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The Effect of Social Media on Perceived Information Credibility and Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

Studies have found that information from celebrities, social media influencers, and people whom they know in real life affects millennial consumers' purchasing decisions. This study investigates how celebrities, influencers, and people whom consumers know personally impacts the ways in which millennials utilize social media information to gain information about consumer products. The study also addresses factors that contribute to trusting that information. Using data from millennial college students, the authors found that Instagram was most utilized for apparel information, while YouTube was most relevant for cosmetic and hair products. However, information from people whom they knew personally was still deemed more trustworthy than that from other sources. Although research suggests that celebrities and social media influencers' have a positive impact on raising product awareness, marketers should be cognizant that consumers still trust endorsements from people whom they know personally, above all else, regarding their purchasing decisions. Relying on celebrities and social media influencers to promote products does not substitute for or replace targeted marketing efforts to build consumers' trust. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Social media; social media influencers; trust; information; branding; marketing; brand engagement; product information; millennials

Introduction

The U.S. market for clothing/shoes, hair, and cosmetic products is tremendous. In 2020, consumers are expected to spend an estimated \$372 billion on apparel. By 2021, hair products are expected to generate over \$15 million in annual revenues, while cosmetics are forecasted to generate approximately \$73 million (www.statista.com). However, consumer trust in a brand is no longer simply determined by the brand's own marketing efforts, as it was in the past. Instead, social media content also affects the brand's perceived trustworthiness. This impacts consumers' purchase intentions (Barnes 2015; Erkan and Evans 2015; Teng et al. 2014).

Celebrity endorsers help raise brand awareness (Lim et al. 2017). They can be directly associated with a brand due to a contractual relationship (e.g., basketball star LeBron James endorses Nike). Yet, social media influencers drive brand engagement (e.g., they post about products on their social media) and brand loyalty (Lim et al. 2017) as well. Social media influencers post, tweet, or snap information about their daily lives. This includes discussing products for which they may not always be directly compensated by the brand itself. Influencers are people (e.g., Chrissy Tiegen) with a large social media following on sites, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. They have hundreds of thousands of loyal followers and, with one tweet or post, can give a brand life or cause it a public relations' nightmare.

For example, in 2015, James Wright Chanel posted a video on YouTube, singing about the quality of Patti Labelle's pies. Patti Labelle is a legendary R&B singer who sells a line of baked goods. His video received over 450,000 views and increased sales to the extent that the pies were selling at a rate of one pie per second in Walmart over a 72-hour period (Settembre 2015). James Wright Chanel was not paid for his video or for the sales' increase. His actions at that time were those of a social media influencer.

Social media influencers can significantly affect consumers' trust and intent to buy clothing, hair, and cosmetic products (Radtke 2017). This is particularly relevant to millennial consumers, the generation born between 1980 and 2000 (Fry 2018; Rupp et al. 2018). They are projected to be the largest living adult generation in the United States, surpassing Baby Boomers (Fry 2018). Given millennials' size and usage of social media to access product information (Thourumgroje 2014), a major challenge for businesses is determining the most effective ways to get their attention and trust.

Gaining millennial attention and trust is extremely important to marketers. Millennial consumers are a driving force, especially in the areas of apparel (McGee 2017), cosmetic, and hair products (McCarthy 2016). They have also changed the ways in which firms advertise to entice consumers. Millennials are more likely to turn to their phone than their television to get advertising content. Hence, firms have increased their digital ad spending. Furthermore, they are likely to utilize social media sites to get product information from their followers, social media influencers, people whom they know personally, and celebrities (Barnes 2015; Rupp et al. 2018). These entities can be deemed more trustworthy than the firms themselves when it comes to accurate product information (Malik and Guptha 2014; Rupp et al. 2018). For example, Kim Kardashian has millions of followers on Instagram and Twitter. A post from her about a facial product can cause it to sell out within 24 hours (Calfas 2017).

A company's own website and/or social media content is not sufficient to drive consumer demand. Instead, they have to be aware of all electronic

content about their services and products, including that which is not posted by the firm themselves. Companies also have to be aware of the sites on which people post comments about their products, as millennials are more likely to be active some sites (e.g., Instagram) than others (e.g., Pinterest; Greenwood et al. 2016).

