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Megan Scott

An analysis of how social media influencers utilise trust-building strategies to create advocates

Social media influencers provide services to their followers in terms of sharing their expertise. As service providers, they rely on advocacy within their audience, and successful influencers are commonly associated with high levels of trust, commitment and authenticity (Christopher et al. 2002; Nguyen et al. 2016; Sudha and Sheena 2017). However, influencer marketing is a relatively new concept and as such has limited research and theory readily available regarding the original influencer-follower relationship. This raises two key questions: How are influencers utilising trust to gain an advocating audience? And what effects do the different antecedents of trust have upon their exchange relationship? This paper evaluates trust-based theory, and trust-based strategies practiced within the influencer sector – primarily those of ‘successful’ influencer, Zoella. A conceptual framework provides organisations and influencers an explanation of trust within the influencer sector. Recommendations are provided, based upon relationships between advocacy, opportunistic behaviour and trust.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing, Trust, Opportunistic Behaviour, Advocacy, Affective Trust, Relationship Marketing

To cite this article: Scott, M. 2018. An analysis of how social media influencers utilise trust-building strategies to create advocates, *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 6 (2), 260-273. Contact: Fiona Cownie, email:fcownie@bournemouth.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of technology, e-marketing is now one of the cheapest and most efficient forms of communication that organisations can use to engage with consumers (Kotler et al. 2013). However, whilst communications are essential for developing consumer loyalty, they are only effective if providing a positive consumer experience (Chaffey and

Chadwick 2012), which in turn can create a level of trust deemed essential in relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt 1994).

This paper begins with a brief introduction to influencer marketing, before examining trust-based theory. Mitchell et al.'s (1998) Model of Postulated Correlates of Trust (PCT) will be examined and applied, before eventually being redeveloped into a conceptual framework that reflects the flow of trust and advocacy within the influencer sector.

Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing through social media is a relatively new concept within relationship marketing, and as such, has a limited variety of research available compared to other marketing concepts. Sudha and Sheena (2017, p.16) define influencer marketing to be:

“A form of relationship building which may be very helpful for brands that seek to expand their audience and turn them into loyal customers through trust and authenticity”.

From this definition, it may be deduced that two exchange relationships are present within certain influencer dynamics, one between the organisation and influencer, and one between the influencer and their audience. However, the definition is written from the perspective of an external brand, and not that of the influencer. Amongst research for influencer-audience relationships, a conclusive definition could not be found.

Social media influencer, Zoella, started vlogging on her YouTube (Zoella 2017a) channel in 2009 and accumulated thousands of followers, due to her assumed authenticity (O'Connor 2017). Eight years later, she now directs a multitude of self-made brands, products and collaborations (Blair 2016; Superdrug 2017; Sugg Life 2017). These projects have been extremely successful, with recent financial accounts stating earnings of an admirable figure from a self-made brand (Locke 2017). Social media influencers can present themselves as an effective means of advertisement, with a high level of consumer loyalty and advocacy, and trust is imperative to their success.

Trust

Trust and subsequently, trustworthiness, is considered an integral element of relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Nguyen et al. 2016). A common consensus is that trust reflects the level of confidence one partner has in another within an exchange-based relationship (Bitner and Zeithaml 2003; Egan 2008). Bitner and Zeithaml (2003) expand upon this suggesting that the level of trust that can be established is partly dependent upon the level of self-trust present versus that of the exchange-partner. Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Geyskens et al. (1996) determine trust to be an essential aspect of creating commitment between consumers and organisations. Furthermore, it can be determined that all elements of relationship marketing lead to one key objective for organisations, the creation of advocates (Bart et al. 2005; Fullerton 2011; Chaffey and Chadwick 2012).

Whilst it can be concluded that trust is integral to relationship marketing, it is important to differentiate between trust and trustworthiness. Carnevale (1995, p11) describes trust to be “an expression of faith and confidence” that an exchange partner is “fair, reliable, ethical, competent and nonthreatening”. Additionally, an exchange partner’s trustworthiness can be described as “the antecedent accumulated perceptual experiences that lead one to trust” (Caldwell and Clapham 2003, p.352).

Cognitive and Affective Trust

Trust is a multi-dimensional concept, which multiple theorists have attempted to segregate. McAllister (1995) determined trust to be categorised into two key types: affective trust and cognitive trust. Affective trust is present when there are emotional bonds affecting an exchange-relationship, whilst cognitive trust is where a connection is created through rational judgement. Affective trust is created as a result of past experiences and interactions with the exchange partner, and is seen to reflect a much higher level of trust in comparison to cognitive trust, which is seen to be created as the result of knowledge or information deemed ‘incomplete’ (McAllister 1995; Johnson and Grayson 2005; Ranganathan et al. 2013). Ganesan and Hess (1997) determine the key antecedent ‘credibility’ to be reflective of cognitive trust, and ‘benevolence’ to be reflective of affective trust. As affective trust is commonly known to be of a higher value, it can therefore be determined that benevolent actions are of more importance than an organisation’s credibility. However, it can be argued that a base level of credibility is required for an exchange partner to be open to encountering the experiences that present affective trust.

