

INFLUENCER MARKETING ON SOCIAL MEDIA: THE IMPACT OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP, SOURCE CHARACTERISTICS ON WORD-OF-MOUTH INFLUENCE

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Abstract

The research was aimed to explore the process of parasocial relationship formation and the extent to which it has an impact on how people adopt and are influenced by information delivered by influencers on social media context. Based on literatures on parasocial relationship theory, word-of-mouth influence, source authenticity, relevance, and product endorsement concept including source trustworthiness, expertise and brand credibility, a research model was proposed and empirically analyzed using data collected from over 300 respondents. The findings suggested that the level of intimacy and trust of audiences towards influencers are critical in how and how much they adopt and are influenced by the information. Finally, information influence path and pattern as well as suggestions for the application of the findings in marketing practice were delivered.

Keywords: *parasocial relationship, word-of-mouth influence, credibility, influencer marketing, influencers.*

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1. Influencer marketing on social media: The impact of parasocial relationship, source characteristics on word-of-mouth influence

Capturing the tremendous possibilities of social media, brands have utilized influencer marketing, using user-generated content on online social media platforms as a marketing tool (Corcoran, 2010). Although named one of the most effective means of marketing (Ward, 2017), firms struggle as they yet to comprehend how people create and perceive value on social media, which greatly affect how they adopt information (Barger, Peltier, & Schultz, 2016). Since social media was made for social interaction, not for trading, commercial content on social media is often being neglected or negatively responded to by the audience (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Therefore, engaging with consumers via influential individuals, that now go by the title of “influencers”, who possess a mix of personal and interpersonal qualities such as credibility, attractiveness, network and leadership, which enable them to exert influence on a large number of people (Gladwell, 2006), has been brought to practice and became popular in marketing. Additional to celebrities, micro-influencers such as Youtuber, Instagram and Facebook content creators, those who have a smaller scale of influence, are gaining brands’ attention, since their audience is niche but have a higher rate of engagement (Wissman, 2018).

Internet unique characteristic of bidirectional communication and the booming of social media have enabled the increased use of online social platform as personal or interpersonal communication (Dellarcos, 2003). Accordingly, the social and personal interaction between public figures and their audience significantly escalated, which are proposed to be the reason for the higher effectiveness and influence of marketing. Prior studies have suggested that the desirable outcome of influencer marketing by influencers are not entirely resulted from fame, but largely depends on the level of intimacy between the endorsers and their audiences (Chung & Cho, 2017). According to Social Identity Theory proposed by Tajfel (1979), favoritism is established when there existed similar qualities in personal and social identity between the parties. This phenomenon, according to Horton & Richard Wohl (1956), is known as “parasocial interaction” or “parasocial relationship”, where the audiences are exposed to the presence of the public figures, or influencers, enough to form a certain degree of

intimacy, closeness and identification. Parasocial relationship has been proven to be the major factor in information adoption and decision-making process of consumers, precisely, it impacts positively on brand equity, such as brand attitude, and purchase decision (Chung & Cho, 2017). Parasocial relationship theory and concept have enlightened the formation and mechanism of how consumers' decision is influenced and shaped, however, extended research is necessary to further explore the role it plays in how consumer adopt information and make decisions. Most importantly, although the nature of consumer-influencer interaction has changed from one-sided interaction to an interactive one, little study has been conducted on, not only the role of parasocial relationship but also its application in marketing (Chung & Cho, 2017; Escalas & Bettman, 2017).

To tackle the research gap, we draw on the concept of product endorsement and parasocial relationship to propose a conceptual model in which demonstrates the relationship may lie among factors of parasocial relationship, source and brand credibility, and word-of-mouth influence. Specifically, hypotheses are established to answer the following questions: (1) To what extent parasocial relationship affects perceived credibility of source and brand. (2) Therefore, to what extent parasocial relationship has impact on the influence of electronic word-of-mouth, specifically, on online product endorsement by influencers. Hence, by clarifying these queries, the objectives of the research can be attained, which are:

- (1) Examining the level of impact of parasocial relationship on how consumers adopt information via electronic word-of-mouth, specifically in the context of Vietnam.
- (2) Identifying the level of importance of influencers' traits, such as authenticity, relevance, credibility and their interaction with audience in conducting marketing through product endorsement.
- (3) Clarifying the mechanism of how audience is influenced by influencers and thereby, proposing clearer insight for implication.