Individuals can become well-recognized social media influencers, based on their product knowledge, and amass millions of followers. Consumers' develop trust in the product, based on their trust in that influencer. This can increase both direct product sales and product referrals. An example is Michelle Phan, a YouTube celebrity. Her claim to fame is her makeup tutorial videos (Yagoda 2015). She amassed a large amount of followers and, eventually, founded her own makeup line (Moss 2014).

However, consumers still value the opinions of people whom they know in real life (IRL) regarding products or services in which they are interested (Erkan and Evans 2015; Goodrich and de Mooij 2014). Trust in personal relationships translates into trusting those individuals' opinions about product/services and therefore can influence buying decisions. While it has been established that endorsements can drive millennials' attention to a product, it is not clear whose endorsements have a greater impact on millennial buying decisions: Celebrities and social media influencers? People whom millennials follow (but are not celebrities or influencers)? Or people whom millennials know IRL?

Furthermore, it is evident that millennial consumers obtain product information from social media sites. However, it is less clear which sites are more or less trusted and why. Also, is their trust in a social media site related to the type of product? If so, why?

These questions are significant to address for several reasons. First, researchers need to be aware of whose opinions millennials trust. This knowledge contributes to understanding their buying behaviors. Second, it is useful to determine who consumers trust the most and the least, as that impacts how businesses should invest their marketing resources. Finally, it is important to assess which social media sites are most trusted for different kinds of product information. While research has shown that social media sites are useful marketing tools, it is less clear how that applies across various types of products. The results can help practitioners with tailoring their marketing communication efforts to more effectively reach the millennial audience.

Literature review

Social media and product credibility

It is essential for apparel, hair, and cosmetic businesses to determine who is buying their product, why they are buying it, how to ensure that

consumers continue to buy it, and how to encourage product referrals. Referrals are the act of recommending products to people whom consumers know IRL and to their social media contacts (some of whom they may not know IRL). These data are key to assessing the effectiveness of firms' marketing efforts, particularly factors that drive brand engagement and referral behaviors.

Electronic word of mouth (EWOM) includes tweets, posts, and snaps (the verbiage for posting content on Snapchat) on social media sites. It is a key driver of consumers' interest in products and their purchase intentions (Barnes 2015; Tapinfluence 2017). Unlike physical word of mouth, which disappears after the words are spoken, EWOM lasts forever, at least until a post is taken down or otherwise deleted. Even then, it may still reside in Internet caches (Cooley and Parks-Yancy 2016).

The source of brand engagement can be just as or more important than a brand itself, in terms of impacting buying and referral behaviors. Sellers seek to identify who consumers deem to be trustworthy informants regarding their brand. Toward that end, sometimes sellers will repost, retweet, or regram (copying someone's Instagram post onto one's own Instagram page) (Landes-Brenham 2018) a comment/picture about their product that came from a consumer. These can include celebrities, social media influencers, and people who consumers know personally (IRL). The purpose is for the seller to utilize someone else's promotion of their product/service as evidence of its legitimacy and trustworthiness.

Therefore, it behooves firms to monitor all social media content about its products. This includes content posted by the firms themselves and content posted by celebrities, influencers, consumers, and followers. One post from an Internet celebrity or just an ordinary consumer can sell out a product or cause a brand to lose sales. An example is blogger Gabi Gregg, who posted a picture of herself in a plus-size bikini. The post received thousands of views and positive feedback about the bikini itself, as well as body imagery. This led to her having a successful swimsuit line with Swimsuits For All.

Some firms have officially incorporated social media follower feedback into their product decisions. NYX utilizes reactions from unpaid social media followers to determine consumer interest in its cosmetic products. Cosmetics that do not generate overwhelmingly favorable posts, tweets, and snaps are culled from its product lines (Weinswig 2017).

Nevertheless, a challenge that firms face is determining the factors that affect consumers' trust in social media content about its products. This is important because consumers' trust in what people say about a product on social media can significantly affect their purchase intentions (Goodrich and de Mooij 2014).

Social capital and consumer trust

This study explores how social media content from celebrities, influencers, followers, and people whom consumers know personally (IRL) affects their buying decisions regarding apparel, cosmetic, and hair products. The study also explores which sites are deemed to be more or less credible for making these purchasing decisions. The authors draw from the social capital research to provide theoretical underpinning to this investigation.

