The web of influencers : a marketing-audience classification of (potential) social media influencers

The Web of Influencers. A Marketing-Audience Classification of (Potential) Social Media Influencers

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Key words: Social Media Influencer; Media; Classification; Audience; Authenticity; Prestige; Celebrity

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Abstract

This study aims to integrate the literature on social media influencers into a framework that classifies (potential) social media influencers and highlights their features. Previous classifications have mainly focused on the measurable characteristics of social media influencers (e.g. number of followers, interaction rate, etc.) as determined either by scholars or consumers. In reality, though, the potential social impact of an influencer evolves as an interaction between his/her own goals and motivations and the perceptions and attributions of the audience. The present study proposes a conceptual classification that combines the characteristics of social media influencers with the audience's perceptions of the social media influencer. The proposed classification consists of three types of top social media influencers – Passionate Business Influencers, Passionate Influencers and Celebrity Influencers and two types of potential social media influencers of Dreaming Business Dormants and Passionate Topic Enthusiasts. The differences between them are explained by celebrity status, level of authenticity and received revenues. The implications of our framework for marketers and research directions are discussed.

Key words: Social Media Influencer; Media; Classification; Audience; Authenticity; Prestige; Celebrity

Introduction

Social media provide opportunities for both individual users and organisations. Via social media, individual users are able to share their knowledge and experience with the wide world (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Organisations can use social media for marketing goals, such as to increase brand awareness, to attract consumers or clients, to change attitudes towards the brands and to increase purchase intent (Ananda et al., 2016). One way to use social media to reach these marketing goals is collaborating with social media influencers, also called social media influencer marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017). Social media influencer marketing is enjoying rapid growth (e.g. Evans et al., 2017), with today more than 60% of the companies experimenting with this new form of marketing (eMarketer, 2019). Some expect social media influencers to become the primary type of marketing in the near future. For others, however, social media influencers are seen as a threat to traditional marketing strategies and the endorsers that are trained for these jobs (Nekatibebe, 2012). To correctly judge the potential impact and opportunities of social media influencers for the marketing industry, more knowledge is needed on how this group of endorsers is positioned in comparison with existing endorsers as well as how they are perceived from the perspective of the audience.

Despite their popularity, social media influencers remain thus far fairly understudied in the academic literature (Bakker, 2018; for a review see Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Two of the main questions raised in previous research focus on how to select the 'perfect' social media influencer for the predefined goals of the brand or researcher and how to determine the actual social influence of the influencer. Researchers have proposed and discussed different definitions and classifications of social media influencers based on, for instance, reach (De Veirman et al., 2017) and impact (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019), which can be used by organisations to select influencers. Also, several techniques have been applied to determine the social influence,

such as sociometric techniques, interviews with influencers, observations and self-designating strategies (Weimann, 1991; Wiedmann et al., 2010).

Although these classifications of social media influencers and techniques for determining their influence provide important insights for marketers and researchers, they highly depend on either the characteristics of the influencers as determined by the scholars or as evaluated in a quantitative survey among consumers. Moreover, these measures only allow the evaluation of the current social influence and do not offer insights into who the potential future social influencers will be. The popularity and economic value of social media influencers fluctuates and drops extremely rapidly in comparison with traditional offline celebrities with fixed value, due to the 'influencer fatigue' (Bazaarvoice, 2018). It is therefore important that companies notice and recruit potential future social media influencers at the beginning of their career in order to take full advantage of and profit from their explosive online growth and potential.

To understand the full reach of (potential) social influence, it should be recognised that social influence is an interplay between several elements, both on the side of the social influencers and that of the audience, and it is not always clearly distinguishable with quantitative measures. Social influence also has to do with experiences with and feelings towards the exemplary figure. Therefore, definitions and classifications should also include the perspective of the audience (Shan et al., 2019). Social media influencers are increasingly popular among audiences, who perceive them as highly authentic and trustworthy in comparison with traditional celebrities or endorsers (Gräve, 2017). By actually interacting with audience members occasionally, social media influencers give them the impression they are being honest with them (Marwick & boyd, 2011). For some, this gives an impression of having conversations with (distant) friends (Chae, 2018; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). Female fans in the

study by Ando (2016), for example, reflected on their relationship with vloggers as a form of idealised relationship between sisters.

