Bridging the trust gap in influencer marketing: Ways to sustain consumers' trust and assuage their distrust in the social media influencer landscape

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Abstract

While consumers' trust in social media influencers (SMIs) has spurred the growth of influencer marketing, consumers have come to distrust what these SMIs say recently. Despite this trend reversal that the industry is undergoing, academic efforts to investigate whether, and if so, why, consumers experience such attitudinal ambivalence in trust and distrust in the SMI landscape is notably lacking. Building upon the concept of attitudinal ambivalence between trust and distrust, this study addresses this gap in the literature. The study used a mixed-method approach. In Study 1, we conducted an exploratory, qualitative study using two focus group interviews. During the interviews, participants were asked to discuss the open-ended questions freely, which included such questions as "What do you think about your choice of SMI in terms of trustworthiness?" and "If you trust (or distrust, or feel ambivalent toward) SMIs, why?" Based upon the findings from Study 1, Study 2 developed and tested empirically the conceptual framework that describes the antecedents and consequences of consumers' ambivalence within the SMI context: (1) whether SMIs' personality traits (similarity and attractiveness) and content attributes (visual appeal and informativeness) promote consumers' trust in the SMIs; (2) whether perceived ad clutter triggers their distrust of the SMIs' branded content, and (3) whether the attitudinal ambivalence in trust and distrust affect their behavior (i.e., behavioral intention to imitate the SMIs' product and brand choices) independently as well as interdependently. Except for attractiveness and visual appeal, the online survey consumer data supported the proposed relations strongly, and the results provide meaningful implications for both theory and practice.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Social media influencers, Consumer ambivalence, Trust, Distrust

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1. Introduction

As influencer marketing has matured as an industry, it has begun to reach the trust threshold, the point at which a social media influencer's (SMI's) audience begins to question his/her motives and opinions. When the industry was in its nascent stage, consumers demonstrated unconditional trust in influencer marketing and SMIs. However, the more commercialized the SMI landscape has become, the more consumers have begun to question which content is the SMI's personal (or organic) post and what is a sponsored or advertising post for which the influencer was paid (Audrezet et al., 2018). Influencer Intelligence (2020), a marketing consultancy, surveyed 500 U.S. and U.K. adults and reported this growing consumer skepticism. According to the survey, 44% of the respondents reported that their greatest concern about influencer marketing is whether a SMI's content is authentic. Echoing this concern, a report from Influence.co noted that consumers have come to distrust what SMIs say (Influence.co, 2022; Suciu, 2019). According to their survey findings, only 6% of the respondents believed that SMIs truly use the products they promote. By contrast, more than 12% believed that influencers do not use the merchandise that they are paid to advertise at all. This illustrates that influencer marketing is at a crossroads as consumers are asking themselves increasingly: Should I trust and/or distrust SMIs?

Before SMIs began to be challenged increasingly for their misleading advertising posts, the academic literature treated influencer marketing as a positive strategy and failed to consider its potential negative effects. Based upon the premise that consumers trust a SMI's post more than traditional advertisements or celebrity endorsements, one line of research focused on understanding the factors that determine consumers' belief in influencers' credibility and likability and the behavioral intention to imitate their brand or product choices. For example,

past studies have focused on understanding whether, and if so, how influencer type (e.g., micro- vs. macro influencers) and the variation in an influencer's disclosure language (e.g., no disclosure, "Sponsored," or "Paid Ad") affect consumers' trust and purchase intention (De Veirman et al., 2017; Djurica & Mendling, 2020; Evans et al., 2017). Further, studies have investigated SMIs' significant characteristics and/or content attributes that affect consumers' perceptions of influencers' likability and the intention to imitate them (Breves et al., 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017; Ki et al., 2022). For instance, Ki et al. (2020) documented that people like and imitate SMIs because they find their taste, style, and lifestyle inspiring. Merz (2019) noted that the more social media audiences perceive that SMIs are experts within their niche, the greater the audiences' propensity to trust them as a source of information. Lou and Yuan (2019) indicated that the more SMIs create entertaining content on social media, the more people consider that their branded content is trustworthy.

In acknowledgment of consumers' growing skepticism of influencer marketing, another body of research has moved away from investigating consumers' trust of influencer marketing to focus more on understanding the growing disbelief that pervades it. Some argued that people are highly skeptical of influencer marketing if they see brand endorsements mixed in a SMI's personal (organic) posts, even when they have built parasocial relationships with SMIs (Jamil & Qayyum, 2021; Moore & Rodgers, 2005; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Feng et al. (2020) and Gilbert et al. (2020) documented that people express a strong sense of distrust in influencer marketing when they identify a SMI's post with a hashtag #ad. To assuage this growing consumer skepticism, Stubb et al. (2019) went so far as to suggest that SMIs should offer explanatory posts regularly and disclose honestly why they were paid to post sponsored branded content. Still, understanding the way consumer distrust's adverse effect on influencer marketing's effectiveness could be assuaged is notably lacking.

To synthesize the bifurcated research developments in the SMI literature, our study draws new attention to *consumer ambivalence* (mixed attitudes) as an under-studied construct in the SMI literature that can provide new insights on how the influencer marketing industry can (re)gain consumers' trust and minimize their distrust. Specifically, noting that much of the SMI literature has overlooked the fact that people can develop both positive and negative attitudes about someone or something rather than having a single dominant response (Akhtar et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2017; Penz & Hogg, 2011), we were motivated to determine whether consumers develop both trust and distrust in response to influencer marketing. Further, provided that consumers' mixed attitudes influence their behavior simultaneously (Lee & Cho, 2022; Mano & Oliver, 1993), we sought to identify and analyze the way mixed attitudes of trust and distrust, if they arise in the SMI landscape, affect consumers' intention to imitate the SMIs' product or brand recommendations (i.e., imitation intention) independently as well as interdependently. This led us to ask the following important questions:

RQ1: How do consumers evaluate SMIs with respect to trustworthiness (e.g., trust, distrust, or feel ambivalent)?

RQ2: What principal factors elicit consumers' trust and/or distrust, respectively?

RQ3: If consumers' exhibit ambivalence in trust and distrust, how do they interplay and influence consumers' behavior (i.e., imitation intention)?

2. Theoretical Background: Consumer Ambivalence

Ambivalence refers to having an attitude or feeling toward someone or something that includes both positive and negative evaluations (Conner & Armitage, 2008). In a stricter sense, ambivalence is defined as a state of mind in which an individual has mixed reactions to, beliefs about, or feelings toward, the same object or phenomenon (Gardner, 1987). Traditionally, attitudes have been conceptualized as lying along a unidimensional bipolar spectrum with a

positive attitude at one end and a negative attitude at the other, such that individuals can be only positively or negatively valanced about a particular attitude-related object or specific phenomenon (Conner & Armitage, 2008). The concept of ambivalence challenges this traditional unidimensional view, which creates a false dichotomy, and proposes a bi-dimensional perspective instead. From the bi-dimensional perspective, people can have two opposing attitudes simultaneously when their attitudes toward a specific object or phenomenon include conflicting positive and negative elements (Zemborain & Johar, 2007).

Past studies have shown growing evidence that individuals have ambivalent attitudinal experiences in consumption-related contexts as well (Cornelis et al., 2020; Pang et al., 2017; Roster & Richins, 2009). The literature defines ambivalence in these contexts as the simultaneous or sequential experience of mixed emotions as a result of the interaction between many distinct factors that emerge during a single consumption episode (Otnes et al., 1997; Sipilä et al., 2018). In a similar vein, when exposed to both positive and negative attributes of a focal product, consumers may develop bivalent evaluations of it and experience a high level of attitudinal ambivalence (Pang et al., 2017; Valenzuela et al., 2022), for example, in deciding whether to buy a bike that has a beautiful color but an uncomfortable riding position. Ambivalence is relevant and at the heart of consumer attitudes in luxury consumption experiences as well. When buying a luxury product, consumers tend to feel both a positive attitude of pleasure (from its aesthetic enjoyment) and a negative attitude of guilt (about spending too much) in the same luxury consumption experience (Ki et al., 2017).

