaders on social media platforms are a crucial communication tool for companies to reach their targeted consumers. This paper developed an original research model and implemented an empirical study on an active Chinese luxury fashion online opinion leader, Gogoboi. The results showed that online opinion leaders influence consumer behaviors toward endorsed brands or products through the para-social relationship and source credibility creation process.

Keywords: social media marketing, influencer marketing, para-social relationship, source credibility, consumer behavior

JEL Classification Codes: M31, M37

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research interest and background

The exponentially growing number of social media users has created a whole new arena for companies and brands to compete within, requiring them to develop new and dynamic ways of reaching and engaging with customers on such platforms. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Weibo have shown great potential of electronic commerce and have created a group of *online influencers*. Opinion leaders are people who are the source of reference of other consumers; they willingly provide information and expertise on products or services. Online opinion leaders are individuals who play this role on an Internet-mediated environment (Haron et al., 2016). Certain online influencers who have a tremendous follower base and high influential power over the followers' attitude or behaviors toward products or services are considered online opinion leaders. Brand managers are increasingly interested in establishing a partnership with such individuals to market their products or services in the social media environment (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014).

Luxury fashion industry has achieved resilient growth in the past decades, even during the worldwide economic downturns. China has become the largest market for luxury consumption and is expected to achieve robust sales growth in the future (Bain and Co, 2014). Luxury brands are beginning to step into social media to use it as a communication channel (Lee and Watkins, 2016). Thus, luxury brands play a pioneering role in the way they use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram.

1.2. Research purpose

Social media is being explored in both academic and practical situations. The objective is to reveal how online opinion leaders on social media change the consumers' behaviors and attitudes toward brands or products. Moreover, the peculiar network in China has created an isolated online environment for Chinese Internet users to interact with others. Hence, in-depth research on Chinese social media platforms and online opinion leaders is expected to reveal on how brands, especially multinational brands that have not yet mastered practices on Chinese social media, strengthen their social media marketing activities to build a stronger relationship with the Chinese consumers. This paper studies Weibo, a microblog social media platform like Twitter, to fill the lacuna in the analysis of Chinese social media marketing, because most previous studies on western social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube are forbidden to access in China.

Luxury brands are striving to secure presence on Chinese social media. Prior research shows that marketing efforts through social media channels by the official accounts of luxury fashion brands is a cost-effective image-building tool that improves brand equity and can directly generate sales by arousing consumer purchase intention (Godey et al., 2016). However, this study focuses on the online opinion leaders of luxury fashion and how their social media marketing efforts

(SMMEs) influence consumer response through source credibility and para-social relationship-building process. A luxury fashion blogger Gogoboi was selected to be researched. He is considered as one of the most famous luxury fashion online opinion leaders active on the social media platform Weibo.

2. Literature review

2.1. Luxury fashion consumption in China

The rapidly growing appetite for luxury brands in the emerging markets of Asia, especially China, has helped reinforce the growth of the luxury industry in the past decades. The robust economic growth in China has made it the biggest market of luxury fashion consumption in terms of sales. According to a report from Boston Consulting Group [BCG] and Altgamma (2018), 32% of personal luxury market is consumed by the Chinese and the number is expected to increase to 40% by 2040. Therefore, the growth statistics indicate a promising future for the Chinese luxury fashion brand market. Chinese consumers are increasingly brand aware, and they are expected to invest more in luxury fashion brands based on the report (BCG and Altgamma, 2018).

In recent studies, an increasing number of researchers have noticed that luxury constitutes three important components: a series of unique features, such as good quality, high price, scarce materials, and complicated production process; experiential meanings, such as fantasies, feeling, and fun for individuals to experience and enjoy; and symbolic meanings, such as high recognition and good reputation, as well as the symbol of the wealth, identity, and social status of the owners (Zhang and Zhao, 2019). The fashion lifestyle focusing on practicality and perceived social, emotional, utilitarian, and economic value has a comprehensive contribution to Chinese consumers' willingness to purchase and pursue luxury fashion products (Li et al., 2012). New luxury values focusing on extravagance, fun, and identity statement are expeditiously increasing among the Chinese millennials compared to the traditional luxury values such as exclusivity and brand iconic patterns. The millennials account for one third of the Chinese luxury consumers. Furthermore, consumers aged between 18 and 30 years account for 58% of the whole group (BCG and Altgamma, 2018).

Simultaneously, young luxury consumers in the Chinese luxury market are active users of social media. The millennial generation has become the prime motivator of Chinese luxury fashion consumption. In China, more than half of the luxury consumers live in areas where there are no brick and mortar stores of the brands from which they want to purchase. Therefore, these consumers have developed a highly digital life and have spent up to an average three hours per day on mobile applications (CNNIC, 2016). As a result, customer journey for such consumers has become highly digitalized. Consumers search for information about luxury brands through diverse channels including various online sources. However,

the use of online platforms is no longer limited to information search. Consumers also leverage online buyers, e-commerce stores, and social media to make actual purchase for luxury products. Thus, social media has become the primary influence-channel to reach luxury consumers. The top 30 luxury fashion online opinion leaders on Weibo platform attract more than 90% of luxury consumers (Boston Consulting Group and Altgamma, 2018). Moreover, Chinese luxury consumers' unique digital lifestyle and consumer behaviors are changing the relationship between luxury brands and customers. Hence, luxury brands should reconsider their marketing strategies to meet Chinese consumer needs in the digital era.