In line with this, several authors have suggested that one needs to analyse both the individual and social aspects of the influencer (e.g. Cova et al., 2007; Kang & Park, 2010), but research actually translating this idea into a practically useful framework is lacking. This paper aims to offer the first steps to fill in this gap. In particular, the scope of this research is to develop a conceptual framework to classify influencers and potential social media influencers based on their dynamic relation with their followers, which is the central element that seems to apply to all social media influencers (Ouvrein et al., 2020).

In what follows, the definition of social influence will first be discussed, followed by an overview of the existing frameworks and classifications of social media influencers. Next, the proposed theoretical framework will be outlined in more detail based on the central nodes of the scheme (Table 1). This will be followed by a detailed description of the different types of (potential) social media influencers our scheme has distinguished, supplemented with some examples from the fashion and food industries based on some or our own exploratory interviews and secondary research.

Social Influence

Raven (2008) defined social influence as a change in an individual's (i.e. the target of the influence) thoughts, feelings, attitudes or behaviours as a result of an action of another person (i.e. the influencer). According to this definition, social influence is developed by an individual person and should be distinguished from social influence from businesses or brands with online accounts (Raven, 2008), a reasoning we follow here. Similar conceptualisations have arisen in the domain of opinion leadership, such as by Gnambs and Batinic (2013). The latter authors, for example, refer to social influence as an 'influence in informal groups among peers' (p. 613)

and see it as the result of the opinion leadership of that individual (i.e. ‘an individual’s ability to informally shape attitudes, opinions and overt behavior of others’, p. 598).

This individual person can develop the following two types of social influence: An informational social influence describes how the individual accepts the information from the influencer as evidence about reality and uses this to increase his/her own knowledge (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). A normative social influence refers to interpreting the information of the influencer as implied expectations on how one should behave (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

Several theoretical frameworks explain the processes through which these two types of social influence develop. An informational social influence results from a process of internalisation, meaning that the target person accepts the influence of the influencers because the information meets with his/her own values and ideas (Kelman, 1961; Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003). Informational social influence can also be explained by the source credibility theory. The central premise of this theory is that the acceptance of information depends on the qualities of the source, such as expertness and trustworthiness (Hovland et al., 1953). A normative social influence, in contrast, can be explained by the processes of compliance or identification. In the former case, the target of the influence adapts his/her attitudes and/or behaviour in order to meet with the prescribed expectations and/or to avoid punishment (Kelman, 1961; Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003) although he or she does not necessarily share the opinion or believe the behaviour is the best option (Rashotte, 2007). In the latter case, though, the target of the influence identifies with the influencer and is therefore more inclined to copy his/her attitudes and behaviours (Kelman, 1961; Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003). A normative social influence can also be explained by Bandura’s social learning theory. According to this theory, individuals develop attitudes towards and behavioural intentions to participate in a certain behaviour by observing others (role models) who perform the behaviour. These processes are referred to as vicarious learning processes. These learning

effects can be facilitated based on i) the nature and closeness of the relationship with the exemplary figure (in this case, the social media influencer) (Bandura, 2001) and ii) the status and popularity of the role model (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

Research on the social influence of social media influencers has found evidence for the potential that social media influencers have to exert informational and normative social influence over their readers, receivers or followers with regard to brands and products (e.g. De Veirman et al., 2017; Schouten et al., 2019). In this way, social media influencers overlap with how traditional endorsers function – firstly, because they both exert influence with the content they create for a large number of followers (Shan et al., 2019) and, secondly, because they function as opinion leaders who influence consumers' product decisions and evaluations (Shan et al., 2019).

Despite these similarities, social media influencers possess some typical characteristics as well due to the social media environment in which they are active. The study by Gräve (2017) points to some differences in the audience's perceptions of social media influencers versus traditional celebrity endorsers. Whereas social media influencers were mostly described as being similar and trustworthy, the effectiveness of traditional celebrity endorsers was perceived as being dependant on characteristics such as attractiveness, expertise and likeability. Moreover, social media influencers themselves experience certain differences. Based on interviews with social media influencers, Ouvrein and colleagues (2020) distinguish four elements that set social influencers apart from traditional celebrities and endorsers. Firstly, social influencers do not consider themselves to be famous in the traditional sense of the word. They are not recognised on the street; rather, they are just 'instafamous', which is a type of fame that exists only in the social media environment. Secondly, inspiring and influencing others is influencers' most important job, which can result from both conscious and unconscious motives. The content the influencers bring should be authentic, which is the third