Among the distinct combinations of ambivalent attitudes consumers experience, their mixed feelings of trust and distrust are fairly common (Kim & Ahmad, 2013). Trust represents one's subjective belief in, or his/her willingness to depend upon, an attitude-related object or phenomenon (Moody et al., 2014). In contrast, distrust represents one's feeling of doubt or suspicion that s/he has towards an attitude-related object or phenomenon. For a long while,

early studies have treated trust and distrust as the same construct situated at two ends of a continuum, such that they were viewed as extreme values along the same dimension that cannot coexist (Barber, 1983; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). However, the more recent stance is that this is not the case, and hence, that distrust should be treated as a qualitatively distinct concept from trust (Chang & Fang, 2013; Cho, 2006; Dimoka, 2010).

A wide array of consumption contexts and distinct marketing-focused stimuli can elicit consumers' ambivalence, i.e., trust and distrust combined. For example, when consumers shop online, they may develop trust in an e-retailer because of its high customer ratings, which serve as an indicator of the retailer's reputation (Everard & Galletta, 2005). Yet, they may also feel skeptical of the retailer when they find that it is providing incomplete information. As indicated in the example, great trust does not necessarily mean little distrust, and the absence of trust does not necessarily mean the presence of distrust (Lewicki et al., 1998). In a similar vein, a neutral attitude may not necessarily mean that a consumer feels indifferent about a consumption episode. Rather, it may imply that both trust and distrust coexist. This indicates the need for a concurrent investigation of both trust and distrust in consumer behavior research because if ambivalence is common in consumers and distrust is a concept different from trust that is equally important in consumers' behavioral outcomes, a study that overlooks distrust would yield a biased estimate of trust's effect because of the missing variable (Cho, 2006).

Despite its significance, academic attention to consumer ambivalence in trust and distrust is notably lacking in the SMI literature. The purpose of this study was to bridge this research gap and contribute to the SMI literature in three key respects. First, while consumers' trust in SMIs spurred the growth of influencer marketing, the industry now faces the important issue that consumers are expressing mixed attitudes (i.e., both trust and distrust) in response to it increasingly (Zhou et al., 2021). Despite this trend reversal that the industry is undergoing, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support whether consumers truly experience the

conflicting attitudes of trust and distrust from influencer marketing. Second, to the extent that trust and distrust are distinct, it is misleading to assume that positive predictors of trust would necessarily be negative predictors of distrust (Cho, 2006). Yet, little is known about the way distrust develops differently from trust in the SMI context. Lastly, while it is critical for marketers to address consumer ambivalence, as it creates a state of conflict in consumers that affects their decisions adversely, and results in residual feelings of doubt, deferred choices, or diminished post-purchase satisfaction (Jewell et al., 2002; Manthiou et al., 2020), no research has yet determined clearly the way consumers' ambivalence in trust and distrust interplay and affect their behavioral outcomes simultaneously. Investigation of the issues aforementioned is important in SMI research and from the managerial perspective as well, because it can offer marketers a more accurate picture of the way trust and distrust develop, and the way the adverse consequences of consumer distrust on influencer marketing's effectiveness can be minimized.

This study adopted a mixed-method approach to advance our current understanding in the ways aforementioned. In Study 1, a qualitative investigation was conducted using the narrative, textual data collected from focus group discussions to obtain insights into what attitudes (e.g., trust, distrust, or both) consumers develop toward SMIs and why they demonstrate trust or distrust or have mixed attitudes in response to SMIs. Using these findings, Study 2 developed and tested an empirical structural model of the antecedents and consequences of consumer ambivalence (i.e., trust and distrust) within the SMI landscape.

3. Study 1

Given the lack of comprehensive research on the issues above, we conducted an exploratory, qualitative study using focus group interviews first. Two serial focus group discussions were held to obtain critical insights into consumers' recent attitudes toward influencer marketing and the factors that determine those attitudes.

3.1. Participants and procedure

We conducted two focus group interviews in Hong Kong (HK). According to the literature, which suggests that eight to ten participants are the ideal size of a focus group (Nagle & Williams, n.d.), we formed our first focus group with 10 participants (1 male and 9 females whose ages ranged between 19 and 22) and the second with eight participants (5 males and 3 females between 25 and 39). We chose HK participants as our primary source of qualitative data because HK offers marketers a good opportunity to reach a cosmopolitan audience through influencer marketing, as it has large numbers of active social media users (i.e., 5.80 million users) and is still growing, with a 4% annual increase. Another key criterion in selecting our focus group participants was their familiarity with SMIs on Instagram. Hence, only those who checked social media regularly as their source of information and like and follow at least one SMI on Instagram were invited to participate. We chose Instagram as the primary context of our study because 78% of SMIs reported that they use it as their main platform in brand collaborations (Statista, 2020).

The two focus group discussions, which included a total of 18 participants, were held in person at a university in HK and lasted for approximately one to two hour(s), respectively. Two researchers conducted both discussions. The discussion leader (lead author) prepared an interview guide and led the discussion. The moderator (another author) took notes and summarized important findings during the discussion. The discussion leader began the focus groups with an introduction to the group's topic and purpose. For example, she provided a clear definition of a SMI as distinct from a celebrity to avoid any mixed use of the two. Then, she explained the focus group procedure and the methods that would be used to analyze the data (e.g., direct quotations, coded responses, etc.). She also noted the study's confidentiality practices. For example, she confirmed that all participants recognized that they were voluntary participants who could leave at any time, that their responses would remain anonymous, and

they knew the way the research would be used. After the introduction, participants were asked to discuss the open-ended questions freely, which included such questions as “What do you think about your choice of SMI in terms of trustworthiness?” and “If you trust (or distrust, or feel ambivalent toward) SMIs, why?” While participants were sharing their thoughts on the above, the discussion leader engaged in the discussion only when she needed to clarify a point, or was asked to provide more detailed explanations.

3.2. Analysis and results

The focus group data were audio-recorded with the participants’ permission and then transcribed into written form for analysis. The data analysis followed the open coding process Corbin and Strauss (1990) proposed. Open coding refers to segmenting qualitative data into meaningful expressions and describing those expressions according to relevant concepts or themes (Asan et al., 2017; Jain & Roy, 2016). First, the focus group discussion leader assessed the data and developed a preliminary code list. The code list was shared with the moderator to finalize the list and create a codebook. While referring to the codebook, both researchers began to code the data, which is the process of transforming the textual information into a set of meaningful and cohesive concepts. After the coding was completed, a third judge who did not participate in the coding process verified all entries in the concepts identified. An agreement percentage was then computed to quantify the intercoder reliability. The reliabilities were suitable, as they ranged from 90% to 95%, which is above the 85% threshold recommended (Kassarjian, 1977).