2.2. Online opinion leaders in China: Social media marketing

With the development of the Internet, users are spending less time on traditional media such as TV and radio. Today, social media has become a popular topic in the Internet world. Looking back at the development of social media, from MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter in the world to QQ, WeChat, and Weibo in China, the concept of social media has penetrated into the core of people's everyday life. Recently, many people have been using social media platforms to build, enhance, and maintain relationships with others. As an Internet-based virtual community, social media enables users to communicate not only with friends in real life but also other individuals who share common interests. Accordingly, the development of Chinese social media can be generally divided into four phases, to wit:

1. The early bulletin board system (BBS) era

BBS is called Luntan in China and was the major form of social media before 2007. The representatives are Tianya, Maopu, and Xisihutong. Compared to node-to-node communication style of e-mail, BBS has equipped social media with node-to-surface communication style, which lowered costs and heightened the efficiency of communication.

2. Social media of entertainment

The success of Facebook inspired Renrenwang, a social network service website that connected classmates. In 2007, Renrenwang became popular among university students and opened a new page for Chinese social media. Following Renrenwang, Kaixinwang launched in 2008 and soon became popular among the white-collar Internet users owing to its high entertainment and interaction value. Moreover, compared to BBS, games such as Happy Farm on Renrenwang and Kaixinwang made social media more entertaining and interactive.

3. Micro-message era

Weibo marked the new era of micro-message when it came into being in 2009. The precise, refined words and transmissibility has made it the biggest micro-message platform in China. By November 2018, active

monthly users of Weibo rose to 462 million, 61% of which were 16–25 years old. Weibo is one of the leading platforms for online opinion leaders to reach the consumers (BCG and Altagamma, 2018).

4. User-generated content era

The explosive growth of social media and tremendous user base have created a stage for people with talent to attract, entertain, and monetize their audience. An accelerating number of individuals is working full time on social media and leveraging the reward system to earn economic returns. The channel of delivering content has become diverse in forms including microblog, short-form mobile video, and live-broadcasting video.

As a platform for establishing social connections and interest-oriented communities, social media has become an influential advertising medium in the digital environment (Brettel et al., 2015). The popularization of social-media use drives firms to employ social media as a marketing platform. Lee and Hong (2016) remarked that Facebook advertisements have attracted followers of celebrities, including their friends, to purchase advertised products, thereby highlighting the power of social media to extend potential advertising audiences. Maurer and Wiegmann (2011) suggested that Facebook empowered brands to use the information of the users to conduct targeted advertising by facilitating direct and smooth communication between brands and consumers, thereby making Facebook an advanced marketing tool. Consumer attitudes toward personalized advertising affect purchases in the online environment (Eastin et al., 2016). Moreover, advertisements enhance positive perceptions and persuade social media users who have positive perceptions and attitudes toward advertisements and advertised brands and products to perform electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Lee and Hong, 2016). Facebook becomes an effective and competitive advertising medium compared with mass media because it provides a space for social media to participate in active interactions, information sharing on brands or products, and other eWOM activities (Xie and Lee, 2015).

As Facebook and other international social media platforms are unavailable in China, Weibo leads the Chinese microblogging market and is exclusively used. Advertising on Weibo is rapidly developing. Additionally, interactive relationships between Weibo bloggers and their followers are extensions of users' networks of interpersonal relationships. Thus, companies promote their products or services through network relationships, and Weibo serves as a product promotional platform on which brands appeal their product value and corporate activities to interact with Weibo users (Shen et al., 2012).

With the development of digital technology, the arena of competition among luxury brands for luring consumers has shifted from offline to online. Recently, luxury fashion brands including Chanel, Dior, Burberry, and Prada have implemented social media marketing strategies to engage with consumers (Dhaoui, 2014; Mike, 2014; Park et al., 2011). In 2017, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and

Prada individually established online platforms in China. Such activities indicate that the attitude of luxury brands toward online channels has become more positive than ever before. Although the percentage of online sales of luxury products is still 30% lower than that of store sales in 2016 (BCG and Altgamma, 2018), the effectiveness of marketing activities is higher than other product categories.

To conclude, social media platforms in China have become a crucial environment for luxury brands to reach the consumers who were initially inaccessible. Furthermore, luxury fashion opinion leaders on social media serve as brand communication ambassadors to spread information from brands to a broader range of consumers.

2.3. Online opinion leaders on social media

Bloggers are individuals who freely share all their opinion and personal feelings through the Internet. They are influential reference groups for customers seeking the recommendation of trustworthy sources in today's world where it is difficult to distinguish between wrong and right information (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). Recently, varied digital celebrity groups (Chahal, 2016), such as bloggers and *insta-celebrities*, have emerged along with the growth of social networking services (SNSs). Compared with traditional celebrities, digital celebrities are typical individuals who gain fame through online blogging, vlogging, or SNSs. Digital celebrities have been recognized as individuals with perceived social influence owing to their large number of followers (Jin and Phua, 2014). Liu et al. (2017) compared the characteristics of advertisements by digital and traditional celebrities and found that the former is more cost-effective and has higher influence over consumers' purchase decisions. The outcome may be because those digital celebrities are aware of their own follower group's preferences, and thus, can transmit content to more targeted consumers with well-defined consumer psychology that conforms to their followers (Wei, 2017). Furthermore, Djafarova and Rushworth (2016) also found that social media users value the opinions of lower-scale and blogger-type digital celebrities over more traditional celebrities. According to the two-step flow theory, certain people, recognized as opinion leaders, interpret media information they receive and then pass it to others, thus increasing its influence (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). In other words, mass media messages may not always affect the public directly; as the two-step flow theory states, opinion leaders mediate the transmission of information. Similarly, bloggers or digital celebrities are considered online opinion leaders in the two-step flow theory (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014).