2. Literature review

2.1. Parasocial relationship theory

The term “parasocial relationship” was initially stated in Horton & Richard Wohl (1956) as “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible to mutual development”. Additionally, he also indicated that the relationship is chosen liberally by the audiences, however, they cannot unilaterally create a new one. This means that although being a one-sided relationship, parasocial relationship, similar to regular relationship, requires interaction between both parties, including audience and public figures. Parasocial relationship was also explained as “the audience’s interpersonal involvement with media characters” (Rubin, Perse, & Powe, 1985). The term is later clarified by Rubin & Step (2000) that parasocial relationship is a unilateral relationship established by social media users with public figures. Most audiences view the personalities who they have the parasocial relationship with as role models and often seek their opinion as counselors (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956).

Parasocial relationship is indicated as a social connection rather than a personal one. This indication is concluded based on three relationship characteristics, including proximity, which is the physical closeness of the relationship; similarity, the resemblance in characteristics; and attraction (Byrne, 1971). Firstly, as audiences and influencers interact virtually via screens, the physical distance still separates the audience from their public figures, therefore, hinders the personal development of the relationship. Secondly, regarding to similarity aspect of relationships, people have the tendency to be drawn to those who possess similarity in personal traits (Tajfel, 1979). Thus, the more the influence’s qualities and viewpoints match the audiences’, the better and stronger relationship is established. Finally, one of the key elements in parasocial relationship attraction, both physical and attitudinal (Byrne, 1971). Besides being a reference (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956), online influencers are perceived as means of entertainment and emotional outlets (Holt & Thompson, 2004), which are categorized to be the attitudinal attraction of influence towards their viewers.

2.2. Product endorsement concept and parasocial relationship

2.2.1. Electronic word-of-mouth in the form of online product endorsement

The change in nature of the communication channel with the advent of the Internet has transformed word-of-mouth (WOM) to word-of-mouse, in other words, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Berger, 2014; Dellarcos, 2003; Le, Minh Dinh, 2018). eWOM shares the similar concept to traditional WOM, specifically, “networks of interpersonal relations” among consumers in the market, sharing information regarding products online, such as social media or e-commerce sites such as Tiki or Lazada, in which the shared message is perceived to be non-commercial by the receiver (Arndt, 1967; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Thus, in this research, eWOM can be defined as the peer-to-peer sharing of information regarding brands, products or services with non-commercial intention that occurs in online settings (Arndt, 1967; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Consumers often seek information via WOM communication for items of which value is difficult to evaluate prior to purchase, such as books, films (Chakravarty, Liu, & Mazumdar, 2010), health care and education services (Le, Minh Dinh, 2018). Therefore, brands have utilized user-generated content by “influencers” on online social media platforms to engage with consumers (Corcoran, 2010).

2.2.2. Influencers

Freberg, Graham, Mcgaughey, & Freberg (2011) suggested that influencers are considered to be an independent party that has the power to shape viewers attitude towards brands, products, or events via social media platforms, such as blogs and videos. Similar to average social media users, influencers have direct contacts, such as friends in their friend lists, and followers, however, stated by (Hall, 2010), “what makes them truly valuable is the number and relevance of their extended or indirect connections”. Influencers help brands achieve the desired association, image, attitude and publicity (Till et al., 2008).

“Non-commercial” aspect is a crucial element as it makes WOM the most effective form of marketing (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007), as WOM is known to be more reliable under the perception of consumers, comparing to firm-controlled source of information (Buttle, 1998). Product reviews,

although may have commercial content, effectively communicate with audience as a form of eWOM, as the intention of the influencers is non-commercial (Nyilasy, 2006). He stated that one can make conversation over a commercial content without having, or not being perceived as having commercial motivation by message receivers. When influencers talk about products and services, rather than being the ambassador of brand, they play the role of the expert peers, sharing opinion and experience with expertise. Therefore, the intention of the content creators is persistently perceived by viewers as non-commercial.