and most important element in the definition of the participants in the study by Ouvrein et al. (2020). In contrast to marketing research that mostly describes authenticity as a well-thought-out strategic way of presenting oneself (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Senft, 2008), participants in Ouvrein et al.'s study associated it with the terms honest, creative and immediate and make optimal use of the opportunities of social media to achieve these goals (Ouvrein et al., 2020). Lastly, social influencers are unique because of their close online interactions and relationships with their audience. In contrast with traditional celebrities, who seem to mostly selectively reply to fans' tweets (Stever & Lawson, 2013), social influencers indicated attempting to keep follower interactions alive (cf. by commenting back or via give-aways) because these motivate and support the followers (Ouvrein et al., 2020). Taking these typical elements of social media influencers together with the often-cited definition by Freberg and colleagues (2011, p. 1), Ouvrein et al. (2020, p. 18) define social media influencers as follows: 'Social influencers/content creators are "average" people who inspire and influence others, consciously or unconsciously, through online creations that are perceived as authentic by a close audience'.

Several of the elements of the definition are central in the theoretical frameworks that have been used by previous researchers to discern social media influencers from non-social media influencers and/or to develop classification systems of social media influencers. In what follows, an overview of the existing classification systems of social media influencers is given.

Previous Classifications of Social Media Influencers

In the academic literature, different classifications of social media influencers can be found. These classifications are highly informative for brands to be able to select the 'right' influencer to promote their brand (Gross & van Wangenheim, 2018). It has generally been assumed that the attractiveness of social media influencers for companies is largely determined by the size of their follower base (De Veirman et al., 2017). Accordingly, one popular way of classifying these social media influencers is based on the number of followers they have (Ruiz-Gomez,

2019). In practice, a distinction has been made between mega influencers (> 1 million followers), macro influencers (between 100.000 and 1 million followers), micro influencers (between 1.000 and 100.000 followers, in small countries, the upper limit is often distinguished at 10.000 followers) and nano influencers (very small follower base, mostly local, < 1.000) (e.g. Ismail, 2018). The number of influencers used to distinguish the different categories may vary per country and per platform (platforms with many users, such as Instagram or YouTube, may use higher upper limits compared to platforms with a lower number of users, such as TikTok).

Mega influencers are often very famous celebrities (sports stars, actors or singers) that are known through other media (Ismail, 2018). They are usually not considered an expert in a particular product domain, and the relationship they have with their followers is more detached and distant (Ismail, 2018). Macro influencers are mostly those who have gained their fame through social media (Ismail, 2018). They have become very popular through the content they post on their social media profiles, and they usually have a digital presence on various platforms (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Micro influencers have a rather small follower base and are often focusing on a specific niche or product domain (e.g. fashion, food, fitness or high-tech). They are perceived as opinion leaders in the domain (Ismail, 2018). Micro influencers are the largest group of influencers (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). To conclude, nano influencers are more recently identified as a separate category. These influencers have a rather small reach, with followers that are part of the influencer's local community (Ismail, 2018).

Connecting with social media influencers who have a large follower base guarantees a broad reach of the (sponsored) post. However, the rise of false social media profiles and the possibility to buy followers on shady websites have questioned the relevance and importance of number of followers as a selection criterion. Additionally, when having millions of followers, it is difficult to maintain an intimate relationship with each of these followers (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Accordingly, apart from distinguishing social media influencers based on their number of

followers, other qualitative measures of online popularity – such as the engagement rate on their profiles and the number of likes, the number of comments, the quality of comments and retweets (i.e. Qualityscore) (e.g. Bakker, 2018) – have been used. The engagement rate is often measured by dividing the number of interactions by the number of followers. Recent insights from Influencer DB (Mobile Marketer, 2019) show that the engagement rate of macro influencers (> 10.000 followers) is only 3.6%, while the rate of micro and nano influencers ranges between 6.3% and 8.8%, with the highest rates for influencers with the lowest number of followers.