According to Weimann (1994), "opinion leaders are individuals likely to influence others within their immediate environment that can include one's neighbors, friends, and coworkers, as well as people with broader societal status like celebrities, experts, and other influential members within our online and offline communities" (Weimann, 1944, p.233). Accordingly, online opinion leaders serve two major functions, namely, *appeal leadership function*, whereby the opinion leaders try to enhance positive perception among fans and followers toward a certain brand or product and *knowledge leadership function*, whereby the

opinion leaders provide information about a given brand or product. Online opinion leaders are present in all sectors: health and fitness, fashion and beauty, food, high-tech, and others. Additionally, there are specific online opinion leader roles such as experts, celebrities, micro-celebrities, market mavens, early adopters, early enthusiasts, and micro-influencers. Online opinion leaders usually possess more than one role at the same time. For example, professional actors, such as Jackie Chan and Jet Li, are probably experts at acting. However, each of these celebrities also displays considerable charisma and various levels of accessibility over social media. Similarly, high-profile CEOs such as Jack Ma, the former CEO of Alibaba, Pony Ma, the CEO of Tencent, and Robin Li, the CEO of Baidu have achieved world-class recognition for their business success and their unique charisma. This combination of artistic talent and business acumen and charisma characterizes the high-profile public figures as both celebrities and experts, enabling both their appeal and knowledge leadership functions. Many lower-level celebrities, early adopters, and micro-influencers also tend to fulfill multiple opinion leadership roles (Lin et al., 2018). Hence, in the context of social media marketing, online opinion leaders are deemed individuals who can hold one or multiple roles at the same time to influence their audience. With their product reviews or product advertisements posted on social media platforms, incorporated with their unique understanding of aesthetics, they entice their followers' desires to possess the promoted products or brands, thus affecting followers' purchase and eWOM intentions (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). In other words, they serve as the medium to deliver messages from luxury brands to a wider range of consumers through their influential power. Posts of online opinion leaders on Weibo manifest as an image or video enriched with embedded content and textual description.

2.4. Monetizing mechanism of online opinion leaders

Brands and companies are increasingly interested in finding ways to leverage popular figures as brand ambassadors on social media. Compared to mass media, several brands are willing to endorse influential online opinion leaders instead of traditional famous actors, singers, or athletes to promote their brand image and products. According to Liu et al. (2017), the market potential of the Chinese digital celebrity economy is exponentially growing; the annual income of certain digital celebrities is more than 40 million USD, and that of second-class digital celebrities exceeds the income of second-class advertising models in traditional media.

The phenomenon of digital celebrities on Chinese social media is rather an outcome of common interest among celebrities themselves, the marketing team behind them, and their online audience with various needs toward celebrities' existence (Liu, M. 2017). Furthermore, there are three major routes for online micro-celebrities on social media to gain popularity and achieve economic returns (Liu, M. 2017). These are as follows:

1. Online entertainer and voluntary rewards from followers

With the popularization of social media, the low entry barriers in the Internet world empower individuals to become self-media. Individuals who cannot earn enough exposure to traditional mass media channels can easily leverage the power of the Internet to gain attention from the public. They use live-broadcasting platforms to showcase their personal lifestyle and daily activities. Fundamentally, this type of digital celebrity is about entertainment and aesthetics, which serve the audience's needs of curiosity, and exhibition through rewards. Herein, the monetizing mechanism is through rewards from the followers.

2. Fashion *guru* and personal e-commerce brand

The content of digital celebrities' posts is all about fancy pictures, trendy style snapshots, and selling the illusion from such pictures. By showing unique fashion style and attracting imitators, fashion-*guru*-type digital celebrities become opinion leaders and interact with their fans and followers. Herein, the monetizing mechanism is through the actual purchase activities of the followers who agree with the celebrities' fashion style.

3. Content creation and brand endorsement

Certain talented or well-educated individuals precisely capture popular social topics and express their stance and opinions toward them in a witty or exaggerated way to attract an audience. The representatives of this type of digital celebrity are Papi Jiang, who performs her original scripts to comment various social situations, and Huiyizhuanyongxiaomajia, who focuses on broadcasting content on dogs and cats. This type of digital celebrity needs to constantly update their content to cater to the fast changing needs of their audience. Herein, the monetizing mechanism is mainly through advertisement endorsement. For example, Lirenlizhuang Cosmetics endorsed Papi Jiang with 22 million Yuan in 2016, which marked a tremendous commercial possibility for such digital celebrities.

To conclude, online opinion leaders improve their ability to generate income from rewards or endorsements by enhancing their entertainment, expertise, or creativity based on the category or genre in which they belong. This study reveals the fact that online opinion leaders improve their influential power, which converts to monetizing power, by refining their efforts on social media.

2.5. Social media marketing efforts by online opinion leader: Content dimensions

Kim and Ko (2012) described luxury brands' SMMEs as consisting of five dimensions, including entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth. Godey et al. (2016) used Kim and Ko's (2012) concept of SMMEs to test the brand equity creation process of luxury fashion brands, and found that such efforts have a positive impact on brand equity. The current research employs entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization to evaluate the contents provided by online opinion leaders.

2.5.1. Entertainment

Being interesting is an important factor to attract audience on social media. Instead of a stern and serious appearance on traditional mass media, witty words and an unprofessional look on social media help firms to blend in with users (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). As an example of aesthetic enjoyment, Kaye (2007) found certain blog characteristics as stimuli for people's engagement with social media. According to Kantar Chinese social media influence report (2018), the most popular content category on social media is entertainment. Moreover, in the advertising context, entertainment and advertising creativity are recognized as prominent sources of advertising effectiveness (Ducoffe, 1996; Taylor et al., 2011). Thereby, entertainment serves as a crucial factor of online opinion leaders' influential power and monetizing ability. This study used a survey to assess whether consumers find Gogoboi, the online opinion leader researched, fun and interesting, to measure entertainment.