2.3. Source authenticity

Information source authenticity can be denoted as how the source is being honest, open and true to one's self in communication and interaction (Ilicic & Webster, 2016). Particularly, influencers with high authenticity are not afraid of sharing their failures as well as showing how they are just like other normal people (Ilicic & Webster, 2016). According to Social Identity Theory proposed by Tajfel (1979), favoritism is established when two individuals share similar qualities in their personal and social identity. Therefore, when there are high autonomy and relatability in influencers, consumers tend to form attachment towards them (Thomson, 2006). Hence, it is safe to say that source authenticity is the antecedent of parasocial relationship formation (Giles, 2002; Thomson, 2006). Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) stated that sources with high authenticity are preferred by audiences and perceived to have higher credibility. In the same study, they suggested that micro-influencers, which are YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook content creators, although have a more niche range of audiences, possess higher authenticity, thereby, exert higher level of influence.

H1: Source authenticity affects positively on the intensity of parasocial relationship

2.4. Source relevance

Source relevance can be understood as the fit between the source and the endorsed brand (D. A. Aaker & Keller, 1990). Bergkvist & Zhou (2016) suggested the source relevance can be understood via "match-up hypothesis", which includes "similarity", "congruency" and "fit". If the source, or in this research case, influencer, shares similar attributes and is fitted with the endorsed brand, meanings are

better transferred from the influencer to the brand and vice versa (McCormick, 2016). Another aspect of viewing source relevance is congruency, which can be understood as the compatibility between source and brand. For example, an athlete product endorsement would yield more positive outcome if its endorser is a public figure related and known for athletics contents (Cunningham & Bright, 2012). Consequently, more positive output can also be brought about if there is a good fit between the source and brand, such as consumers' attitudes towards brands' messages and the brands themselves. A relevant and realistic connection between the influencer and the brand results in more attention and higher source credibility, thereby the message is more believable and adaptable (McCormick, 2016).

H2: Source relevance affects positively on the intensity of parasocial relationship

2.5. Source credibility

According to (Ohanian, 1990), trustworthiness and expertise are elements of source credibility. While trustworthiness leans towards the integrity of the influencers, expertise represents audiences' confidence in their knowledge and skills (Ohanian, 1990). Statements and claims made by a high-expertise source are often viewed as valid by audience (Erdogan, 1999). Furthermore, if a source is perceived as an expert, opinions and ideas delivered by such source are more likely to be agreed with and passed along by audiences (Ohanian, 1990). Trustworthiness, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which the audience perceives the influencers to be honest, honorable and reliable (Ohanian, 1990). Trustworthiness, comparing to expertise, possesses more power in creating a change in audience attitude (Miller & Baseheart, 1969). Both are crucial elements in the effectiveness of persuasive communication (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). The level of trust built and the level of expertise of the influencers perceived by social media users will determine the difference responses towards message delivered as well as level of agreement and intention of sharing (Wu & Wang, 2011). Researches show that when an influencer is perceived to be trustworthy and knowledgeable, audience is more likely to develop positive attitude towards the source, and therefore, the endorsed brand (Hung, Li, & Tse, 2011). On the other hand, those who possess a strong parasocial relationship with an influencer often react positively and rely more on the information the influencers provide (Hung et al., 2011).

