Exploring the Relationships between Social Media Influencers and Service Failure Recovery Process: Views from Social Influence and Commitment-Trust Theories

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Abstract. Prior research has advanced several explanations for social media influencers' (SMIs') success in the burgeoning computer-mediated marketing environments but leaves one key topic unexplored: the moderating role of SMIs in service failure and recovery strategies. Drawing on a social constructivist perspective, and employing social influence theory (SIT) and commitment-trust theory (CTT), 58 semi-structured interviews were conducted with millennials from three European countries (Italy, France and the United Kingdom). Four themes emerged conceptualising millennials perspectives of SMIs' role in the service failure recovery process.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers; Service Failure and Recovery; Social Influence Theory, Commitment-Trust Theory Social Constructivism; Qualitative

1 Introduction

Introduction
Social media influencers (SMI) are involved in various empirical studies revealing their central importance in marketing (Zhou, Blazquez, McCormick, & Barnes, 2021; Stubb & Colliander, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2019). Although extant research provides persuasive findings, research has limited awareness of the fundamental role of SMIs in service failure recovery and their impact on service failure and recovery outcomes and potential customer responses to their efforts. Given that SMIs are noted for their impact on advertisement information (Kim, Duffy, & Thorson, 2021) and moderating consumer-brand relationships (Shan, Chen, & Lin, 2020), SMIs could likewise play a proactive role in service recovery process. Hughes, Swaminthan, & Brooks (2019) provide some valuable insights into SMIs and brand engagement. Drawing on the elaboration likelihood model and building on Pansari and Kumar's (2017) study, Hughes et al. (2019) demonstrated that SMIs' characteristics and platform engagement affect consumers' ability and motivation to engage in effortful processing. A central idea of Hughes et al.'s (2019) study is that varying characteristics of SMIs motivate consumers to process information deeply and to engage with influencers' information and content, and that trial campaigns are positively and more effectively received.

Although Hughes et al. (2019) provided fresh insights into the moderating role of SMIs' characteristics (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and personality), they necessarily tended to emphasise unidimensional, orthodox marketing practice and to de-emphasise other potentially important aspects. Specifically, the study's characterisations do not seem to capture the richness of varying users' experience and tend to aggregate different

demographic cohorts' consumption experience within the same network density. Customers with a high level of consumption opinions are more likely to have a significant relationship with SMIs. In a service failure situation, customers may be motivated to express their emotions through influencers. Customers who share their negative service experience by creating UGC in social media can be segmented according to their motivation and their network density (Arsenovic, Edvardsson and Tronvoll, 2019).

