Effects of Cause and Disclosure on Attitudes toward an Instagram Post: Does the Influencer's Race Matter?

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Purpose/Background: Influencer marketing has become a successful way for brands to promote their products to potential customers on various social media platforms. In light of signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), social media influencers can signal information about a brand to viewers and followers, crafting a favorable image toward the brand and the influencers (Mavlaanova et al., 2012). In the context of social media, signals can correspond to the issues that are increasingly important in shaping consumer attitudes such as advocating social issues, disclosing paid sponsorship, and the race of the influencer. Although a brand's marketing effort for cause-related issues (e.g., donation to charity for brand purchases) has been widely advertised via media, its advertising via influencers is in the early stage, which warrants a study to examine its impact on consumer attitudes toward the influencer (e.g., authenticity) and the ad (e.g., persuasiveness). Another signal that can AFFECT consumers' attitudes toward the brand and social media influencer is sponsorship disclosure. Until 2017, when the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) required clear disclosure of compensation for endorsement, sponsored advertising tended to be deceptive because social media users were not able to identify this sponsorship (Bladow, 2018; Sterling, 2017). Unfortunately, violation of this FTC regulation has not been rigorously followed up, which has led to an unknown outcome of such sponsorship (Bladow, 2018). Transparent and clear disclosure of sponsorship may enhance the perception of authenticity toward the influencer and persuasiveness of the ad, as well as the intention to follow the influencer. Finally, despite the call for more diversity within social media marketing, no research has explored the role that influencer race plays in consumers' responses to social media marketing. With the rapid growth of influencer advertising as well as the rise of black influencers becoming more mainstream, there is a need to explore the role of influencer race in consumers' attitudes toward the influencer (e.g., attractiveness) and intention to follow the influencer.

Given the needs identified above, the purpose of this experimental study is to examine the effects of (a) cause (vs. non-cause) ad message, (b) sponsorship disclosure (vs. non-disclosure), and (c) influencer race (white vs. black) on attitudes towards the influencer (i.e., authenticity, attractiveness), persuasiveness of the promotion and intention to follow the influencer. Based on the literature, we expect to find not only main effects of cause, disclosure, and influencer race, but also interactive effects of these factors.

Methods: To develop the experimental stimuli, we identified two (white and black) female social media influencers who have more than one million followers and promote skin care products. We designed Instagram posts with two levels of cause (cause vs. non-cause) and two levels of disclosure (disclosure vs. non-disclosure). For the cause Instagram post, the message included "They're donating 5% of the profits this month to Girls Inc."; for non-cause post, the message

included "My skin has never felt softer since starting their products." For disclosure, we used "Paid partnership"; for non-disclosure, this information was not included.

An online US female consumer panel, aged 18-40 as the majority of Instagram users ("Which Social Media," 2020), participated in the survey via MTurk. Each respondent was assigned to one of the eight experimental groups. The final sample consisted of 234 respondents. The survey questions consisted of two attitudes toward the influencer (authenticity and attractiveness), persuasiveness, and intention to follow the influencer. These measures were modified from the existing studies (e.g., Erdogan, 1999; Ki & Kim 2019), and rated on 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Construct reliabilities of all factors were satisfactory (> .80).

Analyses and Results: Manipulation check items were confirmed before testing the hypotheses. The mean of the cause group (m = 4.14) was higher ($p < .001$) than that of the non-cause group (m = 1.71) for the statement "This Instagram post is associated with a charitable cause." The mean of the disclosure group (m = 4.40) was significantly higher ($p < .001$) than the mean of the non-disclosure group (m = 4.03) for the statement, "It is clear who paid for this ad." The analysis involved 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVAs (cause vs. non-cause; disclosure vs. non-disclosure; white vs. black influencer). To control the effect of extraneous variables, we used "familiarity with the influencer" and "familiarity with the brand" as two covariates. The former covariates was significant for authenticity, persuasiveness, and intention to follow ($p < .001$), while the latter covariate was significant for persuasiveness ($p < .05$).

The main effect of cause was significant for authenticity ($F = 4.64$, $p < .05$) [$M_{cause} = 3.72$, $M_{non\text{-}cause} = 3.20$] and persuasiveness ($F = 7.53$, $p < .01$) [$M_{cause} = 3.74$, $M_{non\text{-}cause} = 3.17$]. The main effect of disclosure was significant for intention to follow ($F = 5.08$, $p < .05$) [$M_{disclosure} = 3.52$, $M_{non\text{-}disclosure} = 3.40$]. The 2-way interaction effect of cause and disclosure was significant on authenticity ($F = 4.68$, $p < .05$). Finally, the 3-way interaction effect of cause x disclosure x race was significant on attractiveness ($F = 4.26$, $p < .05$).

Discussion: Since cause and disclosure have main and interactive effects on different outcome variables (authenticity and persuasiveness for a cause message; following the influencer for a disclosure ad; authenticity when cause is combined with disclosure), marketers should plan their strategies for cause and disclosure differently depending on their purposes. The 3-way interaction reveals that influencer race played a significant role on the impacts of cause and disclosure on attractiveness. For the white influencer, the cause-affiliated post provided high scores, whether or not it was disclosed, and the lowest score was obtained when the post was disclosed and non-cause affiliated. For the black influencer, the post with cause-affiliation and non-disclosure had the highest score. This indicates that consumers may be more sensitive to black influencer's messages. Marketers may gain different results when they employ black influencers over white influencers. Future research can further explore the impact of influencer race on consumer responses based on racial match between the influencer and the respondent.

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