H3: Source authenticity affects positively on the level of source trustworthiness

H4: Source authenticity affects positively on the level of source expertise

H5: Source relevance affects positively on the level of source expertise

H6: Source relevance affects positively on the level of source trustworthiness

H7: The intensity of parasocial relationship affects positively on the level of source expertise

H8: The intensity of parasocial relationship affects positively on the level of source trustworthiness

2.6. Brand credibility

Similar to source credibility, brand credibility is composed of trustworthiness and expertise, in which trustworthiness refers to the integrity or willingness, and expertise indicates the ability of brands to deliver their claims (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Studies have shown that influencer marketing has tremendous impact on the level of brand credibility as it is affected by influencers' credibility (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999). This can be explained by Meaning Transfer Model proposed by McCracken (1989), in which he mentioned that personality traits of public figures can be transferred onto the endorsed product and brands. The model was later supported by Spry, Pappu, & Bettina Cornwell (2011), stating that influencers with high level of credibility are likely to transfer such trait to the brands they review and endorse. As the brand possesses high level of credibility, it allows consumers to save much time in information search (Erdem & Swait, 1998). Moreover, the highly credible brand reduces the asymmetry in information in decision-making process of consumers, in other words, it reduces consumers' doubts (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Spry et al., 2011). Consequently, consumer decisions are shaped faster, loyalty towards brands' names increased (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Furthermore, consumers are more likely to purchase a highly credible brand even if there is a more inexpensive option on site (Kemp & Bui, 2011).

H9: Source trustworthiness affects positively on the level of brand credibility

H10: Source expertise affects positively on the level of brand credibility

H11: Brand credibility affects positively on the level of influence on consumers of information adopted via WOM

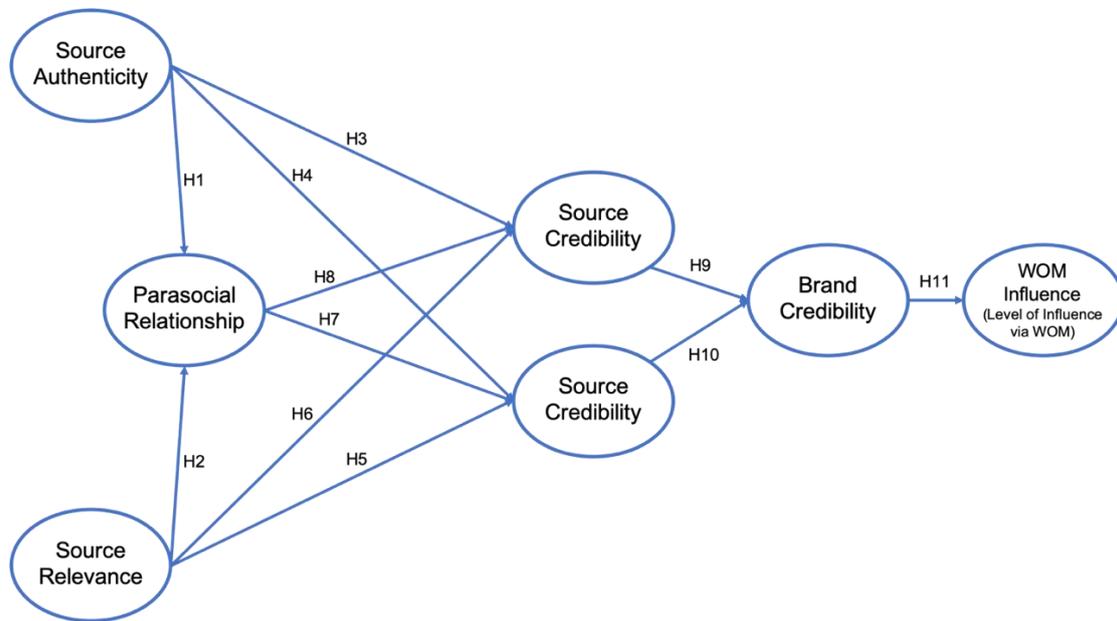


Figure 1. Conceptual model

3. Methodology

To address research questions and achieve research objective, quantitative method was adopted. Specifically, data was collected using survey method and subjected to tests conducted via SPSS and AMOS. Established measurement from previous literature was adopted to construct a questionnaire. All items were measured using seven-point Likert scale, which ranges from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7).

3.1. Data collection

The sample consisted of those who have experienced in searching for and viewing product reviews, endorsement by influencers. Questionnaires were handed directly to participants in universities in Ho Chi Minh City, such as VNU International University and Pedagogy University. A total of 320 participants took part in the questionnaire, in which 313 were valid.