Social capital is the relationships among people in a social group (e.g., family, work group, or a group based on other forms of affiliation), in which resources are shared among members (Portes 1998). Social capital has often been studied in the context of employment, namely how social contacts help individuals obtain job information, influence employment decisions and, in some cases, have the direct authority to make hiring determinations (Granovetter 1995). One obtains social capital based upon the strength of their relationship with individuals who possess employment-related knowledge. In colloquial terms, social capital is “who you know.” It helps applicants get hired over people who do not have those kinds of employment-related social ties (Parks-Yancy 2010).

Trust in the person who provides the job information or referral is an important aspect of social capital (Burt 1997), as is the usefulness of the information. Job seekers trust the validity of the information based on their trust in the individual who provides it. In short, job seekers obtain information about employment opportunities from sources with whom they have a trusting relationship. Similarly, an employer’s trust in a referred applicant is conferred by their trust in the referrer.

Although social capital has largely been studied in the context of people who are connected IRL (Burt 1997; McDonald & Elder 2006), we argue that, conceptually, social capital applies to social media behaviors, too. Consumers’ trust in the quality of a product is heavily influenced by what they see and read about it online (Lee and Youn 2009; Liu et al. 2012; Lim et al. 2017; Thourmrunroje 2014). This includes content posted by the seller themselves and content about the brand posted by social media influencers, followers, people whom consumers follow, and people they know IRL. Just like job seekers trust the validity of employment information based upon their relationship with the person who shared the information, consumers trust the validity of product information posted on social media by individuals whom they know IRL, people whom they follow on social media, and those who follow them. Consumers develop trust in the latter two groups based upon their observations of and interactions with them online.

For example, Lim et al. (2017) examined the impact of posts from social media influencers on consumers’ purchase intentions. The study found that

posts from social media influencers who were not deemed to be directly knowledgeable about a product had no influence on purchase intentions. However, influencers whose public image was congruent with the brands they endorsed significantly influenced consumers intent to buy those products.

An example of an influencer whom consumers trust based on brand-image congruence is Wayne Goss. He specializes in makeup and has amassed a YouTube following of over three million followers. His tutorials about how to apply makeup similar to Kim Kardashian's makeup have 11 million views and helped launch his line of makeup brushes (Forbes 2018). Given the strength of his social media presence, consumers are likely to trust the validity of his posts about cosmetic products. This probably positively affects their intention to buy the products.

The effectiveness of a product endorsement obviously depends on the source (Hovland and Weiss 1951; Taghipoorreynah and de Run 2016). Prior to the existence of social media, companies had more control over the dissemination of content and feedback about their brands. Consumers watched TV commercials, listened to radio ads, and went to the companies' websites to obtain product information. Word of mouth was in person or by telephone. Now, however, consumers are just as likely to check posts, tweets, and snaps on trusted individuals' social media pages regarding a product's credibility as they are to check the seller's website. In this regard, celebrities, influencers, followers, and people whom consumers know IRL are sources of social capital regarding product information. They are viewed as knowledgeable and trustworthy regarding their opinions about specific merchandise. This encourages consumers' belief in a product's advertising (Lim et al. 2017; Talaverna 2015).

Millennial social media behaviors and purchasing intentions

Almost 70% of all U.S. adults use at least one social media site. Social media is used to get news information, converse with family and IRL friends, converse with influencers and followers, and learn about products and services, etc. (Greenwood et al. 2016). However, more than 80% of millennials use social media (Smith and Anderson 2018). Unlike among Baby Boomers or Generation X, YouTube is more popular with millennials than Facebook is. It is a major source for learning how to do almost anything. Other social media platforms that millennials frequent include, in order of usage, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Smith and Anderson 2018).

Millennials are not using social media simply to post, tweet, and snap about their personal lives or just to maintain contact with people they know IRL, celebrities, influencers, and followers. They also use it to learn

about products. Studies have found that social media drives almost an equal amount of online and in-store sales (Barnes 2015). This is particularly relevant for independent stores, relative to franchises (Lee et al. 2015).

However, the trust in a social media platform, as well as influencer, celebrity, or follower endorsements about specific products, may depend on the product itself (Arnold 2017; Lim et al. 2017). For example, Barnes (2015) examined the impact of EWOM on the likelihood that millennials would purchase six products, including hair, makeup, and clothing. The study found that posts from people whom respondents' knew IRL and/or followed on social media had a positive impact on their likelihood of purchase. Hair product, makeup, and apparel purchasing decisions were most influenced by social media activity on the following sites: Twitter (50%), Pinterest (47%), and Facebook (45%). This suggests that all social media platforms are not equally credible sources of product information to garner consumer attention and increase sales.