According to the findings of the first discussion question (i.e., “What do you think about your choice of SMI in terms of trustworthiness?”), seven informants indicated a single dominant attitudinal response of trust (n=6) or distrust (n=1) of influencer marketing. In these findings, we noted that the respondents developed trust in SMIs, while distrust was directed

toward their branded content, not the SMIs themselves. Our informants' attitude (i.e., trust or distrust) and its representative attitude objects are illustrated clearly in the quotes below:

> **Informant 12:** *"I think Caroline Gervan has a good attitude and I trust her. She has no reason to be dishonest. She would gain nothing by lying … Nothing would be needed to further enhance my trust as I am not skeptical of her at all."*
>
> **Informant 16:** *"Her sponsored content made me feel skeptical. I don't trust the brand. The creation of SMI's commercial content is influenced by the brand. I think the brand will filter the content they believed is not beneficial to their product before allowing SMIs to post it on Instagram."*

In contrast, the majority of our informants (n=11) were ambivalent consumers who showed a combination of both trust in SMIs and distrust of their branded content. Examples of their quotes are as follows:

> **Informant 3:** *"I trust influencers as a friend, but I understand people can't be perfect all of the time and some of the influencers may have told white lies. It is okay to know that the influencers are not true to their words when promoting a product or service. I will respond to examine their content on my own."*
>
> **Informant 9:** *"Although their branded content and suggestions may seem over-glorified, I am one of those who are still willing to try the product because I trust the influencer."*

As exemplified in the quotes above, the findings from our first discussion question indicated clearly that consumers' ambivalence between trust and distrust is hardly uncommon, even in the SMI landscape.

To identify more nuanced implications, the second half of the focus group session focused on understanding the underlying reasons for their trust or distrust. Our findings for the second discussion question [i.e., "If you trust (or distrust, or feel ambivalent toward) SMIs, why?"] showed that the informants trust SMIs primarily (1) because they perceive that these influencers are *similar* to themselves, and/or (2) because they find these influencers *attractive*. Here are examples of the informants' quotes, respectively:

> **Informant 1:** *"I follow Tina Wong because I can't agree more with her. I find myself nodding when I read her posts about sustainable fashion. We share a lot in common, and that is why I agree with her and trust what she says."*

> **Informant 17:** *"I trust James Charles because he is a very good-looking model. I like his beauty tips. His attractive appearance adds convincing power to his tips."*

In addition to the SMIs' personal characteristics, their content also played an important role in eliciting the informants' trust. To illustrate, informants stated that they trust the SMIs because of the (1) *visually appealing* and (2) *informative* content the influencers create and share. Examples of their remarks are as follows:

> **Informant 9:** *"Fashion influencers should know how to promote their high taste and aesthetic sense by showcasing professional images on IG. This ability to create nice looking content ... the content they create make[s] me like them and believe that they are professionals in the field."*

> **Informant 4:** *"Influencers are a source of information to me. They help me choose the right products more quickly. I think influencers (to brands) are experimental subjects who help inspect and try their products before consumers like me make a purchase. It is better than buying a product that no one introduces."*

Some of the other reasons (e.g., the amount of time spent on following the SMI and by follower numbers) for informants' trust were as follows:

> **Informant 13:** *"I trust her because I feel I have been following her long enough to judge her character and tell what kind of person she is."*

> **Informant 18:** *"I trust Michelle Lewin and follow some of her suggestions because she has [a] lot of followers. More than 1 million people follow her to see what she thinks and says about fitness."*

In addition to the reasons why some informants trust SMIs, others shared their in-depth thoughts about why they distrusted influencer marketing. As illustrated in the representative quotes below, the informants shared that they were tired of seeing too many branded (sponsored or advertised) SMI posts. Some felt that SMIs were posting more sponsored than personal (unsponsored or organic) content, or that they were using their social media platform as a way to earn money, i.e., as a reason for advertising. The participants' perception that the SMI's social media is used exclusively as an advertising medium, and irritation that the SMI's branded content in their posts contains an excessive number of advertisements [i.e., *perceived*

advertising clutter (Ha & McCann, 2008, p. 570)] was what caused the informants' distrustfulness. Here are examples of their comments:

> **Informant 16:** *"I am aggravated when she posts 'tricky' advertisements. At first glance, it appears that she is sharing her daily life and feelings, which I enjoy, but it turns out to be an advertisement. It is really annoying, and I don't know whether I can trust her anymore."*
>
> **Informant 17:** *"Many endorsed products have not been used by the influencers. In many cases, they pretend that they have used them and share with us. We are naturally very happy if they recommend good products, but they usually recommend products that they never used. It is obvious that it's an ad. Influencers are just eager for earning money."*

4. Study 2

Based upon the findings from Study 1, Study 2 was a quantitative study that used an online survey. The study was designed to develop and test empirically the conceptual framework that describes the antecedents and consequences of consumers' ambivalence within the SMI context. The framework represents (1) whether SMIs' personality traits (i.e., similarity and attractiveness) and their content attributes (i.e., visual appeal and informativeness) promote consumers' trust in the SMIs, (2) whether perceived ad clutter leads to their distrust in the SMIs' branded content, and (3) if so, whether this attitudinal ambivalence between trust (in the SMIs) and distrust (of their branded content) affects their behavioral intention to imitate the SMIs' choices independently as well as interdependently.

4.1 Hypotheses development

4.1.1 SMIs' personality traits (i.e., similarity and attractiveness) promote consumers' trust in the SMIs.

Interpersonal similarity connotes the presence of common values and/or interests between people (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). In our context, similarity is defined as the perception that a consumer and an SMI share similar tastes, preferences, and lifestyles (Feick & Higie, 1992; Ki & Kim, 2019). When consumers see that SMIs share common beliefs with

them, they feel an enhanced connection that leads them to form trust. In contrast, when they perceive that others are less similar to them, they tend to regard those others as dishonest, uncooperative, and untrustworthy (Brewer, 1979). Indeed, interpersonal similarity reduces uncertainty about others (Nicholson et al., 2001) and establishes trust in them (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Many previous studies have supported similarity's significant effects in building trust (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Thus, we expected this effect to hold true in the SMI context, and proposed:

H1: The more consumers perceive that SMIs are similar to them, the more they develop trust in the SMIs.

In addition to similarity, attractiveness is another arguably important trait that affects the formation of trust between SMIs and their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In this study, we defined attractiveness as the extent to which consumers find SMIs appealing and/or physically good-looking. Previous marketing research has indicated that the perception of the person who communicates a message has a significant influence on the message's effectiveness (Reingen & Kernan, 1993). In particular, attractiveness is an important trait in a person that signals the information's value (Penton-Voak & Perrett, 2000). Compared to those who are less attractive, physically attractive people are perceived to be more intelligent (Kanazawa, 2011) and thus, more trustworthy (Flavian et al., 2019). Stated differently, attractive informants are found to have a beauty premium, in that they are trusted to a greater extent (Bascandziev & Harris, 2014). In a similar vein, we expected SMIs who are physically attractive to establish greater trust with their audience. This led us to propose:

H2: The more consumers find SMIs attractive, the greater their trust in the SMIs.

4.1.2 SMIs' content attributes (i.e., visual appeal and informativeness) also promote consumers' trust in the SMIs.

As much as SMIs' personality traits promote consumers' trust in them, their ability to create content is also important in establishing and nurturing trust (Ki et al., 2020). Previous research has indicated that showcasing visual appeal through SMIs' online content is important in eliciting consumers' liking and trust of the SMIs (Ki & Kim, 2019). In the e-commerce context, a website's visual appeal, such as its photographs, colors, font styles, and layouts, were important in gaining consumers' trust (Ganguly et al., 2009; Nia & Shokouhyar, 2020). Similarly, in the social media context, good aesthetics and visual designs resulted in effective communication and, in turn, enhanced consumer trust (Kusumasondjaja, 2019). The more SMIs' social media posts were designed aesthetically and/or the posts' layout was personalized, the more successfully they gained consumer trust (Colliander & Marder, 2018; Yang et al., 2021). This led us to propose that visual appeal is a critical determinant in establishing consumers' trust in influencers. Thus, we postulated:

H3: The more consumers find SMIs' content visually appealing, the more they develop trust in the SMIs.

