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**Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users**

**Abstract**

The growth of Instagram continues, with the majority of its users being young women. This study investigates the impact of Instagram upon source credibility, consumer buying intention and social identification with different types of celebrities. In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 female Instagram users aged 18-30 to determine the extent to which Instagram influences their buying behaviour. The research findings show that celebrities on Instagram are influential in the purchase behaviour of young female users. However, non-traditional celebrities such as bloggers, YouTube personalities and 'Instafamous' profiles are more powerful, as participants regard them as more credible and are able to relate to these, rather than more traditional, celebrities. Female users are perceptively aware and prefer to follow Instagram profiles that intentionally portray positive images and provide encouraging reviews.

Keywords: eWOM, Source Credibility Theory, Halo Effect, Celebrity Endorsement.

## 1. Introduction

Instagram is one of the fastest-growing online photo social web services where users share their life images with other users, however the academic research related to this media is limited (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). It is a relevant channel upon which to focus due to the site's recent decision to expand its advertising platforms, in so doing, revenue generated from advertisements on Instagram is expected to reach $2.81bn in 2017 - greater than both Twitter and Google in the US (Vizard, 2015). Individuals spend more time on Instagram than other similar sites, suggesting it is of importance to research this media type (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Instagram reported more than 400 million monthly active users (Statista, 2016).

Celebrities' profiles are at the top of the list of the most-followed pages on Instagram, frequently used to deliver marketing communication messages to their followers. Recently, one celebrity's profile with the highest number of followers, reached 92 million (Instagram, 2016). Consumers perceive individuals with a large number of subscribers as more attractive and trustworthy, this is in line with Source Credibility Theory and relates to electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Jin & Phua, 2014). Source credibility refers to the consumer perception of the information source based on attractiveness, trustworthiness and knowledge in the area of the endorsed product (Ohanian, 1990). EWOM refers to any product information communicated by potential consumers via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The effectiveness of eWOM on consumers' attitudes and behavioural intentions is determined, to some degree, by the perceived credibility of eWOM communicators (Reichelt et al., 2014; Erkan & Evans, 2016).

EWOM on Instagram has grown to become a persuasive and influential information source due to the emerging popularity of this social media and accessibility via smart phones and other devices (Thoumrungroje, 2014). Celebrity endorsements are considered credible sources in generating a positive eWOM regarding particular products and services (Spry et al., 2011). The impact of celebrity enforcements as marketing communication tools has been extensively researched previously, however there is a lack of academic research on the

credibility of different types of celebrities within social networks (Spry et al., 2011; Jin & Phun, 2014). This is particularly the case for Instagram which is experiencing rapid growth and could, potentially, be of great importance to the marketer.

This study examines the effects of Instagram upon consumers, with a specific focus on the increasing relevance of celebrity endorsers and their influence on female users within the 18-30 age groups (Pittman & Reich, 2016; Chua & Chang, 2016). Previous research shows that half of Instagram users fall into this age category (Duggan, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Statista, 2016). In this research, we investigate the impact of Instagram upon source credibility, consumer buying intention and social identification with different types of celebrities. Particular attention is paid to non-traditional types of celebrities who become famous through online media usage.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Self-Esteem and Self-Control in Buying Behaviour in the Context of Celebrities on Instagram

Online information sharing is defined as a public phenomenon; a shared resource from which members of the public may benefit (Cheung & Lee, 2012) and often at the root of generating eWOM. Across social network sites an online friend becomes an effective medium for information dispersion, and eWOM generates a network of consumers connected to one another (Thoumrungroje, 2014). Opinions formed from strong social connections on social media platforms such as Instagram are considered to be of significant importance by members/followers. Expectations of the individual who shares the information influence the content of their posts (Thoumrungroje, 2014; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013).

There is a growing interest amongst marketers to use Instagram for advertising due to the large reach of this mobile platform worldwide, with 14 million users in the

UK alone (Statista, 2016). This suggests an increasingly broad audience for brands and retailers, as well as providing more scale to brand-specific topics in which advertisers could be interested (Vizard, 2015).