Additionally, Chaffey and Chadwick (2012) and Bart et al. (2005) consider the order of consumer response to be trust (credibility), engagement and flow, purchase intent, loyalty and finally, advocacy. This further enhances the theory that cognitive trust is an important variable for affective trust within certain relationships. Additionally, this presents the two trust-based constructs leading to advocacy.

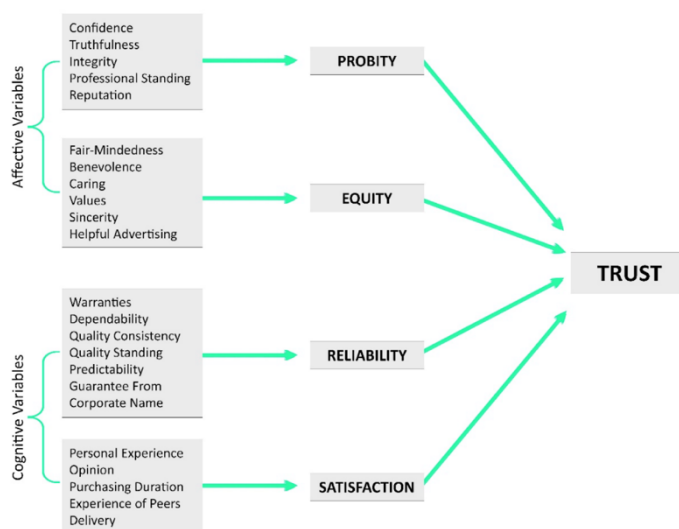


Figure 1: Mitchell et al.'s (1998) Model of Postulated Correlates of Trust

As can be seen in Figure 1, Mitchell et al. (1998) expand upon these theories and segregate trust into four foundations: probity, equity, reliability and satisfaction. Both probity and equity are antecedents of affective trust, whilst reliability and satisfaction are antecedents of cognitive trust.

Probity refers to the level of integrity, openness and honesty that an exchange partner presents (Egan 2008). Trustworthy parties hold high levels of integrity and a positive reputation (Butler and Cantrell 1984; Hunt et al. 1984). Whilst equity represents the level of altruism present within a partner's motivations (Rousseau et al. 1998). Reliability measures the level of expertise an exchange partner possesses (Egan 2008). This can be determined largely by the level of dependability an exchange partner presents (Mitchell et al. 1998). Finally, satisfaction is primarily based upon superficial, perceived opinions, rather than emotional ties or thorough research (Mitchell et al. 1998). This variable is not only present as an antecedent to trust, but also as a consequence to trust (Egan 2008).

Zoella

Zoella has an accumulated digital influence of over 43 million followers (Zoella 2017a; Zoella 2017b; Zoella 2017c; Zoella 2017d; Zoella 2017e; Zoella 2017f; Zoella 2017g; MoreZoella 2017b). As a service provider to these followers, strong relationships such as trust and commitment are integral for audience retention, and advocacy (Christopher et al. 2002; Nguyen et al. 2016;). As trust is an important element for creating commitment (Morgan and Hunt 1994), it may be argued that trust and the influencer's perceived trustworthiness is the most effective element of creating advocates for their brand.

Zoella, amongst many other social media influencers, displays a high level of integrity and honesty within her communications, which have in turn gained her a positive reputation. Zoella outwardly exclaims about her 'boyish' appearance and discomfort and regularly displays and discusses her make-up free appearance, and self-proclaimed 'problem areas' (see Figure 2). As social media is regularly used as a filtered view of normal life, influencers enhance their affective trust by being open about their insecurities and imperfections. Referring specifically to these also helps to build trust as it helps to counteract the high levels of editing and 'picture-perfect' lighting that is used to enhance these videos. Another open and honest feature Zoella utilises, is the sharing of her 'Day in the Life Videos', which encompass less adaption than normal communications.



Figure 2: 'My Makeup Routine for Problem Skin Days' (Zoella, 2017i).

Zoella's communications also encompass the distribution of important shared values. In addition to the communications previously mentioned, she promotes a healthy lifestyle in terms of self-care, both physically and mentally. In addition, she commonly increases cognitive trust levels from her followers through the regular sharing of her expertise in the beauty industry through tutorial videos.

Benevolent actions have been seen to be one of the most effective means of increasing affective trust between two exchange partners (Wu et al. 2010), and Zoella utilises this regularly by co-engaging with her audience to provide personal Q&A sessions, to which her audience submits questions. However, it could be stated that her most benevolent acts are those that are helping to support and reward her followers. Zoella speaks out about mental health issues regularly and is an ambassador for one of the most influential mental health charities, Mind (Dredge 2014).