Informative content also plays an important role in fostering trust (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In our context, informativeness is defined as the extent to which one finds that an SMI's content is useful and offers new ideas (Asghar, 2015). For many consumers, one of the greatest motivations to join social networking sites and follow SMIs is information seeking. Because audiences cannot examine the products or brands that SMIs recommend physically, the quality of the information they present is vital in determining whether or not consumers trust what the SMIs say (Han, 2014). The more consumers find that SMIs' content is meaningful and provides new ideas on various topics, the more it enhances their feelings of trust in the SMIs who are sharing the information (Ki et al., 2020). This led us to propose:

H4: The more consumers find that SMIs' content is a source of information, the greater their trust in the SMIs.

4.1.3 SMIs' ad clutter triggers consumers' distrust of the SMIs' branded content.

Many previous studies have treated SMIs' branded content as online advertisements (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Salminen et al., 2021; Schouten et al., 2020). Our focus group findings also implied that consumers feel that SMIs' posts constitute the brands' advertising, which results in consumers' distrust. This led us to ask: "Does the extent to which consumers perceive the number of ads in SMIs' branded content as excessive and intrusive have a significant influence in shaping consumers' distrust?" The concept of *advertising clutter* helped us address this question. As stated previously, ad clutter refers to "… the state of a high degree of intrusiveness and high frequency of advertising in an editorial vehicle" (Ha & McCann, 2008, p. 570). In our context, consumers may perceive ad clutter when they see excessive branded content in SMIs' posts or when they feel overwhelmed or irritated by influencer marketing's intrusiveness (Rejón-Guardia & Martínez-López, 2014). Childers and Boatwright (2021) indicated that a cluttered advertising environment is prevalent already in the social media landscape. In their research, consumers stated that they felt "scammed" or "tricked" by SMIs' efforts, and hence, expressed skepticism with the content that they see regularly in influencers' social media feeds. With this increasingly cluttered media environment, Balaban and Mustățea (2019) also indicated that too many advertised or sponsored SMI posts can trigger consumers' distrust of the SMIs' branded content and damage their reputation. This led us to propose:

H5: The more consumers perceive ad clutter in SMIs' social media, the greater their distrust of the SMIs' branded content.

4.1.4 Independent effects of consumers' ambivalence (i.e., trust and distrust) on their behavioral intention.

Prior studies have provided much empirical evidence of the effects of consumers' attitudes on their behavior across a wide range of marketing contexts (Charton-Vachet et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2017), and these effects have been documented to hold true even in the SMI

landscape (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Singh et al., 2020). For example, when consumers developed a positive attitude, i.e., trust in SMIs, they were found to agree generally with the SMIs' opinions and suggestions. In turn, this shaped their positive behavioral intention to follow the SMIs' suggestions (Hajli, 2014; Ki & Kim, 2019). In contrast, when consumers developed a sense of distrust in SMIs, they became skeptical of the content SMIs were promoting (Jang et al., 2020). For example, the extent to which consumers perceived excessive ads or sponsorship in SMIs' branded content had a significant effect on their distrust of SMIs' branded content, and resulted in their hesitation or reluctance to follow the SMIs' recommendations (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). This led us to propose:

H6(+): The more consumers express trust in SMIs, the greater their intention to imitate the SMIs' product or brand choices (i.e., imitation intention).

H7(-): The more consumers express distrust of SMIs' branded content, the less their intention to imitate the SMIs' product or brand choices (i.e., imitation intention).

4.1.5 Interdependent effect of consumers' ambivalence on their behavioral intention.

In addition to trust and distrust's independent effects on imitation intention, we felt the need to investigate the interaction effect of these mixed attitudes for two reasons: (1) The core premise of attitudinal ambivalence theory indicates that trust and distrust are two distinct attitudes that often co-exist in consumers' experiences, and hence (2) ignoring one attitude (e.g., distrust) yields a biased estimate of trust's effect on consumers' behavior (Cho, 2006). Thus, understanding the way dual attitudes interplay and influence imitation intention is important to provide a more nuanced prediction of influencer marketing's effects. Research has shown that mixed attitudes interact in such a way that one either amplifies or attenuates the other (Ki et al., 2017). In particular, Lewicki et al. (1998) indicated that increased distrust reduces the positive effect of trust. Hence, we proposed:

H8(-): Consumer trust (in SMIs) and distrust (of the SMIs' branded content) will have a significant interaction effect on imitation intention, in such a way that greater distrust will weaken the positive association between trust and imitation intention.

Figure 1 is a pictorial illustration of our research model and hypotheses.

== Insert Figure 1 about here ==

4.2 Respondents and procedures

To test our hypotheses, we developed an online survey questionnaire and administrated it to participants residing in HK. HK consumers were chosen as our sample for Study 2 for two main reasons: (1) Because the concepts we used in our conceptual model in Study 2 were drawn from Study 1, which were based upon qualitative data from HK, and (2) because HK residents were found to use social media as their main source of information, and spend an average of more than 17 hours on social media per week (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2019). Our survey questionnaire consisted of three sections. In the first, we provided the definition and examples of SMIs to help the participants understand our study's context better. Then, we asked them to name one of the SMIs they liked and followed on Instagram (as in Study 1). The names of the Instagram influencers they provided were then embedded automatically in the second section of the questionnaire in which the participants were asked to indicate (1) their perceptions of SMIs' personality traits (i.e., similarity and attractiveness) and their online content (i.e., visual appeal, informativeness, and ad clutter), (2) their attitudes toward SMIs and their online content (i.e., trust and distrust), and (3) their behavioral responses (i.e., intention to imitate SMIs' choices). In the third, we included questions about the participants' demographics (e.g., age, gender, education, and employment status).

To ensure that the respondents were sharing their opinions about SMIs, we filtered out three responses that named celebrities rather than SMIs. As a result, a dataset of 200 responses

was collected. To determine whether the data we collected had adequate power for analysis, we conducted a prior statistical power analysis using G*Power v. 3.1. According to our *F* test results, a minimum sample size of 157 was required for a model with 20 predictors to achieve the threshold 80% power to detect a medium effect size of $f^2 = .15$ at $\alpha = .05$ (Cohen, 2013). As our study sample size exceeded 157, it demonstrated adequate power to detect the effect size desired. According to our descriptive analysis, most of our respondents were female (77%), held a bachelor's degree (68%), and worked part-time (50%).

4.3. Measures

The measurement items were adopted from previous studies and modified to fit our study's context. The scale items for *similarity* were adapted from Feick and Higie (1992), *attractiveness* from Stever (1991), *visual appeal* from Argo and Main (2008), *informativeness* from Asghar (2015), *ad clutter* from Elliott and Speck (1998) and Cho (2004), *trust* from Kumar et al. (1995), *distrust* from Holbrook and Batra (1987), and *imitation intention* from Netemeyer et al. (2005). All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranged from "*strongly disagree*" (1) to "*strongly agree*" (7). The final measurement items for each construct are presented in Table 1.

== Insert Table 1 about here ==

4.4. Common method bias

The common method bias cannot be ignored when primary data are collected from participants using self-report questionnaires. To address this concern, we conducted Harman's one-factor test. According to the results, the first factor explained 31.68% of the variance among the constructs, which is less than the threshold of 50%, suggesting that common method bias was not a problem in our study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In addition, we conducted a Chi-square difference test between models with and without a single latent factor. The results showed a significant difference ($\Delta\chi^2 = 25.87$ and $\Delta df = 1$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that our study

did not have a serious common method variance issue (Chan et al., 2016). Moreover, we tested the common method variance issue further through the unmeasured latent method construct approach. The insignificant results ($\chi^2 = 26.80$, $df = 28$, $p > 0.05$) confirmed that our study was free from common method bias.