The larger the number of followers an individual has, the greater their perceived social influence (Jin & Phua, 2014). This is due to images being broadcasted to every follower who could, potentially, re-post the images on their own pages, thus expanding the visibility to an even wider audience (Scott, 2011). Studies on social media advertising and online advertising also state that consumers' attitudes towards social media advertising is an essential determinant of its effectiveness (Chen et al., 2011). It is important that an individual has a significant interest in the life of a certain celebrity and a level of attraction and respect in order for them to be influenced by the celebrity's endorsements (Ohanian, 1990). The opinion of others, in this case a celebrity, is often an important influence upon human behaviour (Bearden et al., 1989).

Social media usage is bestowed with a certain level of control regarding the specific posts an individual shares with his/her online following. This encourages Instagram users to focus upon sharing only positive images (Thoumrungroje, 2014). The positive perception an individual creates on Instagram is likely to generate positive feedback from their followers in relation to those profiles (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013). Gonzales and Hancock (2011), in their study on Facebook, state that using social networks positively affects individuals' self-esteem. Furthermore, positive online feedback can enhance one's social self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2006). According to several authors (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013; Thoumrungroje, 2014; Khan & Dhar, 2006), higher self-esteem among individuals online lowers personal self-control, which can often lead to increased impulse purchasing and excessive spending. Wilcox et al. (2011) support this theory, arguing that when self-esteem levels are high and individuals are feeling positive they are more likely to lose rationality and act upon indulgent urges. Irrational and impulse purchases are believed to satisfy one's need for social acceptance and prestige, and are considered as more hedonic purchase decisions (Thoumrungroje, 2014; Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012).

Other researchers (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel, 1989; Bither & Wright, 1973; Kropp et al., 2005; Rhodes & Wood, 1992) explain that individuals with low self-esteem are more susceptible to the opinions of others as they are seeking social approval and acceptance. Highly confident people are more capable of developing counterarguments than those with low self-confidence (Bither & Wright, 1973). Low self-confidence can also motivate consumers to seek more assistance when making buying decisions (Bearden et al., 2001). Users with low self-esteem are more likely to 'give up' trying to comprehend a message if it is unclear, while those with high self-esteem tend to further search for information (Rhodes & Wood, 1992). Often, low self-esteem demonstrates impulse buying behaviour (Kropp, 2006). These arguments would suggest that consumers with low self-confidence are more easily influenced by celebrity endorsements on social media.

The degree to which social media enhances one's self-esteem depends upon whom users follow on their social network (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). An individual is likely to mimic the success of their favourite celebrities and obtain a similar degree of positive feedback to that which the celebrities receive on their Instagram accounts. Women are more susceptible to social influence than men (Bearden et al., 1990). Female users are likely to copy similar types of social media posts and be more inclined to purchase goods that become known to them via, or are used personally by, their favourite celebrities (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2011; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). The use of social media can lead people to make impulse purchases and buy celebrity-endorsed products (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013).

*2.2. Traditional and Non-Traditional Celebrities' Endorsement in Online Platforms*

Celebrities are impactful when it comes to advertising products and services (Van Norel et al., 2014). Celebrity endorsement is currently prevalent in online platforms. More traditional celebrities include film stars, musicians, sporting icons, TV personalities, writers and others. In recent years there has been a rise in new

types of 'digital' celebrity groups such as bloggers, vloggers and 'Instafamous' personalities (Chahal, 2016).

Celebrities appeal to a common reference group. 'Reference group' is defined as a person/group of people who serve as a reference to an individual in forming values and attitudes, and in so doing provide consumers with a reference in their purchasing decisions (Schiffman et al., 2012). This can also include celebrities or Instagram profiles belonging to non-traditional celebrities who could be considered famous online or 'Instafamous' (Scott, 2015). These individuals are known to the public and their identification is based upon elements such as admiration, association, aspiration or recognition (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013).

Celebrity endorsements are considered credible sources in generating a positive eWOM regarding particular products and services (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013; Spry et al., 2011). Celebrities are able to transform an unknown product into a well-known product through persuasion techniques and generating positive associations via advertisements.