3.2. Sample demographic

Out of the 313 samples collected, 97.2% of the respondents age between 18 to 25, which accurately aligns with the target subject of the research, specifically Generation Z, who consumes more online

information prior purchase than any other generations. Accordingly, 93.7% of respondents are students, and 81% have average earning lower than 5 million VND per month. Females took up 66.5% of the survey participants, and 33.5% were male. Among the respondents, 93% of them use more than 2 social media simultaneously, in which 67% taking part in 3 social media platforms or more.

3.3. Measurement

A total of 49 questions were included in the questionnaire, covering variables of factors and demographics information. All items for variables were adopted from previous studies and measured by seven-point Likert scale.

3.3.1. Source authenticity

This variable was measured using 8 items adopted from Ilicic & Webster (2016), for example, “He/she shares his/her personal feelings with his/her fans” was used, with the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients scored 0.902

3.3.2. Source Relevance

Three items were used to assess this variable. Examples of them are “It is logical to relate him/her with the product”. The three items were from studies by Keller & Aaker (1992) and Spry et al. (2011), with the reliability indices of 0.877

3.3.3. Parasocial relationship

This variable was measured by 13 items, such as “He/she seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know”, “I can identify myself with him/her” taken from Tal-Or & Cohen (2010) and “I look forward to watching him/her video whenever it airs” from Chung & Cho (2017) and Rubin et al. (1985) ($\alpha=0.860$).

3.3.4. Source credibility

There were 5 out of 9 items measured trustworthiness such as “He/she is dependable” “He/she is honest” and 4 items measured expertise (“he/she is experienced in [product's field]”), all of which were adopted from Ballantine & Yeung (2015) and Ohanian (1990) ($\alpha=0.903$).

3.3.5. Brand credibility

“Brand X” in the measures referred to the latest brand which respondents’ influencers have reviewed or endorsed. Five items by Erdem & Swait (2004) were used, such as “Innisfree has the ability to deliver what it promises” ($\alpha=0.901$).

3.3.6. Word-of-mouth influence

Six items adopted from Gilly et al. (1998) was used to measure the level of which consumers were influenced by influencers (“he/she mentioned some things I had not considered”) ($\alpha=0.704$).

4. Results

4.1. Reliability analysis

Cronbach’s alpha coefficients and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) were conducted to examine the reliability of the measures. Outputs are demonstrated in Table 1, which showed that coefficients range from 0.705 to 0.909 indicating good reliability of the measurement. Additionally, KMO Bartlett’s Test coefficients are required to be above 0.5, in which sig. < 0.05 and total variance explained > 50%. Moreover, factor loading is required to be 0.5, at least. Consequently, PR1, PR2, PR3, PR4, PR5, PR6, PR7, PR10, PR11, and WI4, were eliminated due to inadequate factor loadings.

4.2. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

CFA was conducted via AMOS to obtain factor loadings, which were used to assess the validity of the measure constructs, which is recommended to be above 0.5. Additionally, according to Hair (1998), the recommended value for Composite Reliability (CR) is equal or higher than 0.7 and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) his at least 0.5. The following Table 1 demonstrates the output of CFA, in which all values of CR and AVE satisfied the proposed benchmarks.

Table 1. EFA and CFA tests output

Variables	Items	EFA	CA	CR	AVE
Source Authenticity (SA)	SA1	0.691	0.900	0.888	0.532
	SA2	0.754			
	SA3	0.555			
	SA4	0.742			
	SA5	0.808			
	SA6	0.706			
	SA7	0.807			
	SA8	0.675			
Source Relevance (SR)	SR1	0.635	0.875	0.884	0.719
	SR2	0.945			
	SR3	0.797			
Parasocial Relationship (PR)	PR8	0.721	0.858	0.757	0.512
	PR9	0.620			
	PR12	0.754			
	PR13	0.554			
Source Trustworthiness (TRU)	TRU1	0.859	0.907	0.904	0.653
	TRU2	0.965			
	TRU3	0.798			
	TRU4	0.528			
	TRU5	0.688			
Source Expertise (EXP)	EXP1	0.837	0.880	0.881	0.649
	EXP2	0.804			
	EXP3	0.781			
	EXP4	0.767			
Brand Credibility (BC)	BC1	0.743	0.899	0.901	0.647
	BC2	0.831			
	BC3	0.796			
	BC4	0.827			
	BC5	0.817			
WOM Influence (WI)	WI1	0.671	0.837	0.812	0.526
	WI2	0.735			
	WI3	0.616			
	WI5	0.571			
	WI6	0.786			