In addition to the distinction between mega, macro and micro influencers, Ruiz-Gomez (2019) also refers to the following three other categories of influencers: accidental internet celebrities, satellites or parasites and wannabes. However, one can question whether these are real influencers as they have only short-lived and coincidental fame (accidental internet celebrities), surf on the success of real influencers to whom they are related (e.g. sibling or partner of someone famous; satellites) or (unsuccessfully) try to build a large follower base by copying the strategies of actual influencers (wannabes).

Although these parameters are important to identify and select the appropriate influencer for a brand, other characteristics may be relevant as well. For instance, Bakker (2018) refers to the VisCAP model of the source effectiveness of Rossiter and Percy (1980) to identify the suitability of an influencer. Next to reach (defined as ‘visibility’), credibility (expertise and objectivity), attractiveness (likeability and similarity) and power (persuasive influence) play an important role. As such, an influencer who is widely known and an expert in the domain, is perceived to be similar to the members of the target group and has an important impact on the purchase decisions of this target group seems to be more appropriate to endorse a particular brand than an influencer scoring low on these factors.

Similar types of classifications have also been developed for social media influencers in specific domains. Wiedmann et al. (2010), for example, conducted a survey study to identify different types of influencers in the fashion industry. They consider the basics of social influence as a central theoretical framework to identify a social media influencer, including who one is, what one knows and who one knows. The former two are determined by individual capital (personality, knowledge, skills and ability), while the latter is determined by social capital (or the connections one has in his/her social network). The survey study of Wiedmann and colleagues (2010) among a German sample of 480 adult consumers examined whether these facets can give input for a segmentation of social media influencers. The study identified the following three types of influencers: fashion superspreaders, narrative fashion experts and helpful friends. Fashion superspreaders are highly empathic and have close relationships with their friends. They do not see themselves as experts nor as highly knowledgeable people. Accordingly, this group is characterised by high social and low individual capital. Narrative fashion experts are highly knowledgeable and see themselves as experts and innovators in the fashion domain. They also like social activities and spending time with friends. This group scores highest on personality strength and gregariousness, indicating that they like taking up leadership roles and playing a role on the foreground. The third group, the helpful friends, are risk averse and not very knowledgeable. They have only a medium amount of individual capital and the lowest amount of social capital across groups.

Gross and van Wangenheim (2018) took another approach to identify different types of influencers by focusing on the perceptions of the influencer themselves. They conducted in-depth interviews with influencers to be able to categorise them from a marketing perspective. The conversations resulted in the following classification of four influencer types based on social presence (willingness to connect and exchange info with others) and domain breadth (broad or narrow scope of content): Snoopers, Informers, Entertainers and Infotainers. Snoopers

are intrinsically motivated to create content on their social media channels, and they perceive the content creation as fun and amusing. Informers mainly aim to share knowledge and information and advise their followers, while entertainers are motivated to provide amusement and entertainment. Infotainers are knowledgeable experts in the domain but provide this content with a high entertaining value.

Adding the Side of the Audience

Although the existing available classifications give an interesting starting point, they are almost all developed from an outsider perspective, making use of 'objective' measures, such as the current number of followers, scores of attractiveness and past interactions, which do not give insights into potential future influence nor into the perceptions on the side of the audience. Apart from the measurable criteria, the chances that a social influence will develop, or not, will also depend on how both the social media influencer and the audience member experience and perceive the content and the relationship with each other. This aspect was also stressed by the social media influencers in the interview study by Ouvrein et al. (2020) as, for them, the audience and its experience and feelings of connection are central to whether or not they succeed and will remain successful in having social influence. This can also be observed in today's trend of virtual social media influencers. Given that these influencers grow very fast, they have an engagement rate three times higher than real social media influencers and the people behind them have strong intentions to influence (Baklanov, 2019), they seem to be the perfect fit based on the objective criteria of existing classifications. However, virtual social media influencers also experience a fairly fast negative follower growth (Baklanov, 2019), which has been attributed to the fact that they cannot emotionally connect with humans (Bradley, 2020). Research experimenting with emotional storytelling by virtual social media influencers has indicated that the audience has difficulties following and responding to a human

story told by someone who is not human (Bradley, 2020). These perceptions by the audience are thus crucial to achieving the intended social influence.