The above shortcomings deprive organisations of much needed practical guidance essential to a more meaningful and effective implementation of influencer marketing in the recovery of service failures. The current study attempts to bridge this gap by examining how effortful processing of social media content created by SMIs could potentially be used as an early interventional service failure strategy in the fashion industry. This paper builds on the line of reasoning proposed by Hughes et al. (2019) and examines the relationship between SMIs and SFR, employing the perspective of social influence theory (SIT) and commitment-trust theory (CTT). Specifically, the paper seeks to examine the role of SMIs in service recovery processes and offers practical explanations about certain variations in the implementation of influencer marketing. The aim of this study is, on the one hand, to investigate the dyadic relationship between SMIs and SFR processes, and, on the other, to investigate consumers' perceptions of SMIs' messages and content in a failed service situation. The current study adds to the growing literature on influencer marketing and service failure, employing a social constructivist perspective; it reports on in-depth interviews conducted with millennials from three European countries: France, Italy and the United Kingdom (UK).
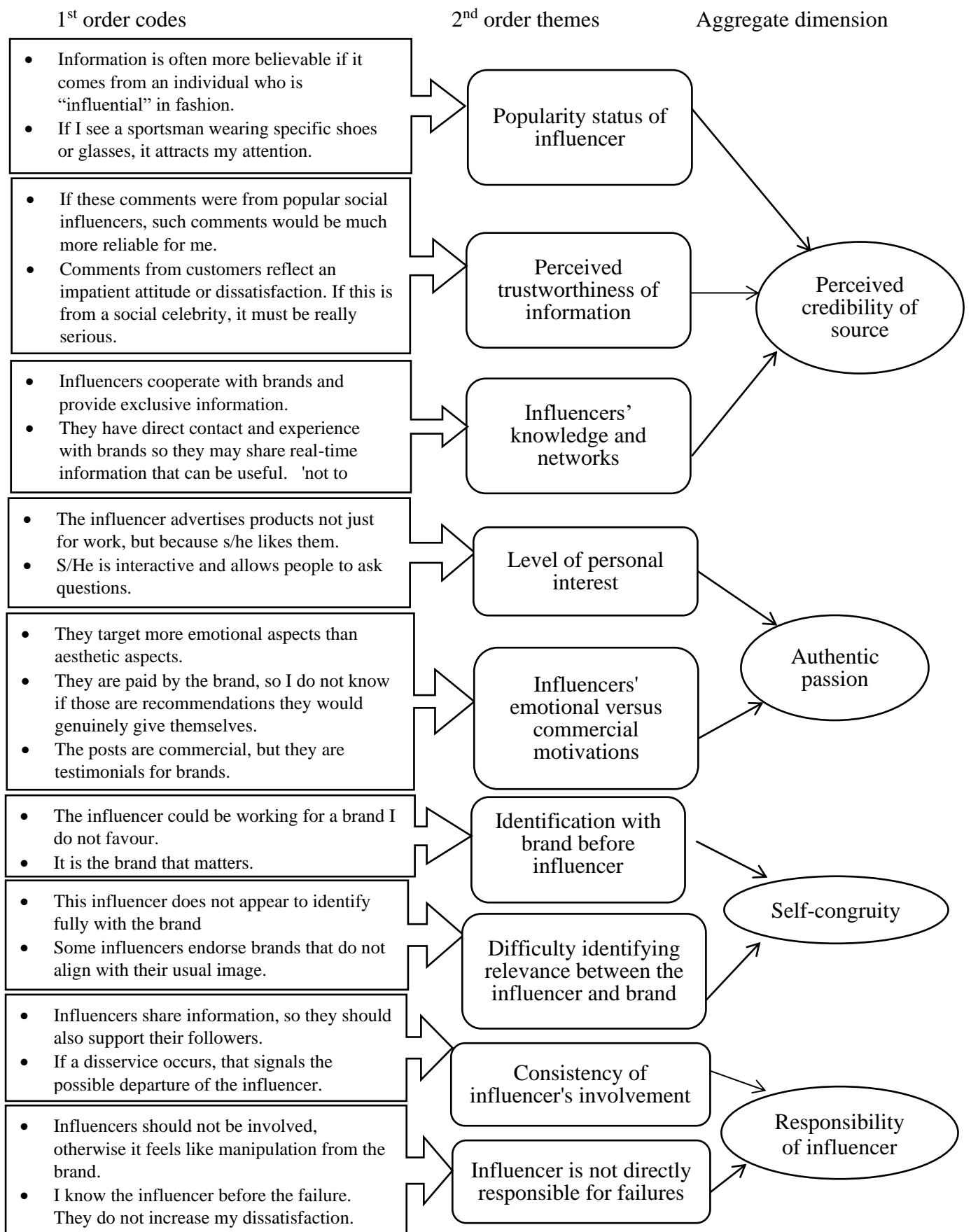
2   Methodology

Social constructivism posits that individuals actively create their own knowledge by comprehending the actions and interactions they conduct or engage in. It emphasises the interdependence of positioning of the self, whereby our subjective predispositions enable us to understand the current reality we engage in. The influencer, which means socially present through internet environments, plays a role in correlating their followers comprehension with the content they distribute online, which allows us to encompass the viewpoint of SIT and CTT into the understanding of social constructed processes.

Using theoretical coding, the researchers developed concepts informed by dialectical processes. Using semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions, which enquired for interviewees online purchase experiences, their perspectives towards the SMIs they frequently observe, and their perspective on SMIs role in service failure and recovery responses. The sample consisted of millennials aged between 18-39 years, known for their significant virtual engagement (Zhang, 2022) and preference for digital commerce channels (Jeong, Ko, & Taylor, 2023). Each researcher recruited millennials from their countries: France, Italy and the UK. From the 120 millennials who were approached, 58 responded (the participants' socio-demographic information is summarised in Table 1). The interviews occurred across a time between of 35 to 50 minutes, and were conducted using virtual platforms (Zoom, Google Meet, Teams, Skype) to facilitate a wider reach of participants effected by travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interview data was transcribed by the researchers, who translated all participants accounts into English, generating 260 pages of the direction discussions between the researchers and participants.

3   Results

The data analysis was conducted following a three-stage process recommended by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013) to develop main themes that were derived from the dialectical data inline with the social constructivism perspective. The first stage involves the examination of the transcribed primary interview data, to identify primary codes that commonly represented multiple participants responses. Two researchers were assigned the task to analyse the data of all three countries to identify the primary codes, and to proceed the analysis to the second and third stages. The two researchers developed the second-order themes that were informed by codes informed by the explicit words of the data, and extant literature, leading to the generation of 9 second order themes. The third-order analysis lead the generation of four aggregate dimensions that describe the generalised qualities of SMIs and their impact on service failure and recovery: perceived credibility of source, authentic passion, self-congruity and responsibility of influencer (Figure 1). By this stage, the remaining two researchers were assigned to examine that themes to ensure they were relevant to the emerging data from each country. They concluded that no significant differences existed between the millennial customers from the three countries, thus providing a rigorous generalisation across the sample on perspectives towards SMIs and their role towards service failure and recovery strategies.