2.5.2. Interaction

Social interaction denotes users contributing to issue-related social media platforms and meeting like-minded others to communicate and discuss particular issues (Kaye, 2007). Participants on social media platforms have the need to actively interact with others to become both producers and consumers of information, the so-called "prosumers" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Another important motivation for using social media is self-expression and sense of belonging. Interaction with other users who share common values or interests on social media satisfy these needs. Accordingly, Zhu and Chen (2015) divided social media into two groups based on the nature of connection: *profile-based* and *content-based*. Profile-based social media focuses on the individual member followed. Herein, the topics are usually about the person; users make connections usually because they are interested in the user behind the profile (e.g., on Facebook, Weibo, and WeChat). Content-based social media focuses on the content posted, wherein discussions and comments are based around the content. Users make connections because they are intrigued by the contents that a certain profile provides (e.g., on Instagram, Pinterest, and Tiktok). This study defines interaction as information sharing and opinion exchange with others in the context of Gogoboi's use of social media.

2.5.3. Trendiness

Nowadays, social media is more than just a communication platform for users to interact with others. The posts on the platforms provide information for consumers to make purchase-related decisions. Social media ranks the first influence lever for information search and decision making regarding luxury purchases (Boston Consulting Group and Altagamma, 2018). According to Muntinga et al. (2011), information covers four sub-motivations, namely, surveillance, knowledge, pre-purchase information, and inspiration. Particularly, surveillance stands for observing and staying updated about one's social environment. Knowledge denotes individuals who consume user information to profit from their knowledge and expertise to learn more about a certain issue. Pre-purchase information refers to reading product reviews or threads on brand communities to make optimal purchase decisions. Inspiration stands for people consuming information to get new ideas about their own life. This study defines trendiness in terms of Gogoboi's dissemination of the latest and trendiest information about luxury fashion.

2.5.4. Customization

The level of customization describes the degree to which a service is customized to satisfy individual's particular preferences (Schmenner, 1986). According to Zhu and Chen (2015), in the context of social media, customization refers to the planned receptor of the messages posted by users. There are two types of postings based on the level of customization, namely, customized and broadcast. Customized posting is intended for a specific person or a small audience; such postings are exclusive to permitted audience. For example, private messages on Facebook and Weibo are customized messages. Broadcast posting is intended for the public and no permission restrictions are imposed. Given the above discussion, this study defines customization as the extent to which Gogoboi provides customized information search and customized service for his followers.

2.6. Personal dimensions

Unlike the brands' official social media accounts, online opinion leaders are perceived as real people on social media platforms. Thus, it is necessary to consider how personal features of opinion leaders affect the relationship-building process and generation of the information source credibility and subsequent consumer response. Three character-based sub-dimensions, including trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, were incorporated into Kim and Ko's SMMEs concept (2012) to fit the concept into the context of the online opinion leader.

2.6.1. Attractiveness

Source attractiveness directly influences the effectiveness of communication (McGuire, 1969). Previous studies have found that source attractiveness, both physical and social, has a positive influence on source credibility and para-social relationship-building process (Hill et al., 2017; Perse and Rubin, 1989). Thus, consumers tend to accept information from an attractive source. Considering the above discussion, this study defines attractiveness as perceived social and physical attractiveness of Gogoboi.

2.6.2. Expertise

Expertise is defined as the extent to which an information source is perceived to be a source of valid assertions (Hovland et al., 1953). According to Bristol (1990), expertise is the extent to which the source is perceived as being capable of providing the correct information. Ohanian (1990) posits that perceived expertise positively affects attitude change in the context of celebrity endorsement advertising. Moreover, the degree of expertise is connected with the experience or training of the source. A study by Lis (2013) on eWOM found that high level of reviewers' expertise implies high probability that their suggestions would be used in a consumer's purchase decision. The expertness of an individual is crucial for making the eWOM message persuasive as it increases the purchase intention. In this study, expertise concerns users' perceptions of Gogoboi's experience and qualification in the luxury fashion industry.

2.6.3. Trustworthiness

Honesty is the basic rule on social media (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The credibility of an information is doubted less by a receiver when the source is trustworthy (Sparkman and Locander, 1980). In the online environment, users can freely express their opinions and feelings about products, services, and brands. However, the overwhelming information results in the users' tendency to determine the trustworthiness of the information source to decide whether to receive or reject that information. According to Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014), brand managers believe that bloggers are influential reference groups for customers seeking the recommendation of trustworthy sources, and that brands suggested by trusted bloggers have the potential to be perceived as reliable and good. In this study, trustworthiness is defined as users' reliability and trust toward Gogoboi.

2.7. Discussion of the extension of SMMEs

Online opinion leader social media marketing efforts (OOLSMMEs) is a concept developed to describe the extent to which online opinion leaders try to leverage efforts of content-based dimensions (entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization) and character-based dimensions (attractiveness, expertise, and

trustworthiness) to establish their personal brands and enhance their influential power over the audience. According to Jin et al. (2018), influencers' persuasive power depends on the extent to which they build their personal brand with their own efforts. For this study, unlike previous research that focus on luxury fashion brands' official social media accounts (Godey et al., 2016; Kim and Ko, 2012), the objective is to understand how online opinion leaders leverage SMMEs to improve their personal brands and enhance their influential power on social media. Hence, it is significant to include character-based dimensions in the original SMMEs concept to elucidate the activities of online individuals. Based on previous literature on SMMEs, this study extends the original concept by fitting it in the context of online opinion leaders.

2.8. Para-social relationship

The concept of para-social relationship originates from para-social interaction first developed by Horton and Wohl (1956). Accordingly, para-social interaction represents a unilateral interaction between television viewers and media performers. It resembles real-life face-to-face interactions, only that the interaction is not mutual, but one-sided; it is controlled only by the media characters and is unequipped with the opportunities to communicate (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Moreover, para-social relationship is considered to develop out of a series of para-social interactions (Rihl and Wegener, 2019). The relationship resembles that created between social media and digital celebrities in the context of social media. The prevailing use of social media and its impact on mediated relationships requires further study of the concept of para-social relationship (Branch et al., 2013).