4.5. Analyses and results

We tested our research model with partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS v. 3. We conducted this analysis for the following three reasons: (1) It is a robust technique that has been used commonly in recent studies and provides more accurate estimates than covariance-based approaches (Carlson et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021); (2) it has high levels of statistical power with resampling functions to ensure the normality assumption for model analyses, particularly when the sample size is not large (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2018); and (3) it provides a high degree of flexibility for the interplay between theory and data that is required urgently in the consumer behavior field (Vanalle et al., 2017).

4.5.1 Outer model analysis results

The outer (measurement) model was examined to confirm convergent validity and reliability. As Table 1 shows, the outer loadings of all measurement items in our study were greater than .70 and significant ($p < .001$). Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliabilities (CR), and the average variances extracted (AVEs) for all of the constructs were also higher than the respective threshold values of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), .60 (Bagozzi et al., 1991), and .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). We evaluated the discriminant validity further following Hair et al.'s (2017) guidelines. As shown in Table 2, the square roots of the eight constructs' AVEs were greater than the construct correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In addition, all of the construct correlation values were lower than .85 (Hair et al., 2017), and thus showed satisfactory discriminant validity. As one of the greatest implications of this study is incorporating distrust as a concept distinct from trust and investigating their concurrent effect

on consumers' behavioral outcome in response to influencer marketing, we confirmed our constructs' discriminant validity further by assessing the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) correlations. Table 3 shows that all of the values were lower than the .85 threshold (Henseler et al., 2015). In particular, the HTMT correlation between trust and distrust was low, .24. Further, to support the existence of ambivalence, we examined the mean and median scores of trust and distrust among our survey participants, which showed that both trust (mean of 5.48 and median of 6.00) and distrust (mean of 4.88 and median of 5.33) were exhibited relatively often. Figure 2 presents the distribution of the trust and distrust ratings, in which 38.50% of the participants rated both trust and distrust no less than the medians. To identify potential multicollinearity, we calculated the variance inflation factors (VIFs) and found that they ranged from 1.00 to 1.98. This showed that our study was free from the multicollinearity issue (Peng & Lai, 2012).

== Insert Figure 2, Tables 2 and 3 about here ==

4.5.2 Inner model analysis results

Table 4 shows the inner (structural) model evaluation and hypothesis test results. The model showed a good fit with a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) of .04. The structural model was examined further with R^2 estimates. In our study, SMIs' personal qualities (i.e., similarity and attractiveness) and their content-driven qualities (i.e., visual appeal and informativeness) predicted 11.7% (R^2) of the variance in trust. On the other hand, perceived ad clutter predicted 59.3% (R^2) of the variance in distrust. The model overall was found to predict 20.9% (R^2) of the variance in consumers' imitation intention. As shown above, all of the R^2s were larger than the threshold value of 10% (Falk & Miller, 1992). Moreover, all of the Stone-Geisser's Q^2 values of the dependent variables were positive (i.e., Q^2_{Trust} = 8.2%, $Q^2_{Distrust}$ = 54.6% and $Q^2_{Imitation\ intention}$ = 16.8%), and thus confirmed the model's predictive validity (Hair et al., 2017).

== Insert Table 4 about here ==

As shown in Table 4, trust was elicited significantly by SMIs' personal quality of *similarity* but not by *attractiveness*, which supported H1 (β = .15, p < .10) but not H2 (β = .08, p > .05). One of the SMIs' content-determined qualities was also found to be significant in eliciting trust. While SMIs' content that showcased *visual appeal* had no significant effect on trust, content that showcased *informativeness* was significant, and hence, H3 (β = .02, p > .05) was rejected, while H4 (β = .20, p < .05) was supported. Further, perceived *ad clutter* elicited distrust significantly (β = .77, p < .001), and thus supported H5. In turn, *consumer trust* affected *imitation intention* positively, while *consumer distrust* affected *imitation intention* negatively, which supported H6 (β = .36, p < .001) and H7 (β = -.22, p < .01). Lastly, consumers' *ambivalent attitudes* had a significant and negative interaction effect on *imitation intention*, which supported H8 (β = -.12, p < .10). Following Ramayah et al. (2018), we illustrated the interaction effect of ambivalence on imitation intention. As shown in Figure 3, increased distrust weakened the positive association between trust and imitation intention. Specifically, distrust's negative effect on imitation intention was insignificant when consumers exhibited high trust, while it was significant when consumers demonstrated low trust.

== Insert Figure 3 about here ==

4.6. Robustness check

To ensure our model's robustness, we identified the potential nonlinearities in our structural model by adopting the two-step procedure Pierce and Aguinis (2013) recommended. First, two quadratic variables were included in the model (i.e., the quadratic effects of trust and distrust on imitation intention), and the bootstrapping results indicated that both nonlinear variables had insignificant effects. Second, we adopted Ramsey's (1969) reset test to investigate the different constructs' scores. We observed no nonlinearities in the regressions of trust [F(2, 193) = .31, p = .73], distrust [F(2, 196) = .44, p = .65], and imitation intention [F(2,

194) = .17, p = .85], which indicated our structural model's robust linear effects. Further, we addressed the concern for unobserved heterogeneity in a PLS model through a finite mixture of PLS segmentation (Hair et al., 2017; Sarstedt et al., 2017). As all of the segment sizes should be above the threshold of 50 for each solution (Hair et al., 2017), solutions from one to four segments (calculated by 200/50 = 4) were examined in this study. Based upon the results in Table 5, the Modified AIC with Factor 4 (AIC4) suggested a three-segment solution. The other six criteria indicated solutions with two or four segments. Then, we examined the relative segment sizes for the solutions and found that the number of observations in Segment 2 (as well as Segments 3 and 4, if applicable) was less than the recommended threshold of 50 (Hair et al., 2017), indicating that the two-, three-, and four-segment solutions were inappropriate. Therefore, this study was free from the unobserved heterogeneity issue.

== Insert Table 5 about here ==

5. Discussion

The influencer marketing industry has experienced a new trend in which consumers have begun to demonstrate a lack of unconditional trust in influencer marketing. Ironically, while consumers' trust in SMIs determined influencer marketing's growth, the recent reality is that consumers have come to distrust what SMIs say. Despite the trend reversal that influencer marketing is undergoing, academic attention to identifying and analyzing whether, and if so, why, consumers experience attitudinal ambivalence in trust and distrust in the SMI landscape is notably lacking. Further, while the influencer marketing industry needs to bridge the trust gap, less is known about the way to sustain consumers' trust and assuage their distrust in the SMI landscape. Hence, our study was designed to analyze further the way trust and distrust interplay and affect consumer behavior concurrently, with the goal to find whether consumer trust's positive effect on influencer marketing effectiveness could reduce the adverse effect of

distrust. We document the study's main theoretical contributions and managerial implications below.

5.1. Theoretical and managerial implications

Our study advances academic knowledge of influencer marketing in three ways. First, it advances current SMI research by incorporating distrust conceptually as an entity distinct from trust and documenting consumers' ambivalent attitudes in trust and distrust in the SMI landscape empirically. Consistent with the conceptual research that suggests consumers' mixed attitudes toward a single experience (or phenomenon) are hardly uncommon (Otnes et al., 1997) and with the studies that view trust and distrust as two disparate concepts that should be assessed separately (Chang & Fang, 2013; Cho, 2006; Dimoka, 2010), both our qualitative and quantitative research findings documented that consumer ambivalence in trust and distrust develops as a result of their interactions with SMIs as well. Notably, our results showed that consumers' trust is directed to SMIs themselves, while their distrust is directed toward the SMIs' branded content. Hereby, we contribute to the consumer behavior literature by sharpening the conceptual clarity of consumer ambivalence. Further, we contribute to the SMI literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of consumers' psychological responses to influencer marketing.