Figure 1: Data Structure

1st order codes   2nd order themes   Aggregate dimension

- Information is often more believable if it comes from an individual who is "influential" in fashion.
- If I see a sportsman wearing specific shoes or glasses, it attracts my attention.

→ **Popularity status of influencer**

- If these comments were from popular social influencers, such comments would be much more reliable for me.
- Comments from customers reflect an impatient attitude or dissatisfaction. If this is from a social celebrity, it must be really serious.

→ **Perceived trustworthiness of information**

- Influencers cooperate with brands and provide exclusive information.
- They have direct contact and experience with brands so they may share real-time information that can be useful.   'not to

→ **Influencers' knowledge and networks**

→ **Perceived credibility of source**

- The influencer advertises products not just for work, but because s/he likes them.
- S/He is interactive and allows people to ask questions.

→ **Level of personal interest**

- They target more emotional aspects than aesthetic aspects.
- They are paid by the brand, so I do not know if those are recommendations they would genuinely give themselves.
- The posts are commercial, but they are testimonials for brands.

→ **Influencers' emotional versus commercial motivations**

→ **Authentic passion**

- The influencer could be working for a brand I do not favour.
- It is the brand that matters.

→ **Identification with brand before influencer**

- This influencer does not appear to identify fully with the brand
- Some influencers endorse brands that do not align with their usual image.

→ **Difficulty identifying relevance between the influencer and brand**

→ **Self-congruity**

- Influencers share information, so they should also support their followers.
- If a disservice occurs, that signals the possible departure of the influencer.

→ **Consistency of influencer's involvement**

- Influencers should not be involved, otherwise it feels like manipulation from the brand.
- I know the influencer before the failure. They do not increase my dissatisfaction.

→ **Influencer is not directly responsible for failures**

→ **Responsibility of influencer**

Analysis discussion

Perceived credibility

Perceived credibility of source refers to a recipient's perception of the credibility of a message source, without reflecting on the credibility of the message itself. If the perceived status of the sender is high, recipients will probably perceive the information as believable, competent and trustworthy. Credibility of source can be linked to another term, believability of information; that is, information perceived as believable and accepted by the recipient (Yin, Sun, Fang, & Yim, 2018). Trust in an organisation and the sharing of brand-related information is partly facilitated by source credibility (Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020). SMIs establish their online identity based on a specific subject they specialise in (Kim & Kim, 2021) which can impact the customers' expectations of the SMI credibility. The effect of negative WOM from a source perceived as highly credible, because of their expertise and trustworthiness, on customers' perceptions will be stronger than the effect of negative WOM from a less credible source, despite positive comments from alternative sources or other customers. Additionally, though an influencer may offer recommendations to remain with brands despite service failures, customers are likely to assess the validity of their recommendations when it concerns service failures.

Authentic Passion

Authentic passion refers to SMIs' perceived level of personal enjoyment and interest in endorsing or commenting about brands and their services and products, overruling the perceived monetary or status rewards they receive from contributing content sponsored by a brand (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Moulard, et al., 2018). SMIs with specific fashion preferences and values become representatives of particular customer segments, such as millennials who favour luxury branded products. This along with the influencer's passion to share specific brand-related information can be considered narrowcasting, a form of communication where the sender transmits information to a specific audience (Barasch & Berger, 2014). The authentic passion of the messages of influencers who exhibit extrinsic motivation can be critically questioned by customers. Though messages from SMIs are perceived as authentic communication, and SMIs are generally expected to discuss several brands, their perceived passion to create and share fashion-related information could be overshadowed by sponsorship opportunities to promote brands they would not themselves usually endorse. SMIs may have authentic passion in endorsing brand-related information and make recommendations to continue using a brand's services, thus contributing to a service recovery on behalf of the provider. However, customers may be sceptical of influencers who try to encourage remaining with brands despite service failures, which can potentially decrease their perceptions of the SMI's authentic passion towards their followers.