Further, YouTube channels having one communicator are found to be more popular and influential than channels having multiple speakers (Welbourne and Grant, 2016), which could be explained by para-social relationships with the unique speaker. Different social media platforms provide channels through which celebrities easily communicate with their followers, making para-social interaction and relationship appear less unidirectional and perhaps more satisfying and intense (Labrecque, 2014). When followers develop para-social relationships with digital celebrities through repeated exposure to the latter's social media postings, they perceive digital celebrities as credible information source and regard their product and service recommendations as reliable (Colliander and Dahlen, 2011), which arouse their purchase intentions. Moreover, digital celebrities on social media platforms are accepted as *one of us* by the users, which inclines them toward the recommendations of digital celebrities' than those of traditional celebrities (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). Lee and Watkins (2016) found that para-social interaction, as a measure of relationship between vloggers and viewers, has a positive influence on consumer brand perceptions (including brand value, brand-user-imagery fit, and brand luxury perception) and purchase intentions. Para-social relationships between celebrities and users positively affect users' purchase intentions (Kim et al., 2015). According to Kim et al. (2011), the use of celebrities of certain goods and services

positively impacts their followers' purchase decision making regarding those goods and services. According to Hwang and Zhang (2018), para-social relationship is an *appropriate concept* to manifest the relationship between digital celebrities and their followers and explain the impact of the celebrities' influential power in terms of promotional effectiveness.

To conclude, this study considers para-social relationship as the outcome of OOLSMMEs and an important antecedent of followers' consumer behaviors. Para-social relationship is measured in the survey by the extent to which followers feel closeness, empathy, and adoration toward Gogoboi.

2.9. Source credibility

Source credibility is the extent to which the information receiver values the source to gain expertise and knowledge in their understanding of a particular product or service (Ohanian, 1990; Stuart et al., 2014). Information from a credible source can positively influence consumers' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors through a process called internalization, which occurs when consumers find that the information source aligns with their values and are, therefore, intrinsically rewarding (Kelman, 1958). According to Kapitan and Silvera (2016), perceived high source credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise are key inputs in consumers' tendency to internalize an endorsement message. According to Jin et al. (2018), celebrities' promotional effectiveness is positively influenced by the credibility of the source, and influencers' appeal depends on the extent to which they build their personal brand with their own efforts. Perceived high source credibility leads to high consumer purchase intentions (Goldsmith et al., 2000). In the marketing context, previous studies have found that endorser-type influence perceptions of credibility (peer endorsers, experts, and company CEOs) rate higher than traditional celebrity counterparts in terms of expertise, which translates to higher evaluations of product quality (Biswas et al., 2006; Kang and Herr, 2006). With marketers increasingly exploring the use of earned endorsements from social media influencers such as bloggers, this built-in credibility is a competitive advantage for peer endorsers over paid-by-brand and/or celebrity endorsers (Breedon, 2013). According to Ohanian (1990) and Spry et al. (2011), source credibility is determined by trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise that the information source presents. Kutthakaphan and Chokesamritpol (2013) argued that source credibility is also dependent on the quality of the argument and the persuasive strength of the endorser. *Argument quality* refers to the persuasiveness of the arguments within an informational message (Stuart et al., 2014). This suggests that perceived source credibility is determined by both content-based and character-based marketing efforts of the online opinion leaders.

This study considers source credibility as the outcome of OOLSMMEs and the antecedent of consumer responses. Source credibility is measured by the extent to which followers trust the information posted by Gogoboi.

2.10. Consumer response

2.10.1. Purchase intention

Purchase intention is defined as consumers' intentions to buy a product or a service based on their subjective judgment along with their general evaluations (Dodds et al., 1991). Purchase intention is an attitudinal variable for measuring customers' future contributions to a brand. As forecasting consumer behavior becomes a critical issue for a firm, timely estimations on future behavior are required (Park et al., 2010). This study measures the purchase intention by considering the extent to which followers of Gogoboi want to buy his recommended products or brands in the future.

2.10.2. eWOM

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) defined eWOM as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p.6). The shared views, experiences, and opinions of online users are called eWOMs (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Filieri and McLeay, 2014); eWOMs are more trusted compared to other corporate messages, as eWOMs directly communicate what are perceived to be consumers' own experiences. Social media is an ideal tool for eWOM because consumers generate and spread brand-related information to their friends, peers, and other acquaintances without constraints (Kim and Ko, 2012; Vollmer and Precourt, 2008). This study measures eWOM as the extent to which followers of Gogoboi want to pass along information received from him to others.

3. Research model and hypotheses

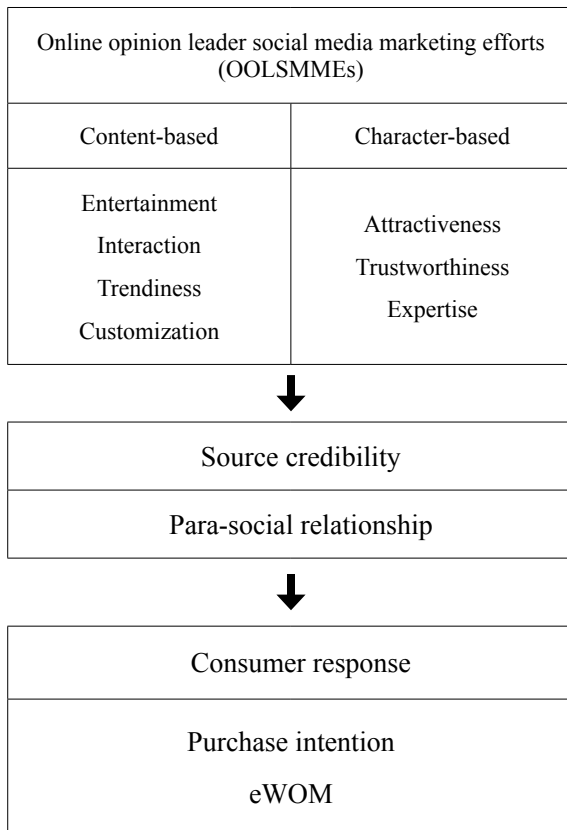
Based on the literature review, four constructs were extracted to implement the empirical study. OOLSMMEs are considered to affect both followers' emotional and rational perception of the online opinion leader. Hence, OOLSMMEs serve as the antecedent of both para-social relationship and source credibility. Likewise, thorough consideration should be taken to understand consumer response. The intricate decision-making process of purchasing luxury products requires an exploration of consumers' emotional and rational motivations. Therefore, this study employs both a para-social relationship and source credibility as the antecedents of consumer response.