Second, in addition to testing the distinction between trust and distrust, we identified determining factors that affect consumers' trust vs. distrust, respectively, in the SMI landscape. For the evaluative dimension of consumer trust in SMIs, our results showed that one of SMIs' personality traits (i.e., similarity) and their content-determined traits (i.e., informativeness) are the important motivational dimensions in trust. This implies that the more often consumers find that an SMI has taste, preferences, and a lifestyle *similar* to theirs, the more often they develop trust in the SMI. This is consistent with past studies' findings (Singh et al., 2017; Ziegler & Golbeck, 2007). Further, the more consumers find that a SMI specializes in providing

informative online content, the more they express trust in the influencer, which supports the work of Lou and Yuan (2019). However, SMIs' personal trait of *attractiveness* and their *visually aesthetic content presentation* had no significant effects on consumers' trust. While previous studies have noted that SMIs' attractiveness is one of the key resources in the development of followers' trust (Kim & Kim, 2021), our study documented that this attractiveness-trust relation no longer holds true. Further, while previous studies have demonstrated that a SMI's ability to curate visually aesthetic content is critical in motivating consumers to like and follow them (Ki & Kim, 2019; Taillon et al., 2020; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020), our study found that SMIs' visually appealing content does not necessarily elicit consumers' trust. These findings may indicate that consumers are becoming more and more empowered with SMI information and can see that SMI endorsements are not quite as authentic and truthful as they had believed. Accordingly, they require more than simply an attractive SMI or visually appealing online content to trust the influencers. Instead, our findings showed that the appeal of SMIs' similarity or their ability to create informative social media content are more important and effective in developing SMI-consumer trust.

In contrast, our results indicated that *perceived ad clutter* leads consumers to distrust SMIs' branded content. The more often that consumers find that a SMI's online content contains excessive and irritating advertisements (i.e., ad clutter), the more often they are skeptical of the SMIs' branded content. While much of the preceding research has pinpointed the way the use of disclosure language (e.g., #ad) can trigger consumers distrust of influencer marketing (Feng et al., 2020; Gilbert et al., 2020), our findings showed that consumers today are tired of SMIs' excessive branded content at a time when influencer marketing is very much in vogue. This implies that retailers and marketers should be cautious in their use of influencer marketing and not overuse it, as it can backfire in their marketing efforts and lead to a significant increase in consumers' distrust in their online information. Thus, while accounting

for the fact that perceived ad clutter elicits consumers' distrust, it may be more practical to understand the way marketers can minimize consumer distrust's negative effect on behavioral intention, which we discuss below.

Third, this study expands our understanding of consumers' evaluations of influencer marketing by clarifying the independent, as well as interdependent, roles that trust and distrust play in their behavioral outcomes. Previous studies have presented a biased estimate of the effects of influencer marketing by ignoring another critical consumer attitude (i.e., distrust) when estimating influencer marketing's effectiveness (Jin et al., 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Our research provides a more nuanced estimation of influencer marketing's effect by showing the way these conflicting consumer attitudes interplay and influence imitation intention concurrently. While it is simple to predict that consumers' trust and distrust affect imitation intentions positively and negatively, respectively, our findings provide novel contributions to the literature by showing the interaction effect. Notably, we found that trust and distrust's interaction effect on imitation intention was significant and negative, in that increased distrust weakened the positive association between trust and imitation intention. Specifically, our results showed that distrust's negative effect on imitation intention was insignificant when consumers expressed high trust. In contrast, the negative effect was significant when consumers had low trust in SMIs. Although our results should be generalized with caution, they indicate that marketers' efforts to improve consumer trust in SMIs can ameliorate the negative consequences of strong consumer distrust of the SMIs' branded content. Thus, to engage in effective influencer marketing, practitioners should focus on maximizing consumers' trust in SMIs by collaborating with those SMIs who have interests similar to their target consumers and specialize in offering informative online content, so that the adverse effects of consumers' distrust can be minimized.

5.2. Limitations and avenues for future research

In the conceptualization we presented, influencer marketing tends to engender both trust and distrust. In future research, it will be important to explore consumers' ambivalent feelings and/or other ambivalent attitudes according to the various perspectives discussed in the SMI literature. Further, although our study provides new insights into the influencer marketing literature, it has some contextual limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, our results should be generalized with caution as the data were collected in HK. An interesting extension of our study would be to test whether consumers in other national contexts, such as those who live in the U.S. or Europe, demonstrate ambivalence and examine whether our results are consistent or differ. Second, as our findings indicated that perceived ad clutter was the critical trigger of consumers' distrust, it will be interesting to examine the threshold value or the optimal number of ads that SMIs can include in their online content before consumers perceive that they are excessive or intrusive, and thus manage influencer marketing in a way that can minimize their distrust of SMIs' branded content.