The purpose of a celebrity endorsement is to add value to a brand name, product or service offering. It could also be argued that advertising through a celebrity is useful in building brand equity (Keller, 2005). The credibility of a celebrity endorser positively impacts the credibility of the endorsed brand (Spry et al., 2011; Elberse & Verleun, 2012; Nicolau & Santa-Maria, 2013).

Consumers will, in turn, associate certain brands with the celebrity endorser, which consequently adds dimensions of attractiveness and trustworthiness, assisting in building brand credibility (Spry et al., 2011). Several researchers argue that information is more credible when delivered by a product reviewer/blogger than an established celebrity (Wiley, 2014; Camahort, 2016). According to Wiley (2014), traditional celebrities do not enjoy the power they once did; online bloggers' product reviews are now much more influential as they are perceived to be more authentic and accessible. Modelling agencies have also latched onto the 'Instafamous' phenomenon and claim that Instafame is the latest criterion for

models, believing that success relies entirely on the demand for the influencer. Influencer outreach will become an increasing focus in the future, however it is essential that the influencer is in line with the brand, and the way in which it is portrayed to the audience (Chachal, 2016).

Two interrelated theories, discussed next, could be used to consider the persuasive effects of celebrity endorsers; Source Credibility Theory and Halo Effect Theory.

*2.3 Source Credibility Theory*

Source credibility is the extent to which the target audience views the source in order to gain expertise and knowledge in their understanding of the product/service (Teng et al., 2014; Ohanian, 1990). Source credibility is based on trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise of the communicator (Ohanian, 1990). Kutthakaphan and Chokesamritpo (2013) argue that source credibility is also dependent upon the quality of the argument and persuasive strength of the endorser. 'Argument quality' refers to the strength of persuasion of the arguments within an informational message (Teng et al., 2014). This suggests that where reviews or statements regarding products and services are perceived as valid on Instagram, consumers will develop a positive attitude towards the brand being endorsed relative to these reviews (Spry et al., 2011). Where the endorsed products are perceived as false and invalid, consumers develop a negative attitude towards the brand and also the celebrity endorser (Cheung et al., 2009). The quality of the Instagram post is validated in terms of the strength of public perception of the celebrity, as well as elements such as relevance and timeliness.

'Relevance' is the extent to which the reviews are relevant and applicable (Teng et al., 2014). In terms of relevance on Instagram, this could be via specific issues related to certain celebrities. For example, celebrities who have personally experienced issues with their weight may be more credible and relevant endorsers of weight loss related products and services. Transformation images and documentation of weight loss 'journeys' on Instagram are likely to make the

endorsed products or services more trustworthy, and subsequently the celebrity endorser into a more credible source.

Source Credibility Theory is addressed in this study in order to examine one of the research objectives: the impact of source credibility of Instagram upon consumer behaviour. This work explores which Instagram celebrity groups are the most influential to, and most trusted by, the consumer, and what factors make the online endorser appealing.

*2.4. Halo Effect Theory*

The Halo Effect was first discovered by the psychologist Thorndike (1920) who, having conducted a social experiment, concluded that the perception of an individual can create either a positive or negative 'halo' around him/herself which can result in a blurring of their individual characteristics. This effect has been researched extensively within marketing literature with regard to consumer behaviour (Klein & Dawar, 2004). Halo Effect Theory can wield a powerful influence upon the impressions we form of others (Smith et al., 2010). The first impression of the attractiveness of a person affects how that person is viewed holistically (Long-Crowell, 2016). Halo Effect Theory refers to a target consumer's tendency to rate a product based on a review they receive from an individual who is potentially endorsing it. Previous research concludes that an individual personal qualities, physical appearance and overall attractiveness can affect how others judge their character (Ohanian, 1990). This suggests that if someone is of an attractive appearance and their lifestyle is appealing they are judged to be a better person (Long-Crowell, 2016).