Cosmetics and hair products

Social media has now surpassed all other sources of information from which millennials get information about cosmetics. Over 90% of millennial women utilize YouTube, blogs, and mobile apps (e.g., Instagram) to get information about makeup products (Guyduy 2016). As of 2017, MAC Cosmetics was a leading brand on Instagram, with over 14 million followers (statista.com).

Purchases of makeup, skin care, and hair products are affected by consumer trust in the sellers' advertising. But, they are also heavily influenced by the social media activity of influencers, celebrities, followers, and even people whom consumers know IRL (statista.com). Consumers not only want to read what these entities have to say, they also want to see trusted sources use the products, too. This adds to the element of credibility and likely increases buying intention, hence the popularity of video sites such as YouTube and mobile apps with picture/video capabilities (e.g. Instagram, Snapchat). These sites and apps enable consumers to see how the cosmetic or hair product changes individuals' appearance.

An example is Yuya, a YouTuber with more than 20 million subscribers. She is known for her makeup and hairstyle tutorials. Given her followers' trust in her makeup application/hairstyle advice, Yuya could be perceived as more credible than, for example, some celebrities who are paid directly by a cosmetic/hair care firm to sell its products. Yuya is probably also viewed as more credible than ads promoted by the brands themselves. Studies have found that, while celebrities contribute to brand awareness, influencers drive product engagement and brand loyalty (Tapinfluence

2017). Obviously, however, both entities can positively affect millennials' buying decisions, as do opinions from people whom they know IRL.

Apparel

The credibility of a source affects the perceived accuracy of online communications (Barnes 2015; Metzger et al. 2003; Teng et al. 2014). It has tremendous influence on millennials' apparel buying behaviors. Apparel is clothing, shoes, hats, etc. According to McGee (2017), millennials expect to not only obtain product information from the retailers themselves but also from celebrities, social media influencers, people they follow, and their own followers, as well. These are credible sources of apparel information and, therefore, affect purchase intentions (Lim et al 2017; Markethub 2016).

Images and videos of celebrity endorsers wearing a brand or otherwise using the product can obviously drive sales (Abbas et al. 2018; McCormick 2016). For example, as a paid endorser, LeBron James posts images of him wearing Nike sneakers. As he is a professional athlete, he is deemed to be credible regarding athletic apparel. Consumers take notice of his posts and weigh in on the shoes' attractiveness on social media. However, LeBron's posts are not the only drivers of buying intent. Comments about the sneakers from people whom consumers follow, as well as people whom they know IRL, are contributors, too (Lim et al. 2017; McCormick 2016).

Millennial consumers place their trust in social media influencers, people whom they follow, and their own followers to learn fashion trends, to stay updated on a brand, and to get information about a brand. No longer do people only believe the content disseminated by the brands themselves. Instead, social media has enabled consumers to obtain information about products and services not only from the people they know IRL but also from people they perceive to be well informed about the brands. Their perceived expertise stems from their social media activity (Dasgupta and Kothari 2018).

For example, Chiara Ferragni is a well-known fashion social media influencer. She started a blog called *The Blonde Salad* in 2009. Over time, she developed a reputation for being very knowledgeable about fashion trends and styles. Based on her social media activity, various brands gained new customers. Her postings about numerous clothing items helped drive sales, long before she was directly compensated for her social media content (O'Connor 2018).

Social media impacts millennial buying behaviors (Greenwood et al. 2016). Therefore, it is important for researchers and practitioners to examine whose social media content they trust regarding their purchasing decisions and which social media sites are sources of millennials' trust regarding product information. This article addresses those issues in the context of cosmetic, hair, and apparel products. The results can help firms

devise marketing communications strategies that more effectively reach the millennial audience.

Data and methods

Study participants

The data were collected from 109 junior and senior college students at a midsized university in the southern region of the United States. The participants were 64% female and 36% male. Seventy-three (73%) ranged in age from 21 to 25, while 27% were between 26 and 31. Thus, this sample befits the millennial generation. The data were obtained by electronically asking students to participate in the research. Students were not given any incentive to answer the survey beyond being told that the study's purpose was to examine social media behaviors and the effect on buying decisions. Their survey participation was anonymous.