The model fit analysis output demonstrates the statistical significance of the research model and hypothesis. Outputs of Confirmatory Factor Analysis showed that χ^2/df scored 2.084; $p < .000$;

RMSEA valued at 0.059; GFI equaled 0.844; IFI equaled 0.924; CFI equaled 0.923 and PNFI valued at 0.767, all of which indicates that the measurement model is valid.

Table 2. Model fit

Model fit indices	Recommended acceptable level	CFA
X ² /df	1 to 3	2.084
RMSEA	<0.08	0.059
GFI	>0.90	0.844
AGFI	>=0.80	0.813
IFI	>=0.90	0.924
CFI	>=0.90	0.923
PGFI	>0.50	0.705
PNFI	>0.50	0.767

4.3. Structural equation modeling & Hypothesis testing

Findings of structural equation modeling (SEM) are demonstrated in Table 3. Firstly, we examine the p value of the hypotheses, which are acceptable if larger than 0.05. Since p value of H2 and H7 did not satisfy the requirement, with p value equaled 0.694 and 0.420, respectively, they were rejected. All of the remaining nine hypotheses are supported. The estimates indices showed the coefficients among variables, which indicate the level of impact of one factor to another or the strength of their correlations. According to the estimates, the coefficient of H11 scored the highest value among others, which are 0.582, meaning the hypothesis of level of WOM influence being dependent on brand credibility is strongly supported. On the other hand, H8, which proposed that the intensity of parasocial relationship affects positively on the level of source trustworthiness, has the lowest coefficient, suggesting the existed but low correlation between the two factors.

Table 3. Hypothesis test results

Hypothesis		Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
H1	Source authenticity affects positively on the intensity of parasocial relationship	0.546	0.093	5.893	***	Accepted
H2	Source relevance affects positively on the intensity of parasocial relationship	-0.025	0.063	-0.393	0.694	Rejected
H3	Source authenticity affects positively on the level of source trustworthiness	0.447	0.075	5.982	***	Accepted
H4	Source authenticity affects positively on the level of source expertise	0.204	0.092	2.227	0.026	Accepted
H5	Source relevance affects positively on the level of source expertise	0.456	0.067	6.846	***	Accepted
H6	Source relevance affects positively on the level of source trustworthiness	0.233	0.048	4.821	***	Accepted
H7	The intensity of parasocial relationship affects positively on the level of source expertise	0.065	0.081	0.807	0.420	Rejected
H8	The intensity of parasocial relationship affects positively on the level of source trustworthiness	0.198	0.064	3.111	0.002	Accepted
H9	Source trustworthiness affects positively on the level of brand credibility	0.372	0.054	6.826	***	Accepted
H10	Source expertise affects positively on the level of brand credibility	0.258	0.048	5.359	***	Accepted
H11	Brand credibility affects positively on the level of influence on consumers of information adopted via WOM	0.582	0.067	8.648	***	Accepted