Indeed, in reality, the potential social influence of an influencer will evolve as an interaction between his/her own goals and motivations and the perceptions and experiences of the audience towards that person. The theoretical model of Kapitan and Silvera (2016) supports the idea that consumers' attributions during exposure to endorsed messages intensively steers the effectiveness of the post. Taking these factors into account, it is possible, for instance, that a social media influencer has no personal intention to exert influence over others but may become influential in the eyes of his/her beholders (Watts, 2007). This is a result of the fact that the successful use of social media marketing has to do not only with the product-influencer fit but also with the influencer-audience fit. Social media influencers have not only an important economic position in our society but also a cultural one (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Social media influencers function as exemplary figures for people's cultural beliefs, attitudes and behaviours (Abidin & Brown, 2019; Escalas & Bettman, 2005) and are able to set certain trends in motion in societies (e.g. gay influencers; Abidin, 2019; Lovelock, 2017). In line with this, research has found that a good match between the audience member's perception of social media influencers' image and their own ideal self-image has a positive effect on the effectiveness of the endorsement (Shan et al., 2019).

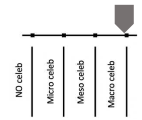
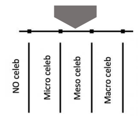
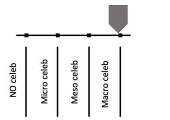
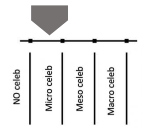
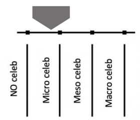
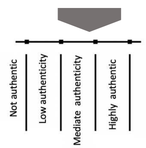
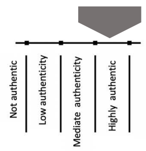
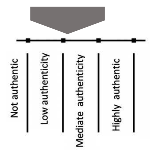
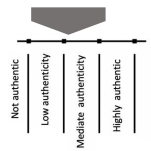
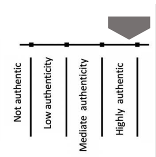
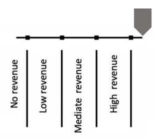
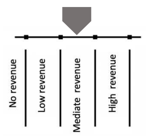
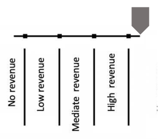
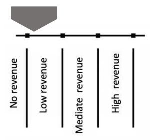
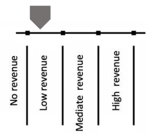
Useful classifications for marketers should thus not only classify social media influencers in terms of the measurable characteristics of the social media influencers but also based on the experiences and perceptions of (potential) audiences and the social influencers themselves. These elements might not always be determined with a specific score on a scale but should rather be seen as a slider on a continuum. By integrating both perspectives, the characteristics/perceptions of the social media influencer and the perceptions of the receivers, the approach of the present study allows us to step away from investigating social influence

from a purely marketing perspective and instead merges audience (on the side of the follower) and marketing (on the side of the influencer) approaches.

A Marketing-Audience Classification of Social Media Influencers

In what follows, we propose a classification of existing social media influencers and potential social media influencers based on their passion for the topic (node 1), the way audiences perceive them (node 2) and the presence of social media entrepreneurship (node 3). The summarising model of our classification results in three different types of top social media influencers and two potential social media influencers (Table 1). All types can be further defined in terms of revenue, authenticity and/or celebrity status. These latter three features cannot be captured in simple decision nodes and are presented as sliding scales where differences can best be captured with a gradation of options (see Table 1). Below we explain each of the three nodes and the three sliding scales. In the next section, the five most relevant types of (potential) social media influencers are discussed in further detail, using examples from the domains of fashion and food as these are known to be two of the most successful domains of digital production (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Giles, 2018).

Table 1. Overview of the characteristics of the different types of social media influencers