Figure 3: Benevolence (Zoella, 2017p)

In addition, she promotes videos targeted solely to help her fanbase navigate difficult periods within their lives and actively discusses taboo topics, such as periods, to help increase her audience's confidence within themselves. Finally, in July, Zoella provided her followers with a free pop-up event to celebrate the release of her 'Jelly and Gelato' Collection (Figure 3, above). Thereby, providing them with the opportunity to collect free ice-cream amongst a meet-and-greet with both her and other influencers.

On the other hand, Zoella's integrity and reputation have been repeatedly questioned by parents, fans and national media. Arguably, two of the most destructive benevolent actions undertaken by Zoella were the use of a ghost-writer for her fastest-selling debut novel series (Flood and Ellis-Petersen 2014) and the over-priced strategy for her 2017 advent calendar (Oppenheim 2017). However, amongst the highly negative response to both these incidents, there has been a highly defensive response from her followers (Figure 5, below). This provides evidence to conclude that whilst benevolent actions reduce trust, the higher the level of affective trust previously present, the more likely an individual is to advocate for the organisation and the lesser the effect benevolent actions may have upon that bond.



Figure 4: Demonstration of advocacy (Jord, 2017).

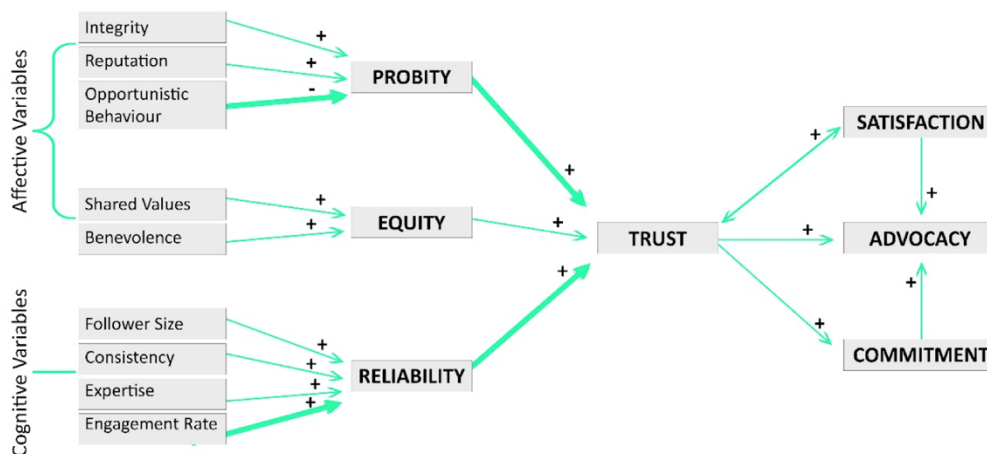


Figure 5: Adapted Framework

Key: thickness of arrow denotes proposed strength of relationship

It has been proposed within this paper, that integrity, reputation, shared values, benevolence, consistency and expertise all have a key impact upon trust constructs within the influencer sector. Therefore, these variables have remained within the proposed framework above (Figure 5). However, it may also be argued that follower size is a successful indicator of expertise within the influencer market, as it demonstrates confidence towards an influencer and their communications. Furthermore, in response to Egan's (2008) determination that expertise is a key indicator of reliability, it may be concluded that followers' engagement with communications may further indicate the confidence invested within an influencer, as reflected within the adapted framework above. It is proposed that opportunistic behaviour has the most impact on reducing the levels of trust present within an exchange relationship (Figure 5). Satisfaction is proposed to represent both an antecedent and a consequence of trust, in line with Egan's (2008) interpretation of Mitchell et al. (1998). Trust drives advocacy directly and also indirectly through commitment.

LIMITATIONS

The primary limitation of the adapted framework is that it does not take into account the consequences of advocacy. In addition, it does not reflect the other antecedents of satisfaction, commitment and advocacy, and is not currently representative of the stronger level of trust that affective variables create.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Zoella and other influencers to effectively increase their affective trust within their audience, it is recommended to reduce the presence of opportunistic behaviour, and to identify and address any perceived opportunistic behaviour to reduce its affect upon probity. Furthermore, it is highly recommended to recognise demonstrations of advocacy in the presence of opportunistic behaviour, as it has been demonstrated within this paper the importance of advocates. Additionally, advocacy must be the key goal for all influencers to aspire towards within their communications due to the strength presented within that bond.

Finally, a new definition of influencer marketing is recommended, in order to fully reflect the viewpoints of both influencers and organisations. Adapted from Sudha and Sheena (2017), the following definition of influencers is proposed: "A form of relationship-building that utilizes trust and authenticity, which may be very helpful for both organisations and social media influencers to gain further value from their accrued audiences".

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is proposed that advocacy is a key intention of building trust-based relationships between influencers and their audience, and that whilst opportunistic behaviour undermines affective trust, advocacy may help influencers to reduce this impact. Whilst it is not possible at this point to determine causality and strength of causality, this paper has proposed that there is a relationship between these variables,

providing academics, organisations and influencers with additional insights to consider within their future relationship marketing strategies.

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