Note: *p-value<0.05, **p-value<0.01, ***p-value<0.001

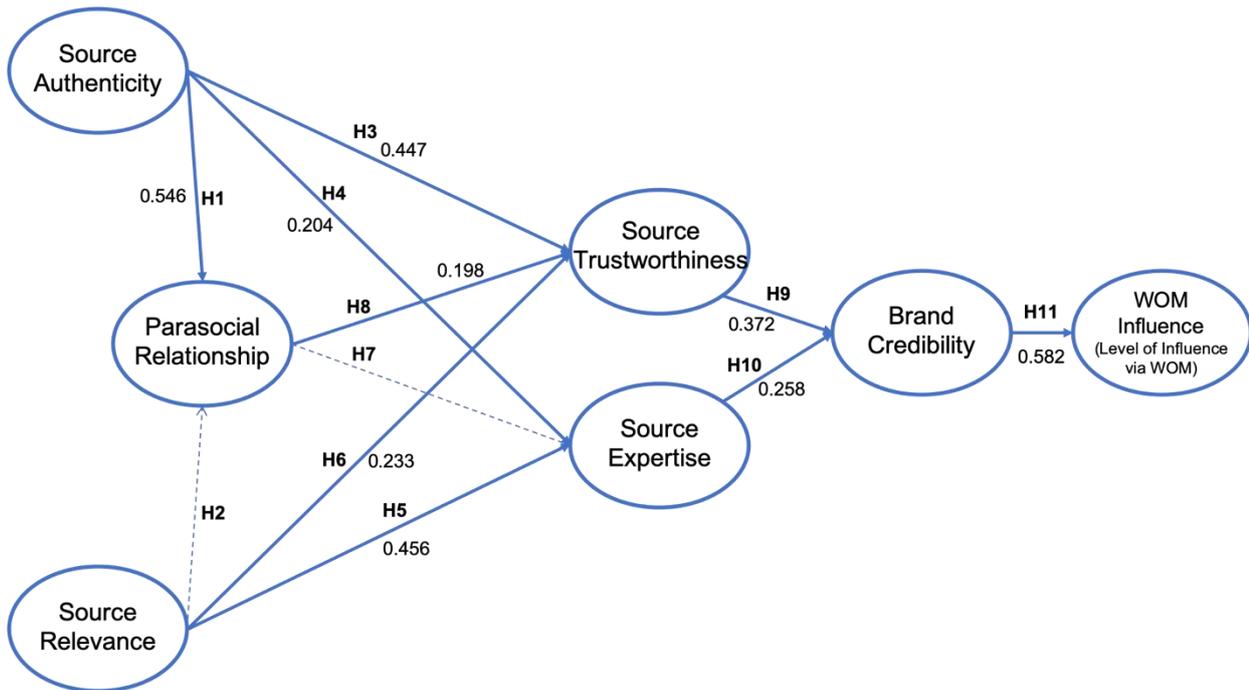


Figure 2. Result of SEM

5. Discussion

Overall, the findings suggest that the traits of information source, in this case, the influencers, and their impression on consumers effect largely on consumers' perception and attitude on the message and the endorsed brand, therefore, the quality and level of receptivity and influence of such message. Firstly, the advent of social media has brought about an increase in personal and interpersonal communication between audience ad public figures (Dellarcos, 2003). The sample shows that the majority of people nowadays used two to three social media at a time, which allow them to interact with their influencers via multiples channel, as 80.3% respondents interacting with the content creators on YouTube overlaps with the 40.8% of the those interacting via Facebook and Instagram. Research shows that parasocial relationship are formed faster and stronger as the level of social media interaction increases (Labrecque, 2014). This can be explained as the frequency as well as the amount of personal information provided by the influencers increases, the psychological proximity is perceived to be smaller by audiences, therefore intimacy increases and stronger relationship is formed (Dibble, Levine, & Park, 2012). The hypotheses proposed that the relationship between audiences and influencers are affected by influencers' authenticity and relevance. Comparing both in findings, we found that

parasocial relationship is mainly affected by source authenticity (Ilicic & Webster, 2016). This finding aligns with preceding studies as they suggested that the more authentic the influencers are, the more likely audiences are to relate and identify themselves to the public figures, therefore, form attachment towards them (Ilicic & Webster, 2016). The Social Identity Theory by Tajfel (1979) also can be used to explain this phenomenon, as stated that one often favors those who make he or she feels relatable and share similar personality traits as well as social identity. On the other hand, the relevance of source, although make information of such source more credible (McCormick, 2016), does not significantly play any role in forming attachment between information source and receiver.

