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Fake it to make it: Exploring Instagram users' engagement with virtual influencers in tourism

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Introduction

The use of social media has become increasingly prevalent over the last decade. From the tourism perspective, social media is essential in the trip planning stage, as it allows travellers to connect with other users for potential trip advice and travel inspirations (Benckendorff, Xiang, & Sheldon, 2019). As one of the most popular social media platforms, Instagram attracts more than 2 million monthly advertisers and 25 million businesses with a potential advertising reach of over 849 million users (Aslam, 2020). Because of its 500,000 active influencers and significant commercial value, Instagram has been voted as the most crucial social media platform for influencer marketing (Chen, 2020).

The term “social media influencers” (SMIs) is an extension of “opinion leaders” coined by Katz and Lazarsfeld (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). SMIs refer to individuals who leverage credibility, expertise and networks to influence others via creating and curating multimedia content online (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). It is estimated that the investment of brands in influencer marketing will reach up to US\$15 billion by 2022 (Schomer, 2019). Within the ever-evolving landscape of SMIs, virtual influencers have become increasingly popular in recent years. Virtual influencers (VIs), also known as CGI (computer-generated imagery) influencers, are computer generated characters that possess influential power on social media. VIs can be briefly categorized based on whether they are three-dimensional or two-dimensional, humanlike or cartoonlike. The first VI on Instagram, *Lil Miquela* was nominated by Time magazine as one of the 25 most influential people on the Internet in 2018 (Time, 2018). More recently, another VI named *Knox Frost* has been enlisted by the World Health Organization as an ambassador for COVID-19 prevention campaign (Yalcinkaya, 2020). Intriguingly, the average engagement rate of VIs is almost threefold that of their human counterparts and the average VI post attracts four times more followers (Baklanov, 2019). Presumably because of this, marketers have collaborated with VIs in a range of industries including entertainment, fashion, beauty and retail. Despite a potential risk to trustworthiness (Moustakas, Lamba, Mahmoud, & Ranganathan, 2020), VIs have successfully collaborated with many prestigious brands such as Prada and Dior for consumer engagement and brand marketing.

In tourism, the adoption of VIs is still in its infancy. *Kizuna AI* (a Japanese virtual Youtuber) was a tourism ambassador for Japan in 2018 and *Esther Olofsson* (the first VI of the Netherlands) became a brand ambassador for Postillion Hotels in 2020. Tourism has been identified as one of the industries that would be extensively influenced by VI marketing in the near future (Moustakas et al., 2020). Given that tourism is an information intensive industry impacted by current trends in influencer marketing, there is a huge potential to leverage VI engagement in marketing tourism experiences. However, there is a lack of research in understanding user engagement of VI marketing in tourism.

This research takes the first step to understand engagement factors of VI marketing in the tourism context. Specifically, the objectives of this research are to: (1) explore Instagram users' perceptions

on engagement with VIs in the tourism context; (2) explore the key source (i.e. VI related) and content factors that will drive Instagram users' engagement with VIs in the tourism context; and (3) develop a conceptual framework mapping the key source and content factors that drive users' engagement with VIs in the tourism context.

Literature Review

User engagement

In the social media context, user engagement is described as the degree of physical, cognitive and emotional presence on specific online social platforms (Cheung, Shen, Lee, & Chan, 2015). It manifests in three levels: consumption (e.g. viewing or liking a post), contribution (e.g. commenting on a post) and creation (e.g. creating user-generated content) (Valentini, Romenti, Murtarelli, & Pizzetti, 2018). Figure 1 illustrates the course of user engagement from antecedents, to metrics, to engagement outcome on social media. In the current user engagement literature on SMIs, most research has focused on one factor (i.e. source, users, context or content) among four factors in antecedents (in Figure 1) that influence user engagement. Whilst Jaakonmäki, Müller, and Vom Brocke (2017) investigated the impact of context, source and content factors collectively, the study is limited as it relied on big data derived from the posts of Instagram users in German-speaking countries. Overall, the review of the literature highlights a lack of research on the key drivers (i.e. source and content factors) of user engagement with SMIs on social media.