It is common practise for businesses to use the halo effect to their advantage; brands use the 'halo' of their reputation to justify charging premium prices for basic products (Smith et al., 2010). This is also the case with brands that use celebrity endorsers with a positive 'halo' to generate a positive association with a particular product. Halo Effect and Source Credibility Theories can be interrelated

as they are both based on characteristics, such as attractiveness and trust, which are used to evaluate the credibility of the source.

Halo Effect Theory is relevant in addressing the second research objective: to determine to what extent different types of celebrities on Instagram influence consumers' buying intention and social identification with celebrities. Questions related to this theory will be raised with the intention of discovering how the halo effect can influence the perception an individual develops of an online celebrity and how this can influence trust. This will be achieved by investigating participants' social media habits and their identification with and perception of celebrities.

## 3. Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research method to meet the research objectives. The aim of qualitative research is to provide a greater understanding of that which needs to be studied. In qualitative research the goal is rarely to arrive at statistically-valid conclusions, rather to gain insights and build theory (Bryman, 2015). In-depth interviews were used to explore the meanings behind Instagram users' discussion (Bryman, 2015; Chua & Chang, 2016). Non-probability purposive sampling is used in this research. Such sampling technique provides good sources of data in exploratory research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). In terms of generalisability, qualitative studies are characterised by a dependence on context and the fact that they do not seek to be representative of a larger population (Neergaard & Parm Ulhoi, 2007). For this research, the sampling method was intentionally chosen in order to achieve results that convincingly reflect reality, irrespective of relative bias.

This sampling is applied as it is impossible to state the probability of any member of the population being sampled; therefore it is difficult for any researcher to be confident that claims made about a specific sample can relate to the wider population (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015; Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012). In total, 18 face-to-face interviews were conducted with females aged 18-30

who are active users (daily use) of Instagram. All respondents are from the same location; the North East of England. The sample is drawn from a mixture of university students and young professionals. It was concluded that those in the selected gender and age groups were the most common users of the Instagram platform (Duggan, 2015; Statista, 2016).

Data was split into several themes which emerged through the interview process (Cresswell, 2009). Creswell's model for data analysis in qualitative research was implemented within this study. As this study is of an inductive nature, the researchers were able to create categories and common themes as identified within the data during analysis. This is referred to as template analysis (Creswell, 2009).

## 4. Results and Discussion

The main themes identified throughout the interviews relate to; patterns of following celebrities on Instagram, celebrity types, the influence of eWOM upon participants' purchasing and posting habits, the credibility and influence of different types of celebrities, and the halo effect in relation to Instagram celebrities. The following discussion provides key findings, categorised into themes.

### 4.1. Theme 1: Celebrities' Profiles on Instagram

All participants stated that they follow some type of celebrity on Instagram except for one who stated that she uses Instagram mainly to keep in touch with friends and family. Participant B identified that 80% of the accounts she follows on Instagram are those of celebrities, as she finds their lifestyles and posts more interesting than people she knows personally. She also added that she uses Instagram more than any other social media platform as she feels the visual elements make it more appealing. Participant B used Instagram daily to 'stalk people' of whose lifestyle and physical

appearance she is 'jealous.' One of the respondents notes that she follows traditional and online celebrities if they have 'nice, high-quality pictures.'

Participants categorised celebrities on Instagram and the majority were familiar with the term 'Instafamous.' Users considered bloggers and 'lower-end' celebrities the most influential when listening to their opinions/stories. Participant G said a quarter of the people she follows are celebrities; both 'typical celebrities' but also individuals whom she would personally identify as celebrities, including those such as well-known makeup artists.

One user stated that she would class anyone with a following of over 30,000 people on Instagram as a celebrity and many other participants held the common view that their number of followers was an indication of a person's credibility and defined them as being Instafamous. Participant G said that determining an individual on Instagram as a celebrity would be 'based on the amount of followers they have.' Another participant further stated that she was most influenced by bloggers and lower-scale celebrities as she considered them to be more trustworthy and relevant to her than more traditional celebrities. Wiley (2014) also confirms that online celebrities appear to be effective in online communication. Trustworthiness is among the key dimensions of source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990).