	Top Social media influencers			Potential social media influencers		Unpassionate endorsers
	PASSIONATE BUSINESS INFLUENCER	**PASSIONATE INFLUENCER**	**CELEBRITY INFLUENCER**	**DREAMING BUSINESS DORMANT**	**PASSIONATE TOPIC ENTHUSIAST**	
Key elements	**Passionate, admired, strategic**	**Passionate, admired, accidental**	**Passionate, admired, strategic**	**Passionate, unnoticed, strategic**	**Passionate, unnoticed, accidental**	**Not passionate, unnoticed, accidental**
Passion	**Yes,** Topic-specific (mostly long passion for the topic) + entrepreneurial	**Yes**, Topic-specific (mostly long passion for the topic)	**Yes**, Entrepreneurial (passion to earn money within the domain using social media)	**Yes,** Topic-specific (much intertest in the topic) + entrepreneurial	**Yes**, Topic-specific (much interest in the topic)	**No,** online activities not inspired by passion for the topic, neither by entrepreneurial passion
Online admiration	**Yes**, considered as role model for the audience. Audiences give this person prestige.	**Yes**, followers are inspired. Online admiration is based on prestige as influencer has not the intention to influence.	**Yes**, online admiration is not the result of passion for the topic but can be the result of strategy or existing fame.	**No**, content is not picked up by the audience.	**Yes**, online admiration based on prestige, as influencers has not the intention to have this influence.	**No**, content is not picked up by the audience.
Social media entrepreneurship	**Yes**, strategic use of the platforms, focused at maximizing revenues, driven by entrepreneurial motives.	**No** intention to share content or to influence others with content.	**Yes**, strategic use of the platforms, focused at maximizing revenues, driven by entrepreneurial motives.	**Yes**, willingness to influence, but not always perfectly translated into practice.	**No** social media entrepreneurship, mostly no clear strategy for posting or earning money with it.	**No** social media entrepreneurship, mostly no clear strategy for posting or earning money with it.
Celebrity status*	Large discrepancy between the number of followers and the number of people the influencer is following. Can further be confirmed by the fact that the influencer has a verified account, which is an indication of a real famous person or brand. 	No personal knowledge of all the followers. 	Large discrepancy between the number of followers and the number of people the influencer is following. Can further be confirmed by the fact that the influencer has a verified account, which is an indication of a real famous person or brand. 	Knows all the followers. 	Knows all the followers. 	
Authenticity*						
Revenue*	Long-term and short-term collaborations with famous brands, large revenues. 	Sponsored posts and collaboration now and then. 	Long-term and short-term collaborations with famous brands, very large revenues. 	No, or very limited collaborations. 	No sponsored posts. 	

*the point on the timeline indicates the range in which the particular case can fall, depending on more individual information

Node 1: Passion

The first and foremost criterion we use to distinguish social media influencers from other endorsers (see Table 1) is that their online activities were started as a result of a passion. In this way, we follow the definition by Ouvrein et al. (2020) and the existing literature on opinion leadership, both claiming that passion (or involvement as it is called in the literature on opinion leadership) is a crucial driver for social influence (Grewal et al., 2000; Lyons & Henderson, 2005).

Passion in this context can take two different forms. Firstly, there is a domain-specific passion, which refers to 'a target-specific passion, that implies the existence of a specific domain that is the origin of one's affective experiences but also the target toward which one is motivated to fulfil a persistent effort' (Milanesi, 2018, p. 425). In the literature on opinion leadership, this type of passion is often referred to as involvement (e.g. Grewal et al., 2000; Lyons & Henderson), defined as a reflection of interest, enthusiasm, excitement and personal relevance for specific domains and products within this domain (Goldsmith, 1996; Zaichkowsky, 1985). The domain represents hobbies and activities performed during leisure time (Milanesi, 2018). For many social media influencers, this domain is fashion, but it can also focus on, for example, family life, sports or food (Giles, 2018). For example, when Chrissy Teigen began to blog about her passion for cooking and became more famous than ever, she started from a genuine true passion for cooking food. This is a domain-specific passion as it describes an activity that has been her hobby for a long time. She started doing it because she likes it and not because she could earn money with it. Influencers with a domain-specific passion inform their audiences about the products they use to enact their passion, not like objective trained journalists but with a profound enthusiasm (Booth & Matic, 2011). And this passion is their power, as followers' perceptions that the endorser really likes, uses and values the products or brand are considered a very important driver for endorser effectiveness (Kapitan

& Silvera, 2016). By enacting their hobbies with the endorsed brands, these people might in the end drive followers' consumption (Cova & Guercini, 2016). This was also confirmed in the interview study of Ouvrein and colleagues (2020) as most social media influencers indicated that they did not start their activities on social media because they wanted to become 'instafamous'; they just wanted to share their passion and experience with others, and they gradually noticed that they have influence (Ouvrein et al., 2020). They manage their authenticity by being informative and honest but primarily by being passionate regarding what they talk about (Audrezet et al., 2017). In many cases, the influencer has had the hobby since childhood and has always invested much of their leisure time in it. This has resulted in the development of great knowledge, skills and familiarity within the domain over the years (Milanesi, 2018). In this sense, their passion can lend them credibility and expertise in the eyes of their beholders (Haria, 2018). In line with this, research has found correlations between familiarity with the product and expertise (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987).