Based on the above discussion, an original concept model was developed, as shown in Figure 1. The model consists of three parts. First, as a concept, OOLSMMEs were considered to include both content- and character-based variables to describe the marketing efforts of opinion leaders on social media platforms. OOLSMMEs impact the para-social relationship between online opinion leaders and their followers as well as online opinion leaders' source credibility, both of which subsequently influence followers' consumer behaviors.

The following hypotheses were developed to test the concept model:

- H1: OOLSMMEs have positive effects on source credibility.
- H2: OOLSMMEs have positive effects on para-social relationship.
- H3: Source credibility has positive effects on consumer response.
- H4: Para-social relationship has positive effects on consumer response.

Figure 1: Proposed research model



4. Methodology

This study investigates the influence of OOLSMMEs on para-social relationship, source credibility-building process, and consumer response toward products or services that online opinion leaders recommend or criticize. A quantitative questionnaire was designed, targeting followers of a prominent Chinese luxury fashion blogger Gogoboi with a follower base of more than nine million.

4.1. Measurement

All the questionnaire items were adapted from relevant literature with some amendments to fit the context of this research. Since the original scales were in English, the questionnaire used in China was translated from English to Chinese in a tripartite process that included language, back-translation, and a third-party re-translation, which should reaffirm the extent to which the translation was an understandable and conceptually consistent attempt to measure each scale item (Wang et al., 2017; Kotabe and Helsen, 2000). The respondents were asked to express their opinions and evaluations on a classic 5-point Likert scale with anchors ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

Survey items were modified from the instruments used in Kim and Ko (2012) to measure two items each in entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization and in Ohanian (1990) to measure two items each in attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, and three items in source credibility. Survey items were adapted from Kim et al. (2015) to measure para-social relationship (three items), Van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) to measure purchase intention (two items), and Su et al. (2016) to measure eWOM (one item).

The category-wise list of items is as follows:

Online opinion leader social media marketing efforts

- Entertainment (Kim and Ko, 2012)
1. Following X's social media is fun.
 2. The content of X's social media seems interesting.
 - Interaction (Kim and Ko, 2012)
 3. X's social media enables information sharing with others.
 4. It is easy to provide my opinion through X's social media.
 - Trendiness (Kim and Ko, 2012)
 5. The content of X's social media is the newest information.
 6. Using X's social media is very trendy.
 - Customization (Kim and Ko, 2012)

7. X's social media offers customized information search.
8. X's social media provides customized service.
 - Attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990)
9. I think X is a nice person.
10. I find X very attractive, physically.
 - Expertise (Ohanian, 1990)
11. I think X has abundant experience in the fashion field.
12. I think X is qualified to give an opinion on the fashion field.
 - Trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990)
13. I can rely on X's opinions.
14. I believe in what X says in his/her Weibo.
 - Source credibility (Ohanian, 1990)
15. I think the content in X's Weibo is convincing.
16. I think the content in X's Weibo is credible.
17. I think the content in X's Weibo is accurate.
 - Para-social relationship (Kim et al., 2015)
18. I feel close enough to follow X's Weibo.
19. I feel pity for X if X says something sad about himself/herself.
20. I feel fascinated with X's Weibo.

Consumer response

- Purchase intention (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2016)
21. I have the intention to buy the product that X sent through Weibo.
 22. I am interested in buying the product that X sent through Weibo.
 - Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Su et al., 2016)
 23. I am likely to say positive things about the product that X sends through Weibo to others.

4.2. Field data

The research model was tested using the field data collected from Weibo users. Weibo was selected for several reasons. First, it is a popular social media platform with more than 462 million active users as in 2018 (Weibo, 2018). Second, it is broadcast-type social media wherein observations on how users interact with others, including making comments, liking the content, or following accounts, can be easily observed. Third, it provides information about users' past consumer activities. In conclusion, Weibo's universality, openness, and accessibility make it a suitable platform to observe blogger–follower interactions and collect data.

Data were collected using a web-based survey. Respondents were recruited through an online panel research company Tiancheng Data with a well-established panel management policy and extensive filtering process. From the data quality perspective, steps were taken to ensure that only sample members who had followed Gogoboi for more than six months preceding the survey could proceed with the survey. Random sampling from Gogoboi's follower base was enforced to ensure data credibility and validity. A unique URL link was generated for each respondent, and only one questionnaire per respondent was permitted. The online survey was open for 30 days, within which, 315 Gogoboi followers responded. Additionally, each respondent was rewarded with RMB10 to their online account after completing the survey. Each respondent could access the questionnaire only once to prevent users from repeatedly answering the questionnaire for cash rewards.

4.3. Sample demographics

The resulting data were screened and prepared for analysis. Of the total 315 respondents, 75 were initially screened out of the survey because they did not meet the sample criteria of (1) taking more than 30 seconds to complete the survey (2) showing traits of truthful answers (deleting respondents who choose 5 or 1 for each item in the survey). After the screening process, a valid sample of 240 cases was retained for measurement analysis.