All participants understood the term 'Instafamous' and all established similar definitions as to what this term referred to. One of the respondents defined the term as describing an individual who creates Instagram content that inspires people, and Participants G and N offered that the term refers to someone who is known on Instagram by more people than merely their friends. Participant H described Instafamous persons as those with a strong presence online, usually 'people with really nice lives and loads of money to be able to buy nice things and post about them and have good quality images.'

Participants were also questioned about filters and special effects used on Instagram. Respondent B favoured image enhancement features via the use of filters on Instagram; she enjoyed the way images were made more visually

appealing and believed this contributed to the success of the platform. Many participants had not considered how images may be manipulated but after reflection stated that this could influence the appearance and composition of a displayed product. Respondent N said she would only pay attention to professional-looking images. Participant D thought that at the point of initially viewing a post a certain expectation would probably be subconsciously formed, but she did not think about it in any depth. It could, however, be argued that edited images create unrealistic expectations which impact upon vulnerable young women trying to 'fit in' with Instagram's strong online community. The study respondents note that images which are edited to be more appealing make them more favourable. This is in line with previous research by Erkan (2015). Another respondent stated that image enhancement is 'the norm' and that it is 'no secret that people use filters and that is kind of the whole point; to make things look more appealing.' Composition of images was also regarded as an important aspect of profiles. Within the context of this study, composition of images on Instagram refers to the way objects are arranged in a photo which guides the viewer towards the most important element/s of the image. Respondents implied that using filters can also improve the composition of pictures.

*4.2. Theme 2: Product Reviews on Instagram*

All participants, to a certain extent, were influenced by reviews on Instagram, depending on individual interests and types of celebrities and accounts which they followed. Thoumrungroje (2014) argued that a 'friend' online becomes an effective information source and therefore eWOM is generated amongst similar consumers who are connected to each other.

Respondents of this study noted that in most cases they would not post negative reviews directly onto Instagram. Users are keen to maintain a positive online presence on Instagram and tend not to post negative information as the positive perception an individual creates is likely to generate more positive feedback from

their followers. Previous research also found Instagram was perceived as a positive type of media (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013). Furthermore, positive online feedback can enhance an individual's social self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2006). Participant L indicated that she would follow profiles for inspiration and enjoyed viewing images which are attractive and positive, but which she admits could be the opposite of reality.

Two participants said they were likely to tell their friends and family members face-to-face if they did not recommend or were unhappy with a purchase. Participants E and F both claimed they would be more likely to post a negative review on an alternative review-specific website as opposed to Instagram in order to maintain a positive position online. Participant G ventured to say 'I would probably keep Instagram for positive things because I would probably feel embarrassed if I bought something rubbish because it was a waste of money and I would not want people to think I only bought it because a celebrity said I should.'

A common theme emerged regarding the ways in which eWOM linked to purchase decisions. The majority of participants (all but one) stated that they had purchased an item that had become known to them solely through a celebrity whom they trusted on Instagram. Moore (2010) argues that consumers search for information via online reviews to reduce the perceived risk inherent in purchase decisions. Participants G, E and H claimed that making a purchase online boosted their self-esteem. Participant H said 'yeah, definitely, like when I've had a stressful time at university I do like to treat myself now and again to cheer myself up.' Participant B reasoned that using a product which a celebrity also used made her feel good about herself as she then had common ground with her idols and others on the platform. Previous research (Thoumrungroje, 2014; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013) confirms that opinions formed from social media are considered highly important, and engaging online enables users to form stronger connections. Female users seek the opinions of others to inform decisions as, presumably, they are less confident in their own decision making and trust others more. According to academic research (Bearden et al., 1990; Wilcox et al., 2011; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013) females are more susceptible to social opinions than men, leading to more

influence over their buying behaviour based on reviews by their favourite celebrities.