For a long time, it has been assumed that this expertise and competence resulting from a domain-specific passion is the major driver for social influence (e.g. Treadway et al., 2011). However, more recent research in the domain of opinion leadership has indicated that these competences are important to be able to inspire, motivate and share enthusiasm with the audience but are not essential for developing social influence (Gnambs & Batinic, 2013). The authors refer to the moderating role of what they have grouped together as 'influencer traits' (i.e. skills and knowledge that drive a strategic organisation of their online activities) (Gnambs & Batinic, 2013). More specifically, they found that a lack of expertise and familiarity can be compensated for by higher influencer traits. This idea of 'influencer traits' is comparable with the second type of passion distinguished by Milanesi (2018) – entrepreneurial passion. This type of passion is described as the development of a strong drive to make a difference as an entrepreneur and to earn money from that (Cardon et al., 2009). Starting to use social media

with the purpose of maximising incomes for one's webshop, for instance, can be considered an entrepreneurial passion (Ouvrein et al., 2020). Also, being passionate about social media and how it can be used to earn money can be classified as an entrepreneurial drive. This type of passion regularly seems to reflect the driving force of endorsers whose fame originates from other contexts (e.g. celebrity endorsers who start to make sponsored posts on social media). For example, while Paris Hilton has been making some cooking videos, her starting point was not a true/genuine passion for cooking; rather, she ventured into it because she is an entrepreneur and knows that cooking posts can generate much attention and revenue. Other common examples of endorsers driven by entrepreneurial motives are participants of reality-TV programmes who start making sponsored posts after the programme has finished. Laura Lieckens, for instance, (https://www.instagram.com/lauralieckens/) started doing paid posts after she became famous for participating in a local reality-TV programme. Her success as a social media influencer is (partly) determined by her existing fame from TV.

Whereas most social influencers are driven by one of these two types of passion when they start their online activities, many of them are steered by a combination of both after a while. More specifically, most social media influencers whose domain-specific passion stimulated their activities at first later experience how entrepreneurial motives may come into play. For example, one may start an Instagram account about healthy foods, starting from a genuine passion for cooking healthy meals, then become successful and get paid by organisations and start to post messages about specific products that may not have been present at first because now the entrepreneurship has also started to define the content. As a more concrete example, lifestyle social media influencer Jamie Lee Six (https://www.instagram.com/jamieleesix) occasionally endorses a specific brand of toothpaste or soft drink. In such cases, Jamie Lee is paid to endorse products she has no target-specific passion for. It is the entrepreneurial passion that drives the endorsement. This, however, does not mean that she loses her position as a social

media influencer as she continues to promote products from the domain she *is* passionate about as well. Audrezet and colleagues (2017) describe this as the typical tension between one's inner passion and the financial gains that most social media influencers struggle with after a while. By analysing how ordinary people with a passion became entrepreneurs, Milanesi (2018) describes this process as one part of the domain-specific passion being replaced by entrepreneurial passion as the person becomes enthusiastic about becoming an entrepreneur but still invests much of their leisure time engaged in the activity (still a domain-specific passion as well). According to some authors, the combination of both types of passion and related skills is the best basis for having strong social influence (Gnambs & Batinic, 2013).

By using passion as a necessary foundation for being or having potential to become a successful social media influencer, we immediately exclude one type of endorser that we suggest not be classified as a social media influencer – the *accidental (celebrity) endorser*. Accidental (celebrity) endorsers do not start their influencer career from a genuine and personal passion for a specific topic nor from an entrepreneurial passion. To illustrate why accidental endorsers do not fall under this umbrella, consider the following example: In season three, episode five of the romantic comedy-drama Sex and the City, lead characters Carrie and Miranda sit on a bench to enjoy a cupcake. Their accidental, or at least unintended, endorsement of cupcakes resulted in an unforeseen boom of the cupcake industry. They accidently launched a new hype by just eating a cupcake without necessarily having any special passion for cakes or baking. They became what we call *accidental celebrity endorsers*. The fact that what celebrities do or consume becomes popular among their audiences is an accidental by-product of their fame. This does not imply that Carrie and Miranda have no passion for cooking or cupcakes, it is possible that they have, but their influence is not prompted by such passion but rather by their existing fame. This type of influence can be explained by the general copying bias theory (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). According to this theory some people have the