Methods

The sample was obtained by using a survey developed by the authors and administered via SurveyMonkey. The survey had 10 total questions (Table 1) and asked the participants about their views on different methods to obtain information about hair, cosmetic, and apparel products. These products were chosen because studies have found that social media and people whom consumers know IRL strongly influence purchasing behaviors of these items (Barnes 2015). Participants compared the trustworthiness and usefulness of social media channels and people they know IRL for information about cosmetic, hair, and apparel products.

The survey explained that the question response option "people you know personally" meant people whom they knew IRL. This was done to ensure that the participants were aware of the differentiation between knowing someone via social media only (no IRL interactions) versus knowing someone IRL. These data were analyzed using analysis of variance (Table 2) to determine whether there were any statistically significant differences between respondents' answers to the survey questions. Survey questions 1 through 4, 7, and 9 were coded 1 through 6. "1" meant the most common answer selection and "6" meant the least common answer selection. Survey questions 5 and 6 were reverse-coded. "1" was the most prevalent answer choice and "6" represented the least prevalent answer choice.

Survey questions 8 and 10 asked respondents to choose only one selection and to explain the reasoning for their answers. This question was open-ended and provided qualitative insight as to why the respondents made their choice.

Table 1. Survey questions.

-
1. What sources of information do you use when deciding to buy clothes/shoes? Select all that apply.
 - a. Snapchat
 - b. Instagram
 - c. Facebook
 - d. Twitter
 - e. YouTube
 - f. People you know personally
 - g. Other (please specify)
 2. What source of information do you use when deciding to buy cosmetics/hair products? Select all that apply.
 - a. Snapchat
 - b. Instagram
 - c. Facebook
 - d. Twitter
 - e. YouTube
 - f. People you know personally
 - g. Other (please specify)
 3. What information do you need to see/read/hear about before buying clothes/shoes? Select all that apply.
 - a. Endorsement from a famous person?
 - b. Endorsement from your social media?
 - c. Endorsement from a famous person that you follow on social media?
 - d. Endorsement from people whom you know personally?
 - e. Other (please specify)
 4. What information do you need to see/read/hear about before buying cosmetics/hair products? Select all that apply.
 - a. Endorsement from a famous person?
 - b. Endorsement from your social media?
 - c. Endorsement from a famous person that you follow on social media?
 - d. Endorsement from people whom you know personally?
 - e. None of the above
 - f. Other (please specify)
 5. Rank the sources of information about clothing/shoes from 1–6 that you trust the most to the least. 1 = *trust the most*, 6 = *trust the least*
 - a. Snapchat
 - b. Instagram
 - c. Facebook
 - d. Twitter
 - e. YouTube
 - f. People you know personally
 6. Rank the sources of information about cosmetics/hair products from 1–6 that you trust the most to the least. 1 = *trust the most*, 6 = *trust the least*
 - a. Snapchat
 - b. Instagram
 - c. Facebook
 - d. Twitter
 - e. YouTube
 - f. People you know personally
-

(continued)

7. Information from these sources helps me make wise choices when buying clothing/shoes (select all that apply).

- a. Snapchat
- b. Instagram
- c. Facebook
- d. Twitter
- e. YouTube
- f. People you know personally

8. This is the most useful source of information about clothing/shoes products (PICK ONE).

- a. Snapchat
- b. Instagram
- c. Facebook
- d. Twitter
- e. YouTube
- f. People you know personally

Please explain why you chose the source above.

9. Information from these sources helps me make wise choices when buying cosmetics/hair products (select all that apply).

- a. Snapchat
- b. Instagram
- c. Facebook
- d. Twitter
- e. YouTube

10. This is the most useful source of information about cosmetics/hair products (PICK ONE).

- f. Snapchat
- g. Instagram
- h. Facebook
- i. Twitter
- j. YouTube
- k. People you know personally

Please explain why you chose the source above:

Results

Sources of information for clothes/shoes

When the participants were asked what source of information they utilized most to make purchasing decisions about clothes/shoes, a majority selected people they know personally (57% of respondents; $p > .05$). This belies the abundance of information in the literature that consumers are starting to use more Internet and online sources to find information about products and services due to the expertise that social media influencers possess (Radtke 2017). Of the social media sites presented in the survey, Instagram was a significant source of information for clothes/shoes (47%; $p > .05$). Thus, people whom they know IRL and, second, Instagram were overwhelmingly the preferences of the participants when looking for these products. Information from YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter was not significantly related to the participants' decision to buy clothes/shoes.