*4.3. Theme 3: Source Credibility Theory and Celebrity Endorsement*

All users considered celebrities as a trustworthy source of information online. Common themes emerged when participants were asked which celebrity group they considered the most trustworthy and credible. It transpired that the majority of participants valued the opinions of lower-scale 'Instafamous' and blogger-type celebrities over more traditionally famous celebrities. Participant D never considered 'bigger'or 'star' celebrities but automatically associated Instagram celebrities as bloggers and models, finding them more influential on her purchasing behaviour and decisions as these celebrities were considered more relatable. One user expressed that she would trust online celebrities' opinions as those celebrities were less superficial in comparison to, for example, famous Hollywood personalities. It appeared that participants were aware that some products endorsed by celebrities were overpriced and beyond their budgets, and were therefore more likely to be influenced by lower-end celebrities who endorsed more affordable brands.

All participants were asked a question related to celebrity 'journeys' and whether their overcoming personal problems made them more credible in endorsing related products, for example, reality stars such as Charlotte Crosby who had overcome weight-related problems and produced a range of fitness DVDs. Users considered this a key influencer of purchase decisions. One user said if a celebrity who had always been slim was advertising weight-loss DVDs she would not trust that celebrity as 'they haven't gone through the process so how can they set the example?' Thus respondents agree that trust in a celebrity's review is developed from their expertise and knowledge of the endorsed product.

All respondents referred only to female Instagram profiles, implying that females using social media are more interested in the lifestyles of other women and comparisons are made to similar types of people. Appearance and features of a

presented person can have a strong influence on likeminded consumers, also confirmed by Thoumrungroje (2014). Female users are likely to copy similar types of social media posts (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013).

When participants were asked whether celebrity fashion style and lifestyles inspire them and their posts on Instagram, varied responses were presented. Participant D stated that she uses celebrity style for outfit inspiration and that she would post similar types of posts as celebrities' in terms of her purchases on her own Instagram page. According to Wilcox & Stephan (2013) opinions generated by strong connections are important to network members, to the point where the expectations created by individuals influence the content of posts. Current research findings show that it is common for females to imitate their favourite celebrities. Townsend (2015) also states that where a celebrity values a particular brand or product, their followers are likely to be of the same opinion.

One participant replied that if she had never tried a product she would do so, trusting the opinion of the celebrity endorsing it, as 'it must be good' to warrant a post by that celebrity. Participant H also presented the view that they would be more inclined to buy an item that was brought to their attention by a celebrity. Celebrities are able to transform an unknown product into a well-known product through persuasion and generating positive feelings via advertising.

Participants were asked whether any negative press regarding a celebrity would ever adversely affect their view and/or use of a particular brand or product which that celebrity represented. This elicited a variety of opinions. Participant A said she would not be affected by information in the press, whereas Participant I expressed she would not be happy if the press revealed a celebrity as immoral; she would be inclined to 'unfollow' them and would consider them an unreliable information source. These are mixed opinions, however, research by Spry et al. (2011) notes that the credibility of a celebrity impacts the credibility of a brand. Previous research argues that companies hope that the performance and perception of a celebrity is parallel to the success of the brand which they endorse (Elberse & Verleun, 2012; Nicolau & Santa-Maria, 2013).

*4.4. Theme 4: The Halo Effect*

The halo effect can wield a powerful influence on the impressions we form of others (Smith et al., 2010). When participants were asked whether they would be willing to purchase goods from an unfamiliar website that became known to them solely via a celebrity endorser, they responded that they would be willing to trust the celebrities to whom they aspire, as they presume that celebrities value their position of power and are unlikely to abuse it, therefore their opinions regarding a particular brand or website would be considered credible. Celebrities operate as a sub-brand for companies, and consumers therefore associate certain brands with certain celebrities which helps a brand to build credibility (Seno & Lukas, 2007).

Users were also asked whether they were likely to follow and trust unfamiliar celebrities who they only learned of via the 'explore page' on Instagram. Participant H said she constantly follows new interesting people through the explore tab but must follow them for a reasonable amount of time before she trusts them, and claims you 'just get a feel if an account is genuine.' The first impression of the attractiveness of an individual affects how that person is viewed holistically, which corresponds with Long-Crowell's (2016) study. One of the current study's users said they would trust a new online celebrity, especially if they were familiar, or would 'follow' some of their followers.