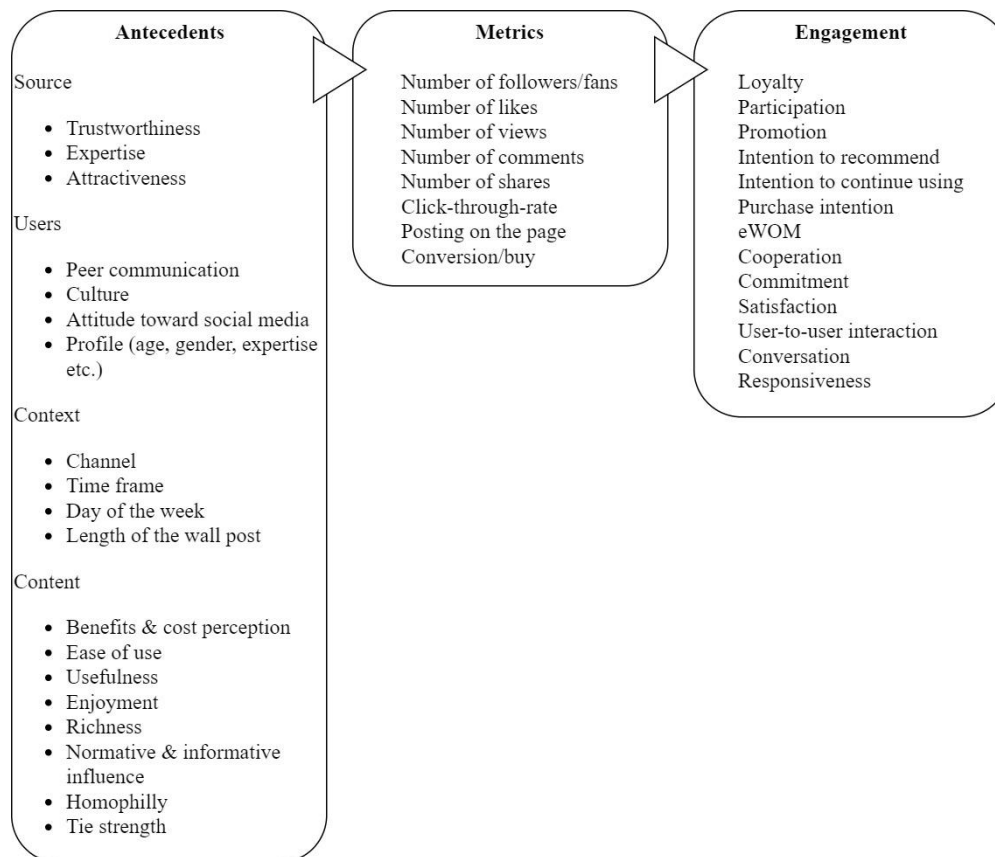


Figure 1. The framework of user engagement on social media
Source: Adapted from (Ohanian, 1990) and (Perreault & Mosconi, 2018).

Virtual influencers

Given the very recent emergence of VIs, literature on the VI phenomenon is lacking. Overall, research on VIs can be categorized in five areas: ethics (e.g., Blanton & Carbajal, 2019); ontology (e.g., Robinson, 2020); realness and authenticity (e.g., Andersson & Sobek, 2020); effectiveness of virtual influencing (e.g., Moustakas et al., 2020); and user-VI engagement (e.g., Molin & Nordgren, 2019). A review of the marketing literature has highlighted a research gap in addressing the key factors that influence user engagement with VIs at a more holistic level. While several studies have investigated specific elements of the source (i.e. the VI) or the content (e.g., Andersson & Sobek, 2020; Robinson, 2020; Shin & Lee, 2020), no studies have attempted to look more holistically at both areas. Overall, the literature reviewed in these sections suggest that audience reactions to VI marketing are largely positive. It should be noted that none of these studies have been conducted in the tourism field. Nevertheless, the increasing popularity of VI marketing and the emerging use of influencer marketing in tourism makes this a worthwhile domain for further research.

Methodology

This study employs photo elicitation focus groups conducted on Zoom. Focus group interviewing is a common qualitative method and it is particularly suitable for exploratory research where little is known about a specific phenomenon (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). As this study seeks to explore a novel phenomenon (i.e. Instagram users' engagement with VIs in tourism settings), focus group interviews are considered appropriate for achieving the research objectives. The targeted population is Instagram users who are no less than 18 years old and who have access to the Internet. Purposive sampling and convenient sampling will be employed to recruit participants through online advertising on Facebook and Instagram. Six to eight participants will be recruited for each focus group session (considering possible no-shows) with five sessions at a length of approximately 1.5 hours each. The researcher will use the first session for pilot testing and the remaining four sessions to interview Instagram users from four categories respectively. These four categories are: (1) users from the Eastern countries (i.e. nations in Asia including the Middle East) who do not follow VIs; (2) users from the Western countries (i.e. nations in North and South America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand) who do not follow VIs; (3) users from the Eastern countries who follow VIs; and (4) users from the Western countries who follow VIs. The justifications to interview four categories of participants separately are listed as follows. Firstly, homogenous focus groups are more likely to achieve full engagement among participants (Krueger, 2014). Secondly, responses from participants may differ due to their familiarity with VIs. Those who follow VIs will have more experience and may dominate the conversation if all participants are interviewed together. Lastly, cultural differences may play a role in participants' responses towards VIs. For example, the evolvement of anthropomorphic characters such as mascots has been significantly influenced by the Japanese culture around *yuru-kyara* (Radomskaya & Pearce, 2021). Similarly, the long history of Japanese animation culture may influence participants from

Eastern countries to engage more with cartoonlike VIs. If data saturation is not reached after conducting these five focus groups, more will be considered for data collection.

In terms of the interview protocol, a “funnel-style” guide moving from broad participant-oriented questions to more specific research-oriented questions will be adopted (Morgan, 2012). Key interview questions related to factors of Instagram users’ engagement will explore aspects of VIs’ Instagram bios, Instagram photos and captions, and commentary (users’ comments to VIs, users’ comments to other users and VIs’ replies to users). These source and content factors may include variables such as number of followers, VI’s gender, VI’s realness, VIs in the photo, settings of the photo, narratives, user comments to VIs and other users as well as VI’s replies to users. Materials for photo elicitation including Instagram posts of *Lil Miquela*, *Noonoouri*, *Kizuna AI*, *Guggimon*, *Knox Frost* and *Esther Olofsson* will be used to stimulate focus group discussions.

Conclusion and Discussion

This ongoing study seeks to uncover the key source and content factors that drive Instagram users’ engagement with VIs in the tourism context. Virtual focus groups interviews with photo elicitation will be adopted to achieve the research goal. The anticipated research results have several important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this research will expand the current knowledge of social media engagement and tourism marketing theory. It will also develop a conceptual framework of the source and content factors that influence Instagram users’ engagement with VIs in the tourism context. Practically, the results will help tourism practitioners understand users’ engagement with VIs on Instagram and leverage key factors when launching VI marketing campaigns and/or selecting VIs for future collaborations. In addition, this research will assist VI agencies to understand the importance and impact of various VI features and strategies and evaluate the potential use of VIs in the tourism industry.

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