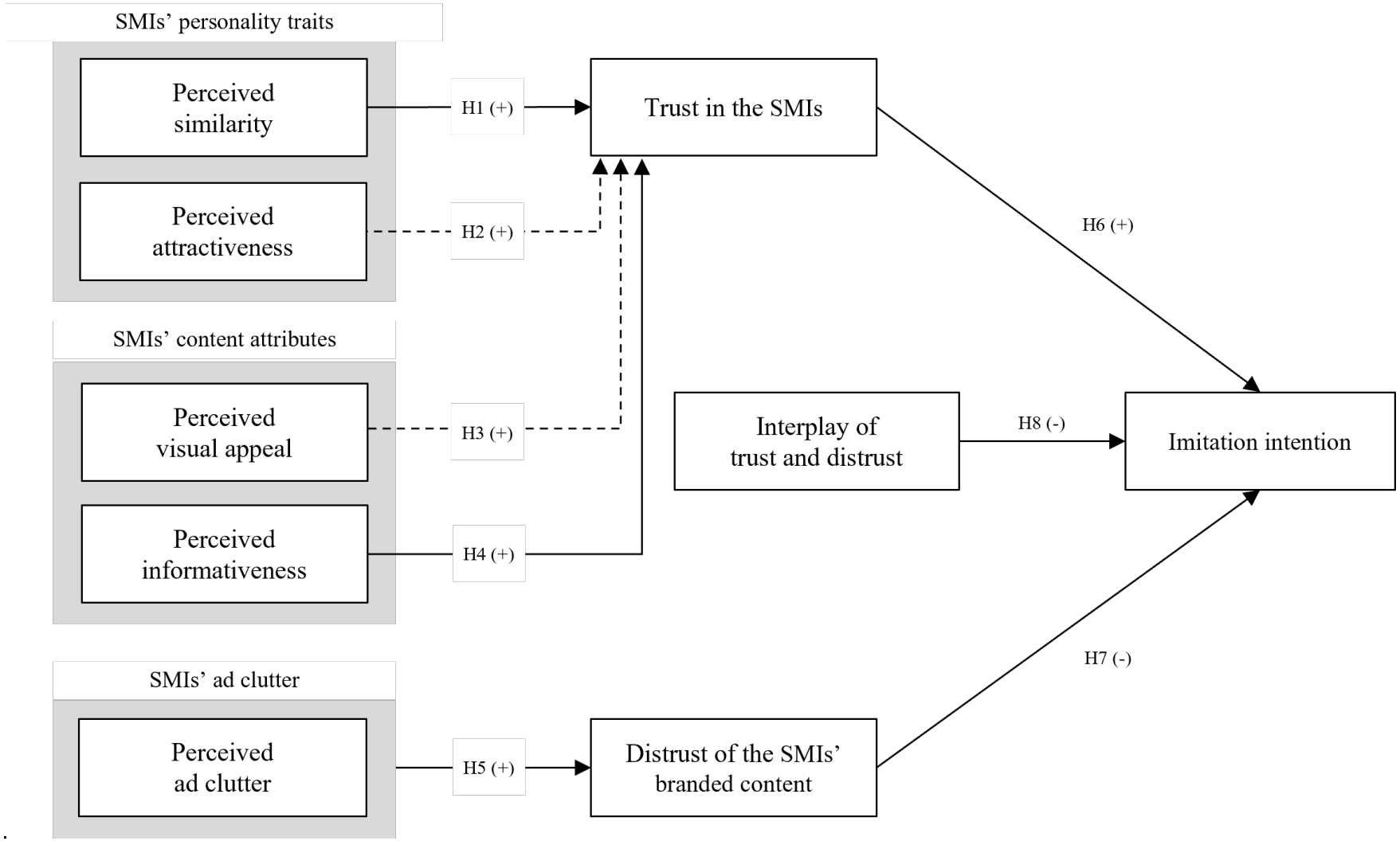

Figure 1. Conceptual model

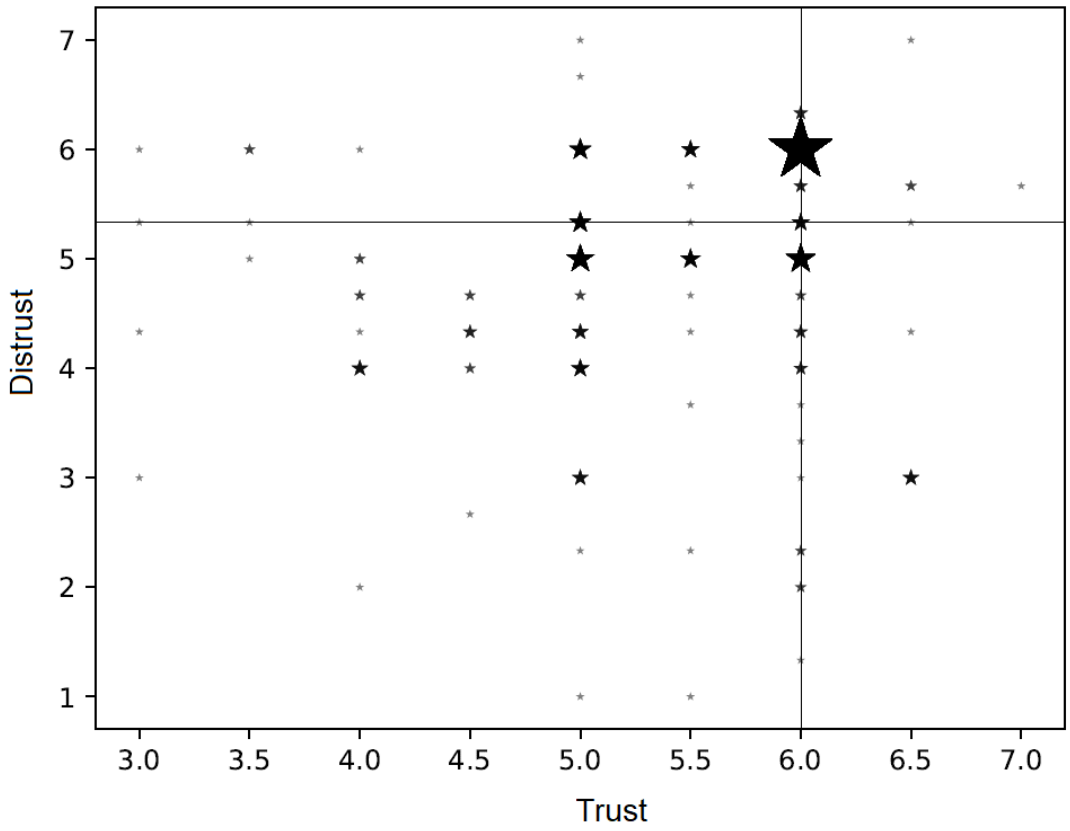

Figure 2. Distribution of trust and distrust ratings

Note. The larger the marker size, the larger the number of respondents per data point; Reference lines present median ratings of trust and distrust.

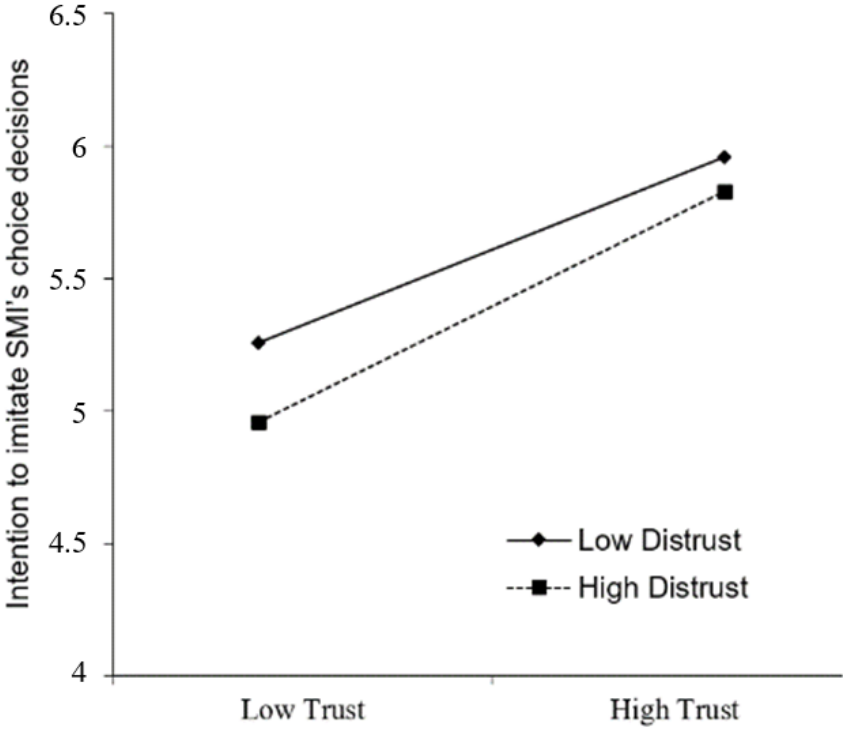

Figure 3. Interplay between trust and distrust

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Outer loading	α	CR	AVE
Perceived similarity		.81	.91	.83
[SMI] and I have similar tastes and preferences.	.96***			
[SMI] and I have similar lifestyle.	.86***			
Perceived attractiveness		.97	.98	.94
I find [SMI] appealing.	.97***			
I find [SMI] attractive.	.98***			
I find [SMI] good-looking.	.96***			
Perceived visual appeal		.94	.96	.90
[SMI]'s content is nice-looking.	.94***			
[SMI]'s content is visually attractive.	.96***			
[SMI]'s content is aesthetically pleasing.	.94***			
Perceived informativeness		.78	.90	.82
[SMI]'s content provides me with new ideas on various topics.	.89***			
I find [SMI]'s content as a source of information.	.92***			
Perceived advertising clutter		.92	.95	.86
I think [SMI]'s Instagram is exclusively used as an advertising medium.	.94***			
[SMI]'s branded content contain an excessive amount of advertisement.	.95***			
I find the amount of advertising on SMI's Instagram irritating.	.89***			
Trust in SMIs		.81	.91	.84
I find that [SMI] is sincere.	.93***			
I am confident that [SMI] is telling the truth.	.93***			
Distrust of SMIs' branded content		.96	.98	.93
I feel skeptical of [SMI]'s branded content.	.97***			
I feel suspicious of [SMI]'s branded content.	.97***			
I feel distrustful of [SMI]'s branded content.	.95***			
Intention to imitate SMIs' choices		.94	.97	.95
In the future, I am likely to consider buying one of the same products/brands that [SMI] posted on his/her Instagram.	.97***			
In the future, I am likely to try one of the same products/brands that [SMI] posted on his/her Instagram.	.97***			

Note. *** $p < 0.001$; Cronbach's alphas (α); Composite reliabilities (CR); Average variances extracted (AVEs).