Table 2. Analysis of variance.

Source	Percentage: Q#1	Percentage: Q#2	Rank: Q#5 (1 = trust the most to 6 = trust the least)	Rank: Q#6 (1 = trust the most to 6 = trust the least)	Percentage: Q#7	Ranking of the most trusted for clothes/ shoes: Q#8	Percentage: Q#9	Ranking of the most trusted for cosmetics/ hair: Q#10
Snapchat	11%	13%	4.2	4.2	23%	50%	11%	49%
Instagram	47%	39%	3.4	3.4	40%	12%	28%	31%
Facebook	21%	21%	3.2	3.7	28%	2%	18%	2%
Twitter	7%	6%	3.9	4.3	8%	4%	6%	4%
YouTube	17%	49%	3.4	2.9	39%	28%	42%	11%
People you know personally	57%	63%	2.6	2.7	76%	3%	71%	2%
<i>p</i> value	0.000	0.000	*no <i>p</i> value for ranking	*no <i>p</i> value for ranking	0.000	*no <i>p</i> value for ranking	0.000	*no <i>p</i> value for ranking
	Percentage: Q#3	Percentage: Q#4						
Endorsements: Famous person	19%	16%						
Endorsements: Social media	29%	24%						
Endorsements: Famous person you follow on social media	27%	21%						
Endorsements: People you know personally	63%	63%						
<i>p</i> value	0.000	0.000						

Sources of information for hair/makeup

When looking for more personal products, such as those for the face and hair, participants indicated that they used information from both people they knew personally and social media platforms. Even still, they were more swayed by “people they know personally” (63%; $p > .05$) in terms of trustworthy sources of information that affect their buying behaviors. This was followed by YouTube (49%) and then Instagram (39%). Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter were not at all significant contributors to respondents’ information about hair/makeup products.

Do endorsements from celebrities or followers matter?

Respondents preferred endorsements from people they know personally (63%; $p > .05$) over famous people, their followers, and people they follow on social media. Evidently, the participants deemed an endorsement from someone they know IRL as more credible than celebrities or social media influencers. This is interesting, given the outsized influence that celebrities and social media influencers are known to have over their followers when it comes to trying certain new products (Tapinfluence 2017).

The same holds true for the hair/makeup endorsements. Respondents preferred endorsements from people they know personally (63%; $p > .05$) over famous people, their followers, and people they follow on social media. Social media influencers obviously raise awareness of apparel and hair/makeup items. But, in this study, trusting product referrals stemmed from people whom the participants knew IRL, as opposed to influencers, celebrities, or their own followers (all of whom they may not know IRL).

Sources of trust for clothing/shoe products

The participants were asked to rank the sources of information when searching for clothes/shoe information. They ranked the answer options from 1 = *trust the most* to 6 = *trust the least*. The participants ranked “people they know personally” (2.63; $p > .05$), as their most trusted source of information for clothing/shoes. They ranked Snapchat as the source that they trusted the least. Instagram was the second most trusted source, although the finding was not significant.

Sources of trust for cosmetics/hair products

The participants were also asked to rank sources of information when searching for cosmetic/hair product information. Contrary to the clothing/shoes responses, the participants ranked YouTube as the source they trusted the most (2.92; $p > .05$) and “people they know personally” (2.69, $p > .05$) as the second option. Instagram (3.38) and Facebook (3.67) were ranked third and fourth, respectively. However, participants evidently did not use Snapchat (4.15) or Twitter (4.26) much for information about cosmetic/hair products.

Sources of information for wise choices: Clothing/shoes

This question was included to ensure that the participants understood the first survey question as intended and to ensure reliability of the answers that were already collected. The respondents were asked which sources help them make wise buying decisions. “People they knew personally” (76%; $p > .05$) was still the overall choice when it came to the information source selected for making wise choices for clothes/shoes. This is similar to the results for the first survey question.

Sources of information for wise choices: Cosmetics/hair

This question was included to ensure that the participants understood the second survey question as intended and to ensure reliability of the answers

that were already collected. The same conclusion was established for this question as it was for question 2. Respondents selected “people you know personally” (71%; $p > .05$) as the preferred source of information to help them make wise buying decisions.

Most useful source of information: Clothing/shoes

Fifty percent of all respondents chose “people you know personally” as the single most useful source of information about clothing/shoes products. Instagram (28%) was the second most useful source. Below are some of their comments explaining their reasoning for selecting “people you know personally.”