Secondly, the findings show that the depth of parasocial relationship affects influencers' trustworthiness, but not expertise. Parasocial relationship has its role in determining the degree to which consumers perceive a source as trustworthy. Similar to friendship, parasocial relationship enhances the level of trust and protective function (Chung & Cho, 2017). Therefore, if there exists such relationship, audiences are more likely to understand, forgive and overlook bad rumors surrounded the influencers and less likely to be affected by such negative information, which means stronger belief and perception in influencers' credibility (Chung & Cho, 2017). On the other hand, results showed that the depth of parasocial relationship does not impact how people perceive information source expertise. This can be explained that radical judgment on consumers on source technical knowledge and skills are not entirely affected by the level of affection of them towards influencers. While trustworthiness is more about influencers' integrity, expertise indicates their skills, knowledge, and understanding (Ohanian, 1990).

Thirdly, perceived trustworthiness of information source is confirmed to be affected by its authenticity and relevance. Source authenticity, on the other hand, has a lot more significant impact on the degree of source trustworthiness, comparing to source relevance. As explained by how influencers showing their true selves makes themselves relatable to audiences and also can be understood as offering friendship, audiences are more immune to the negative information and have more trust in their influencers (Chung & Cho, 2017; Tajfel, 1979). Contradictory, source expertise depends more on the

level of relevance, rather than authenticity. When there is high compatibility between the source and the brand they reviewing, the messages are more believable and well-received (McCormick, 2016). Taken from the sample, the two categories of product of which influencers are most searched and viewed are cosmetics and skincare (59.2%), and electrical devices (21.1%). If the influencers show a consistent representative with a category of product across channels overtimes, which leads to higher perception of relevance of them with such categories (Giles, 2002), the perceived expertise of the influencers on that categories will be higher, and the influencers' messages, therefore, are more believable (McCormick, 2016).

It can be seen from the results of prior analysis, brand credibility is significantly impacted by both trustworthiness and expertise of source, although source trustworthiness shows more substantial influence. Meaning Transferring Model (McCracken, 1989) explains the how traits of public figures are transferred onto product and brands they endorsed, likewise, as brand credibility is made up by trustworthiness and expertise as well, brands are likely to be seen as credible if the source has high trustworthiness and expertise.

We conclude that audience can move on three paths in forming initial perception, to relationship building, then to trust and being influenced. Firstly, viewing influencers to be authentic, audiences identify themselves with the content creators, then trust them to take their experience as reference to their own towards the brand (Tajfel, 1979), over time, as credibility of source and brand increase, the level of influence of information provided by influencers to consumers increases. Second of all, the second path is nearly identical, but additionally includes audiences forming in-depth one-sided relationship towards influencers. Via statistical analysis, parasocial relationship, in this case, can also be considered as the mediator to the relationship of source authenticity and source trustworthiness. The final information influence path goes from audiences realizing the relevance, then having confidence in influencers' knowledge and skills, in other words, their expertise, which allows audiences believe in their message, and therefore, have confidence in the endorsed brand and are influenced by the information to follow or make purchase. Conclusively, when pursuing influencer marketing,

specifically choosing influencers, rather putting emphasis on the number of followers or fame, brands should choose those who have the ability to authentically interact and create intimacy with audiences as well as earn their trust. Only by which can brands be represented as the most human and credible, which leads to higher influence of delivered message (J. L. Aaker, 1997).

6. Limitations and suggestions for future studies

Although this research study sheds light on the literature on the formation and effects of parasocial relationship with the sample of Ho Chi Minh City young people, as well as some empirical suggestions to its application to achieve more effective influencer marketing, several limitations should be addressed. First, to achieve higher response rate and larger number of data, a few samples were collected via web-based survey, which may lead to biased data and less engagement compared to other methods. Furthermore, although the number of samples is adequate, more data should be collected in future pursuit of this topic to attain more significant and meaningful findings. Secondly, the case for this study is mainly Vietnamese influencers as well as social media habit and consumer behavior in the context of Vietnam. Therefore, due to culture, custom and economics differences, more studies should be conducted in other countries, regions to obtain a variety as well as generality of results.

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