Table 2. Discriminant validity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Similarity	**.91**							
2. Attractiveness	.21	**.97**						
3. Visual appeal	.36	.68	**.95**					
4. Informativeness	.45	.19	.26	**.91**				
5. Ad clutter	.07	.09	.07	.30	**.93**			
6. Trust	.27	.16	.18	.29	.21	**.92**		
7. Distrust	.05	.18	.19	.24	.77	.20	**.96**	
8. Imitation intention	.15	.17	.19	.28	.30	.38	.30	**.97**

Note. The square root of AVE is bolded.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) correlation ratios

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Similarity	-							
2. Attractiveness	.24							
3. Visual appeal	.40	.71						
4. Informativeness	.55	.21	.30					
5. Ad clutter	.09	.10	.07	.35				
6. Trust	.31	.18	.21	.36	.25			
7. Distrust	.05	.19	.20	.27	.82	.24		
8. Imitation intention	.16	.18	.20	.33	.32	.44	.31	-

Table 4. Inner model analysis results

Hypothesis	Structural path	Regression weight (β)	*t*-value	Result
H1	Similarity → Trust	.15†	1.67	Supported
H2	Attractiveness → Trust	.08	.70	Not supported
H3	Visual appeal → Trust	.02	.19	Not supported
H4	Informativeness → Trust	.20*	2.10	Supported
H5	Ad clutter → Distrust	.77***	19.84	Supported
H6	Trust → Imitation intention	.36***	5.46	Supported
H7	Distrust → Imitation intention	-.22**	2.74	Supported
H8	Interplay of trust and distrust → Imitation intention	-.12†	1.86	Supported

Note. $^{\dagger}p < 0.1$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.

Table 5. Finite mixture PLS results

	No. of segments			
Criterion	1	2	3	4
LnL	-725.51	-437.08	-412.57	-392.06
AIC	1473.02	920.17	895.14	**878.13**
AIC3	1484.02	943.17	930.14	**925.13**
AIC4	1495.02	966.17	**965.14**	972.13
BIC	1509.30	**996.03**	1010.58	1033.15
CAIC	1520.30	**1019.03**	1045.58	1080.15
HQ	1487.71	950.87	941.86	**940.86**
MDL5	1742.43	**1483.48**	1752.35	2029.23
EN	N/A	1.00	0.80	0.73
	Relative segment sizes			
Segment 1	200	161	132	76
Segment 2		39[a]	39	66
Segment 3			29[a]	39[a]
Segment 4				19[a]

Note. LnL - LogLikelihood; AIC – Akaike's Information Criterion; AIC3 - Modified AIC with Factor 3; AIC4 - Modified AIC with Factor 4; BIC - Bayesian Information Criteria; CAIC - Consistent AIC; HQ - Hannan Quinn Criterion; MDL5 - Minimum Description Length with Factor 5; EN - Entropy Statistic (Normed); [a] The number of observations in each segment should be greater than 50 for an inappropriate solution.

Appendix 1. Informants' attitudes in response to influencer marketing

Attitude	*Representative quotes*
Trust	Informant 2: "I trust Snow E because she shares honest reviews, like both good and bad reviews, about products. She is a lipstick collector. Even though she is a fan of a certain lipstick color, she recommends the audience not to try it if their skin color is similar to hers. I mean yellow. She says it will make them look old fashioned."
	Informant 6: "Even though the content of Ling Cheng's posts say #sponsored or #ad, I trust what Ling Cheng says … If influencers don't have trust in the products they promote, they won't take the risk of sponsoring them, right, because that may affect their reputation bad?"
Distrust	Informant 1: "I won't fully trust what the SMI shares. It is so obvious that he received money to promote the product. He normally types one to two captions to share his daily life or mood, but when he promotes a product, he types a long paragraph with detail where you can get it. Wasn't it so fake?"
Ambivalence	Informant 4: "Although I trust (and want to trust) the influencers I follow, to be honest, how many influencers would really know the chemical terms and their medical effects? They are not doctors. I think the brand gives them some guidelines or scripts to write on their IG."
	Informant 5: "You can't expect people to receive money and tell the truth at the same time. Maybe what they say regarding the advantage of the product is true, but I guess they hide the aspect that is not attractive or poor about the product as well … Maybe the eye cream is effective, but the texture is really sticky and makes you uncomfortable to put on."
	Informant 8: "When many influencers post content that introduce the same, newly launched product at the same timing, it is obvious that the brand paid them. I don't trust those content. But it is like a lottery. Even though I have 1% suspicion, I do not want to miss the chance."

Appendix 2. Informants' reasons for trusting SMIs or feeling distrustful about influencer marketing

Themes/Concepts			*Representative quotes*
Reasons for trusting	SMI's personal characteristics	*Similarity*	Informant 7: "It is important to me that the influencer I am following has the same lifestyle and cultural background as I do. I started to follow Monroe because she shares a lot of skincare tips for Acne-Prone Skin like me. I trust her advices and follow the menu she suggests with the hope to get rid of my pimple."
			Informant 3: "I am not pretty. That is why I feel attracted to those influencers who look like me, I mean who is an average girl but has good taste. Agnes is a good example. Even though she is not that pretty, she is very stylish, through which she makes good impression to others and draw attention. That is why when it comes to fashion, I trust her styling tips. I want to imitate her fashion style and make good impression to others like her."
		Attractiveness	Informant 5: "Pamela Cheung looks so pretty and showcases high-class, even when she is wearing Zara. I trust her fashion styling tips."
			Informant 15: "I follow him and trust the products or styling tips he recommends because he is so attractive and stylish. He is even more stylish than Messi. He himself is a brand."
	SMIs' content attributes	*Visual appeal*	Informant 1: "I simply follow Pimtha because she is slim and good looking. Pimtha is Thai, she did use English in some of her posts but the reason I like her is nothing related to her content."
			Informant 11: "She posts very nice photo to promote products. I really like the naturalness of her photos. She seems very authentic in her posts at all times, which makes me trust her."
		Informativeness	Informant 3: "I trust Oyan because she shares the latest Korea fashion trend. She gives first-hand information by regularly posting her visit to Dongdaemun. The information she shares is faster than many fashion magazines, even faster than Elle."
			Informant 6: "I read the contents even it is advisement, simply as a way having a common topic to discusses with a friend and is also a good way to accumulate knowledge. Anyway, it doesn't charge for reading it, haha. I need more information to feel more certain about which product or brand to choose and buy. SMIs are experimental subject.."

Themes/Concepts			*Representative quotes*
	Others	Others	Informant 14: “Cristiano Ronaldo have more followers on Instagram because he is self-made athlete, he works hard, he is more stylish than Messi, He is brand.”
			Informant 18: “I trust Michelle Lewin and follow some of her suggestions because she has lot of followers. More than 1 million people follow her to see what she thinks and says about fitness.”
Reasons for distrusting	SMIs’ branded content	*Ad clutter*	Informant 3: “She posts her daily life or mood honestly, normally with one or two hashtags. But when she posts about a product, she posts it with a long detailed texts. You cannot but notice it’s an ad. It is already so fake. The content is very suspicious too. This is when I started to feel that she may not be purely authentic.”
			Informant 8: “There are too many ads. Advertisements always appear when I am skimming through the posts, and the number of ads is almost catching up with the actual moments.”
	Others	Others	Informant 18: “My family members recommended me not to follow her and they told something against her.”

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