As shown in Table 1, the sample presents characteristics of female-orientation (66.3% women and 33.7% men), most under 30 years of age, with a higher education background, and an appetite for luxury consumption. The structure of the sample differed from the Chinese social media population, which was unproblematic because the focus was on luxury consumers, and the sample structure aligned with the targeted consumer group.

Table 1: Sample demographics

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Participants (of 315)		240	76.2%
Gender	Female	159	66.3%
	Male	81	33.7%
Age range	<18	2	0.8%
	18–24	95	39.6%
	25–30	118	49.2%
	31–40	23	9.6%
	>41	2	0.8%
Education	Primary school graduation	1	0.4%
	Middle school graduation	3	1.3%
	High school graduation	26	10.8%
	Bachelor's degree	125	52.1%
	Master's and above	21	8.8%
Annual expenditure on luxury fashion	<1000 RMB	33	13.8%
	1001–5000 RMB	69	28.7%
	10001–20000 RMB	41	17.1%
	20001–50000 RMB	8	3.3%
	>50000 RMB	4	1.7%

5. Results

The IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0 software was used to implement exploratory factor analysis, calculations of Cronbach's alpha, and demographic analysis. The AMOS 19.0 software was used for confirmatory factor analysis, which examined the convergent validity, and structural equation modeling, which analyzed the research model and hypotheses.

5.1. Evaluation of the measurement model

First, exploratory factor analysis was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation with oblimin rotation to check whether there was any notable deviation from the structure of the adapted constructs. The results showed that entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness were merged into one factor, supporting the OOLSMMEs concept. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were used to assess the reliability of the variables.

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine the convergent validity of the measurement items by factor loading and average variance extracted (AVE). According to Chin (1998) and Bagozzi and Youjiae (1988), the adequate reliability

for Cronbach’s alpha, CR, and AVE are 0.8, 0.7, and 0.5, respectively. As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach’s alpha of the variables was between 0.832 and 0.95. The composite reliability of the variables was between 0.83 and 0.95, indicating that the constructs captured high stability and consistency. The AVE measures ranged from 0.59 to 0.70, indicating that the scales had sufficient construct validity. The results of convergent validity analysis showed that the overall model fit indices were $p\text{-value} = 0.000$, $X^2/df = 575.622/224 = 2.570$, $GFI = 0.804$, $AGFI = 0.759$, $NFI = 0.881$, $TLI = 0.913$, $CFI = 0.923$, and $RMSEA = 0.081$, meaning that CFA showed an acceptable fit with the data collected.

5.2. Structural model and hypotheses testing

After establishing the validity of the measures, a causal relationship model was tested for OOLSMMEs, para-social relationship and source credibility, and consumer response regarding luxury fashion blogger. The overall fit for the research model indices is $p\text{-value} = 0.000$, $X^2/df = 61.705/31 = 1.990$, $GFI = 0.952$, $AGFI = 0.914$, $NFI = 0.968$, $TLI = 0.976$, $CFI = 0.984$, and $RMSEA = 0.064$, meaning that the structural model had a fairly good fit (Bagozzi and Youjae, 1988). All the hypotheses were tested and supported.

As displayed in Figure 2 and Table 3, OOLSMMEs have a significantly positive influence on both source credibility ($b = 0.487$) and para-social relationship ($b = 0.506$); therefore, H1 and H2 were supported. Followers’ perceived source credibility has a significantly positive influence on the followers’ consumer response ($b = 0.526$); hence, H3 was supported. Followers’ perceived para-social relationship with the online opinion leader has a significantly positive influence on consumer response ($b = 0.496$); therefore, H4 was supported.

Figure 2: Proposed research model incorporating the results of the analyses

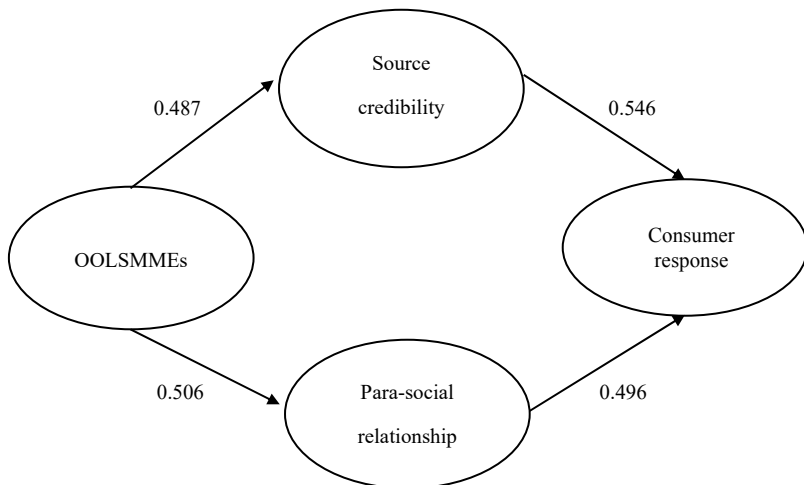


Table 2: The results of reliability and confirmatory factor analysis

Constructs	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	Average variance extracted measure	Composite reliability
OOLSMMEs		0.95	0.59	0.95
Following X's social media is fun.	0.77			
Content of X's social media seems interesting.	0.80			
X's social media enable information-sharing with others.	0.70			
It is easy to provide my opinion through X's social media.	0.67			
Content of X's social media is the newest information.	0.78			
Using X's social media is very trendy.	0.80			
X's social media offer a customized information search.	0.73			
X's social media provide customized service.	0.66			
I think X is a nice person.	0.81			
I find X very attractive physically.	0.75			
I think X has abundant experience in the fashion field.	0.80			
I think X is qualified to give opinion on the fashion field.	0.81			
I can rely on X's opinions.	0.82			
I believe in what X says in his/her Weibo.	0.79			
Source Credibility		0.832	0.62	0.83
I think content in X's Weibo is convincing.	0.80			
I think content in X's Weibo credible.	0.77			
I think content in X's Weibo accurate.	0.81			
Para-social Relationship		0.863	0.67	0.86
I feel close enough to follow X's Weibo.	0.83			
I feel pity for X if X says something sad about himself/herself.	0.84			
I feel fascinated with X's Weibo.	0.80			
Consumer Response		0.874	0.70	0.88
I have the intention to buy the product that X sent through Weibo.	0.85			
I am interested in buying the product that X sent through Weibo	0.81			
I am likely to say positive things about the product that X sends through Weibo to others	0.85			