Self-congruity

Self-congruity is considered an extension of self-concept, referring to the match between a brand's image and an individual's self-concept (Xu & Pratt, 2018). The assumption of self-congruity is that individuals express positive attitudes towards a focal object when they perceive it to be a representation of. Self-congruity establishes a bond between customers and brands that are consistent with each other and causes customers to search for consistency between marketing messages and self-identities, particularly between the brand and influencers. Influencers' associations with different brands could cause customers to perceive them as having little congruence with specific brands, thus weakening the effect of influencers, especially following service failures. Likewise, self-congruity between influencers and followers creates an environment comprising shared values and characteristics, causing followers to increasingly follow influencers on subjects of interest (Nekmat & Ismail, 2019). This may increase the positive effect influencers have on supporting brands' recovery strategies by increasing the influencer's relevance to the information as well as their credibility.

Responsibility of influencers

Responsibility of influencers refers to customers' perceptions regarding the extent to which SMIs are responsible for the service failures of brands they endorsed and are obliged to assist in service recovery procedures (Audrezet et al., 2018). SMIs are considered to have control over their endorsement of products or brands through their online content, which is meant to represent their alleged real life. This means that their followers may hold the influencers accountable for failures, even if these failures were beyond their control. An influencer's tendency to diverge from brands following service failure becomes quite noticeable to customers when their eWOM related to the brand is less active following service failures. Additionally, customers may develop suspicions about a brand's attempt to manipulate customers by using influencers (Singh et al., 2020) to promote an image that may cause customers to overlook failures. However, if customers perceive the influencer to have minor responsibility for the failure, they are less likely to assign their negative evaluation of a service failure to them. Thus, it can be argued that influencers are only responsible for reproducing or sharing messages and are not responsible for delivery failure of services and products, thus reducing the perceived level of blame or responsibility assigned to them.

4   Conclusions and discussion

This study examines a perspective of SMIs their influence on customers through service failure and recovery through four key themes identified following interpretation of interview data: perceived credibility of source, authentic passion, self-congruity and responsibility of influencers. Each of the discussed themes plays a major role in shaping how customers perceive SMIs involved in service failure and recovery efforts. This study finds that the positive effect of SMIs on customers is not immediate or based on short-term interactions with providers' services or the influencers themselves. For customers with no prior relationship with employed influencers, authenticity is one of the key factors needed to maintain the impact of the influencer. Customers' unfamiliarity with an influencer can disrupt the perceived credibility and authentic passion of the influencer, and make it difficult for customers to identify self-congruity between the influencer, the brand and themselves. Thus, if brands employ specific influencers, they need to be given time to build a follower relationship with the customers to build trust and believability in their efforts.

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TABLE 1 - Participants' socio-demographic information

Country	Gender	Occupation	Age
France	F	Luxury hospitality manager	25
	F	MBA Global Fashion student	23
	F	Fashion product manager	22
	F	Fashion event manager	24
	F	Luxury hospitality and event specialist	24
	F	Luxury event specialist	24
	M	Luxury fashion customer experience specialist	23
	F	MBA Global Luxury Fashion Management student	23
	M	MBA Global Luxury Fashion Management student	24
	F	MBA Global Luxury Management student	23
	F	MBA Global Luxury Management student	23
	M	MBA Global Luxury Management student	24
	M	MBA Global Luxury Management student	24
	M	Creative designer	27
	F	MBA Global Fashion and Luxury Management student	25
	F	MSc Global Client Service Management student	23
	F	Fashion store associate	25
	F	MBA Global Luxury Management student	24
	M	Fashion store associate	27

Country	Gender	Occupation	Age
Italy	F	Marketing assistant	25
	F	Marketing assistant	27
	F	University Art and History student	25
	M	Engineering manager	34
	F	Fashion event manager	34
	F	Tourist guide	35
	F	Fashion store manager	34
	F	Fashion store associate	30
	F	Market research analyst	33
	F	Fashion product manager	26
	F	University Fashion Marketing and Business student	25
	M	University Fashion Marketing and Business student	30
	F	Fitness entrepreneur	34
	F	University Business and Administration student	23
	F	University Fashion Marketing and Business student	24
	F	University Business and Administration student	24
	F	University Business and Administration student	22
	F	Fashion product manager	26
	F	University Art and Entertainment student	26
	F	University Business and Administration student	20
	F	University Fashion Marketing and Business student	31

Country	Gender	Occupation	Age
United Kingdom	F	University Fashion and Marketing student	22
	F	Marketing associate	30
	M	University Economics student	23
	F	Human resource coordinator	29
	M	MSc Business student	24
	M	University Economics student	22

	M	Interior Design student	23
	F	University Business student	21
	M	Fitness instructor	27
	F	Administrator	30
	M	MSc Economics student	25
	M	Mortgage advisor	33
	F	Procurement officer	26
	F	University Marketing student	18
	F	University accommodation officer	24
	M	University Finance student	21
	M	Lecturer in Marketing	29
	F	Receptionist	27
	M	Accountant	32