“I trust that those people whom I know personally are isolated from any biased opinions for their “own products.”

“I like to get all the details before I buy and I trust people I know more than online sources.”

“Receiving information from people I personally know will give me valuable information from someone who tried the product rather than someone just selling it.”

Some respondents stated that social media and/or celebrities were not always credible when it comes to product information.

“I trust the people I know before I trust Instagram. The problem with Instagram is that a lot of the photos are either photoshopped or displays clothing and shoes that the site does not sell. If my friends and family trust the site, then I will too.”

“I do not trust famous people because they get paid to talk about the products. I prefer to ask my friends.”

Of the respondents who chose Instagram, their comments centered around perceptions that Instagram is fashion-forward. If they wanted to know the latest apparel trends, Instagram was a good source for that information. Instagram evidently also includes links to apparel sites, making it easier for consumers to purchase the desired items.

“In Instagram, I have always seen the new trend of fashion style.”

“I choose Instagram because there is always updated style ideas and trends spreading.”

“I chose Instagram because it is most convenient when searching and looking for clothes. It always provides link in their bio to push for instant online shopping.”

Most useful source of information: Cosmetics/hair

Forty-nine (49%) of all respondents chose “people you know personally” as the single most useful source of information about cosmetics/hair products. YouTube (31%) was the second most useful source. Below are some of their comments explaining their reasoning for selecting “people you know

personally.” Their remarks centered around trusting people they knew IRL over other sources of information.

“Close friends have similar skin complexion as me. So I tend to trust their judgment at least enough to just try out a product.”

“Cosmetics and hair products are very personal choice. So I always take advice from people whom I am associated with to guide me about them.”

“I know beauticians and they give me information on what good and healthy for my hair.”

“What better testimonial other than from someone you know.”

Of the respondents who selected YouTube, they mentioned that seeing the application of makeup/hair products demonstrated the change in the users’ appearance. Respondents also indicated that YouTube has “real people” using the products, not just celebrities and/or paid endorsers.

“YouTube has the most realistic reactions to products. Everyone on there is not paid for advertisements so you get real opinions. Also, you can watch the results.”

“Tutorial videos help and show you what your results will be like.”

“On YouTube there are people who vlog about what products are good or bad.”

“You can get a view of the product before you even purchase it.”

Discussion

This study examined how information from celebrities, influencers, followers, people they follow, and people whom they know IRL affects millennials’ purchasing decisions of hair, cosmetic, and apparel products. The study addressed these questions: (a) Whose product information/endorsements do millennials trust the most? (b) Which social media sites are more or less trustworthy? (c) Does trust in information about or endorsement of a product depend upon the product itself? Why?

Surprisingly, celebrities/influencers, people whom they follow and their own followers did not have any significant impact on the respondents’ decisions to buy clothing/shoes or cosmetics/hair products. This was a surprise because of the amount of research highlighting the impact of celebrities and influencers on millennial buying behaviors (e.g., McCormick 2016; Wong 2014), as well as popular press articles that contain similar suggestions. But, in this study, trusting product endorsements was reserved for people whom the respondents knew IRL. This relates to the social capital aspect of consumer behavior. People whom consumers know personally are more trusted referrals than those who are not, even if the referrers are celebrities or influencers. The trust is based on the content of their

relationship with the product referrers, which impacts the perceived validity of the referrer's suggestions.

Therefore, while social media content from celebrities and influencers obviously increases awareness of products, researchers should be nuanced in stating its impact on buying behaviors. Evidenced from this study, being famous and having many followers is not enough to spur millennial consumer spending. Instead, it is important to millennials to have a trust relationship with individuals who recommend the products. In this case, that trust relationship is with people millennials know IRL, over all other sources. While researchers have found that content from celebrities/social media influencers drives consumer interest in hair, makeup, or clothing products, millennials do not necessarily trust the legitimacy of those endorsements. Their trust is reserved for people whom they know personally, which spurs buying intentions. This is the essence of social capital.

Researchers should be circumspect in stating the influence of celebrity/influencer endorsements. They should distinguish between sources that raise product awareness and sources that instigate buying intentions. The results of this study indicate that when it comes to buying hair, cosmetic, and clothing products, millennials still trust endorsements from the people they know IRL over celebrities/influencers, similar to earlier generations. While the popular press also suggests that content from celebrities/influencers are significant drivers of millennial buying behaviors, this study does not support such intimations.