Table 3: Path coefficients and p-values for research model

Hypothes	Relationship between variables		Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	Test Result
H1	Source credibility	← OOLSMMEs	0.487	0.029	16.572(***)	Supported
H2	Para-social relationship	← OOLSMMEs	0.506	0.032	15.815(***)	Supported
H3	Consumer response	← Source credibility	0.546	0.308	1.772(*)	Supported
H4	Consumer response	← Para-social relationship	0.496	0.28	1.773(*)	Supported

p-value = 0.000, $X^2/df = 61.705/31 = 1.990$, GFI = 0.952, AGFI = 0.914, NFI = 0.968, TLI = 0.976, CFI = 0.984, and RMSEA = 0.064.

p < 0.1 *; p < 0.05 **; p < 0.001 ***.

6. Discussion and conclusion

6.1. Discussion the results

This study investigates the influence of OOLSMMEs on source credibility, para-social relationship-building processes, and consumer responses. The analysis was centered on the use of Weibo and the relationship between the followers and luxury fashion blogger, Gogoboi. Based on Kim and Ko's (2012) SMMEs literature, this study developed an original concept, OOLSMMEs, to fit the context of digital influencers on social media platforms. Factor analysis showed that all seven sub-dimensions positively contributed to the original OOLSMMEs concept. The findings provided evidence on the fact that online opinion leaders should take care of both their content quality and character attractiveness to maintain relationships with their followers.

Overall, structural equation model results found support for OOLSMMEs as a credibility- and relationship-building tool and that online opinion leaders can improve their influential power over their followers' consumer responses by working on enhancing their content and their personal image on social media (H1 and H2). The results supported that both source credibility and para-social relationship with an online individual can positively influence luxury product consumer response (H3 and H4). This is consistent with the literature on relationship marketing, which suggests that long-term relationships with consumers are an effective marketing strategy (Berry 1995). The sample highlighted a slightly stronger impact of source credibility on purchase intention, which is coherent with previous research results (Sokolova and Kefi, 2019).

6.2. Academic contributions

This research makes some significant theoretical contributions. First, this study adds to the knowledge of the recent stream of digital influencer marketing by focusing on online opinion leaders' social media activities. To explain the online influential power mechanism, Kim and Ko's (2012) SMMEs concept was applied; originally, the concept was used to describe companies' marketing implementation instead of online individuals. However, this study incorporates character-based dimensions including attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness to fit the context of online opinion leaders, which is one of the originalities of this study.

Second, this study systematically explores both source credibility and para-social relationship-building processes in the research model. Previous studies have focused on either of them (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Luo et al., 2013; Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). The purpose of using both concepts in the research model was to test both affective and rational factors of the consumers' purchase intention and decision-making process.

Third, this study focused on the Chinese social media platform Weibo and elucidated on the enclosed online environment. The research results provided evidence on the importance of the existence of online opinion leaders and their communication effects on social media platforms.

6.3. Managerial implications

Social media is considered an indispensable communication platform for the younger generation, who were the first to adopt and use this technology. Nowadays, social media is not only a relationship-building tool but is also recognized as a significant online resource to collect information for purchase intention and decision making. To achieve a competitive advantage and stronger image on social media for a brand's products or services, partnership with influential online opinion leaders is necessary for brand managers. This research contributes to the practitioners in luxury fashion industry as well as online opinion leaders who want to take the role of brand ambassadors.

The research results showed that consumers value online opinion leaders' advice and willingly purchase or share information about the recommended products because they consider the online opinion leader as a friend, and simultaneously, a trustworthy information source. Changes in the communication landscape caused by technological advancement have affected practitioners' control over brand messages (Gensler et al., 2013). Scott (2013) noted that the readers of blogs view the information shared by smart bloggers as one of the few forms of real, authentic communication. The practitioners should initiate to connect with such influential online individuals and start establishing long-term partnership with them. Similarly, online opinion leaders should enhance their influential power by understanding the needs of their followers, providing creative contents with originality and expertise that fit the followers' needs, and presenting an attractive personality.

6.4. Limitations and further research

This research has several limitations as well as directions for future studies. First, as mentioned by Kim and Ko (2012), visual stimulus used to evaluate social media marketing activities resulted in difficulties in controlling possible error; therefore, future studies could develop an effective instrument to measure SMMEs more appropriately.

Second, although this study used seven dimensions to evaluate SMMEs, other factors may have been ignored. For instance, a prior study has found that attitude homophily is an antecedent of both source credibility and para-social relationship (Sokolova and Kefi, 2019). Hence, future studies should consider that there are other factors related to OOLSMMEs.

Third, this study focused on a Chinese luxury fashion blogger's influential power and relationship with his followers. In this context, the researched online opinion leader takes the role of an expert in the fashion industry. Empirical findings from this study may not be applicable to other industries or countries, which results in limited external validity. Thus, future studies should explore online opinion leaders who take other roles such as entertainer and/or digital celebrity. Moreover, the findings from this study should be tested in other industries.

Lastly, this study may have been limited by the hypothetic–deductive research design adopted. A survey-based approach and adapted items defined from previous literature to measure psychological variables are limited by an evolving psycho-sociological phenomenon due to a change of attitudes towards certain social behaviors. Future studies should address the issue using qualitative or mixed research designs to explore fresh insights.

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