## 5. Conclusion

*5.1. Contribution*

Academic research dedicated to Instagram is limited (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Erkan, 2015; Pittman & Reich, 2016). This work provides further understanding of its usage. Previous research (Cheung et al., 2009; Erkan & Evans, 2016; Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013; Hennin-Thurau et al., 2004) explored the use of Instagram and other types of social media with regard to eWOM, however, little research has been conducted to understand social identification of Instagram

users and how famous online personalities influence buying behaviour. The potential of online celebrities should not be underestimated.

The research conducted within this study discusses, in particular, the impact of eWOM and online celebrity endorsements within the Instagram platform, drawing upon Source Credibility and Halo Effect Theories. More specifically, the study identifies the patterns of consumer behaviour related to the celebrities followed on Instagram and explores the factors which influence users' purchase behaviour. The attractiveness, quality and composition of images are of significant importance to participants and a key influencer on whether or not users decide to follow new profiles.

Findings show that eWOM can strongly link to buying behaviour based on trust, and participants appear to refer to reviews on Instagram to reduce the perceived risk when making a purchase based on their admiration of and trust in their idols. Extant research demonstrates that women are more susceptible than men to social opinions and tend to follow the decisions of others whose opinion they trust or whose lifestyles they wish to imitate (Bearden et al., 1990; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). The findings of this study show that respondents' self-esteem is enhanced in buying a product or service that was recommended by a celebrity. Hence they seek the opinions of others to inform decisions as, presumably, they are less confident in their own decision-making capabilities.

This research revealed that participants aspire to the lifestyles of certain celebrities; copying their fashion and makeup styles, types of posts, or choices of restaurant and holiday destinations. It appeared to be common knowledge that no negative reviews regarding particular brands are posted by users in order to maintain a positive perception of themselves among the online Instagram community. Participants were also aware that celebrities are approached by brands to endorse products but believed celebrities are unlikely to abuse their position of power and fame and would not wish to damage their reputation by posting disingenuous reviews. This concludes that celebrities' incentive for financial gain did not seem to adversely affect participants' desire to purchase.

*5.2. Practical Implications*

The research findings suggest that companies should consider consumers' control over the information to which they are exposed on Instagram. Online celebrity endorsements are perceived to be of significant importance and credibility when communicating marketing messages. This suggests it is essential for brands to utilise Instagram effectively when determining a target audience; they must consider what type of celebrity would be the most effective in appealing to a particular target group. Research shows that non-traditional types of female celebrities, i.e. those in the vlogger/blogger/Instafamous categories, are more influential to young females.

Respondents noted that lower-scale types of celebrities were most influential, as these categories were perceived as more credible and relevant to female users, particularly with regard to purchase decisions as the products and services they were endorsing were more affordable to participants. Thus in selecting a brand endorser, companies must rely more upon online celebrities to whom consumers can relate. Image composition and celebrity relevance to the product are most influential, which is important to ensure success in social media advertising.

*5.3. Research Limitations and Future Research*

One limitation of this study is the lack of existing academic research in relation to Instagram as a social platform. This could be due to the fact that Instagram is a relatively new phenomenon; only in recent years has it grown in size. Future research could further explore Instagram in relation to brand recall, visual communication, use of figurative language within the images portrayed and viewer participation. It would also be interesting to study cross-cultural differences in the use of Instagram, as this media growers faster in some countries (*e.g.* USA, Russia and Brazil) than in others (Statista, 2016).

Another limitation of the research is the sample size used. The sample of respondents was drawn from the same region of the UK enabling the authors to

explore initial patterns in relation to Instagram usage among female users. However, future research should employ a larger sample size to further test the findings of this research. As Instagram appears to be widely used by females (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Statista, 2016) it would be interesting to explore the reasons behind this phenomenon; perhaps by conducting an analysis of the factors which influence different social media usage across genders, in particular, investigation into source credibility and self-esteem of consumers.

In terms of theory building, further work could be conducted to test source credibility (Ohanian, 1990) and self-presentation models in relation to online communication. Potentially this could develop factors of source credibility which are more relevant to eWOM and thus develop a new theoretical framework applicable to social media.

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