When buying clothing/shoe or cosmetic/hair products, participants overwhelmingly choose people whom they know personally over YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter. This supports prior research that individuals trust information from people whom they know IRL (Erkan and Evans 2015). In addition, it suggests knowledge that everything that one reads or watches on social media may not be true (Prier, 2017). The prevalence of Photoshop and image-altering online is probably well known to millennials, particularly given that many phone applications enable people to alter their appearance. So consumers are more likely trust what they see and hear IRL than on their phone or computer.

However, the second most trusted sources of information for clothing/shoes differed from makeup/hair. Instagram was the second most common response for clothing/shoes, while YouTube was the second most common response for hair/makeup. These patterns held true when the respondents were asked to rank the trustworthiness of sources of information and when asked to name a singular source of product information whom they trust.

As indicated in the open-ended comments, Instagram was a trusted way to learn about upcoming fashion trends, observe different apparel styles, get a variety of reviews on clothing items, and to quickly go to the brand's

websites to buy the products. However, YouTube was more credible than Instagram for cosmetic/hair product information. The respondents vouched for the validity of the makeup tutorial videos, the credibility of feedback from “real people” as opposed to paid endorsers, and the sheer amount of video content about cosmetic and hair products. One of this study’s research questions asked whether the credibility of a social media source depended upon the product in question. The results suggest that, indeed, it does.

Finally, while Facebook was the third most common informational choice for both clothing/shoes and cosmetics/hair products, less than 20% of respondents selected Snapchat or Twitter. Content posted on Snapchat and Twitter from people they know IRL, celebrities, their followers, and people whom they follow about those products had little impact on the respondents’ buying decisions. This is interesting, given that most Snapchat users are younger than 30. Snapchat now surpasses Facebook in video views (Keith 2016), and it has more users than Twitter (Frierket 2016). Users may deem those sites as places to discuss themselves, their friends, their followers, people whom they follow, as well as pop culture topics (Keith 2016). But, evidenced by this study, endorsements on Snapchat (Keith 2016) and Twitter do not have as much of an impact on millennials’ buying decisions for clothing/shoes and cosmetic products.

Implications for practice

Marketers should not lose sight of the importance of the human element in how people develop trust in a product or brand. Social media content from celebrities/influencers does not replace or substitute for personal relationships when it comes to consumers’ buying behaviors for makeup, hair, or apparel products. Obviously, content on social media influences purchase intentions. But, who is posting the content matters significantly (Tathagota and Amar 2018). Thus, businesses that utilize celebrities/influencers with a wide following to promote their products should be aware that that does not necessarily engender wide trust, such that consumers will automatically buy what the celebrity/influencer is promoting. Marketers should distinguish between strategies to drive brand promotion and strategies that drive brand purchases.

Instead, marketers should be strategic and authentic in their efforts to attract millennial consumers. First, they need to ensure that people who are not just celebrities or influencers believe that the clothing, makeup, and hair product will enhance their appearance. Consumers may become aware of a product because of a celebrity or influencer. But feedback from actual buyers of the product whom consumers know IRL affects their decision to buy, not simply celebrity or influencer endorsements. Marketers should

consistently repost, regram, and retweet product comments from “regular people,” as they may be perceived as more authentic than feedback from celebrities or influencers. Furthermore, firms should analyze social media content about their products from “regular people.” The data can help identify individuals’ who buy products due to endorsements from their IRL connections. Capitalizing on IRL trust relationships among consumers can probably grow product sales.

Second, marketers should be selective as to where they target their social media advertising and product promotions. Based on this research, Instagram and YouTube are credible sources of information for consumer purchases of apparel and cosmetic/hair products, respectively. Expending resources toward promoting apparel, cosmetic, and hair products on those sites may generate a better return on investment than employing equal resources promoting those products on Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter.

Future research

This study sheds light on the effect of endorsements from celebrities, influencers, followers, people whom consumers follow, and people they know IRL on millennial consumers’ purchasing intentions. However, additional questions remain. Future research should investigate how endorsements affect the purchase of products that are not related to one’s appearance. Are celebrity/influencer endorsements still less credible than people whom consumers know IRL? What specific aspect of trust relationships with people whom they know IRL affects consumers’ buying behaviors? The strength of the relationship? The duration of it? Addressing these questions in future research will shed more light on consumers’ buying behaviors and the role of social media.

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