intention to mimic the overall behaviour of prestigious others with an aspiration to achieve success, whether or not in the form of fame, themselves. Rather than (wasting time) first finding out what exactly is the key to success, a random 'copy all' strategy seems to drive human behaviour, explaining why *accidental celebrity endorsers* can start a trend. Accidental endorsers are not always celebrities, though. The term endorsers can also refer to credible experts, experienced laypeople or even random strangers having influence with their social media posts (Ohanian, 1990). For instance, one local virologist in Flanders was covered so often in the news as an expert on COVID-19 that he accidentally became famous for the type of sweaters he wore all the time and was asked to do sponsored posts on social media. This person, however, has no domain-specific, nor entrepreneurial, passion for fashion. Nevertheless, it is possible that these endorsers have an affiliation or domain-specific passion for the product they endorse, which will make them more credible and successful endorsers (Kertz & Ohanian, 1992), but this is not a necessity.

Node 2: Online admiration

The second element necessary to be a social media influencer is online admiration. Some social media influencers immediately have online admiration because they are already famous before they started making sponsored posts. Most social media influencers, though, have to gradually develop their online admiration. To clarify how online admiration can be developed, we refer to the prestige bias theory (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). In their paper, Henrich and Gil-White (2001) explain how social status can emerge either from the eyes of the beholders, the audience, who look up to someone or from an influencer's urge to dominate others by strategically influencing them. The first type, which the authors call online admiration, develops through prestige, which is represented in our second node. The latter they called dominance, which is represented by our third node. Node 2 adds the potential presence of online admiration

with the simple question – Do audiences grant influence on the social media influencer or not? – (see Table 1). Online admiration results from the audience's online expressions of respect for an individual's skills, expertise and motives for participating in the campaign of focus and can thus only be taken into account when including the perspective of the audience in the classification (Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). To acquire online admiration, social media influencers must be perceived by audiences as skilled and/or interesting role models, whose advice they actually want to follow. It is the influencer's passion (node 1) that grants them their expertise (Milanesi, 2018), being perceived as skilled, and it is the audience's awe that grants them their power over the behaviour of their followers (node 2). This can be explained by, for example, the impact of the audience's perception of the influencer's motives (personal internal or situational external) (Heider, 1958) on their behavioural intentions (Carr & Hayes, 2014). Research has indicated that when the motive is driven by passion (personal, internal motive), the audience seems to ascribe more prestige to the endorser and, as a result, is more open to product endorsement compared to external motives, the latter of which easily makes them doubt the qualities and features of the product(s) (Heider, 1958; Shan et al., 2019). We therefore believe that the existence or development of online admiration is necessary to become a social media influencer. However, if there is passion but no online admiration (yet), the person will fit into the category of potential social media influencers.

Node 3: Social media entrepreneurship

The use of strategies with the intention to influence is a third and important feature of our classification of influencers; some do, and some do not, use strategies to exert influence over their audiences (see Table 1). Although social media influencers do not make use of intimidation or coercion, as the original prestige bias theory describes (Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Raven, 2008), they do opt for conscious strategies consisting of strategic ways of making and sharing their posts, for instance, by making use of social media

planner apps that measure their impact and reach and inform them on when and what to post. These actions are thus not necessarily 'dominant' or negative but reflect a certain ambition that goes beyond mere passion for a topic. We refer to this as 'social media entrepreneurship'. Social media entrepreneurships is strongly related with entrepreneurial passion as a social media influencer who acts based on entrepreneurial passion will mostly also have the knowledge and drive regarding how to strategically strive for influence.

Nevertheless, influence does not need to flow out of a sender's intent or strategy to influence others (Watts, 2007). Early adopters of trends regularly become accidental influencers because they inadvertently launch a trend, and society is open to take over the trend. Following this reasoning, every early adopter can become the one that launched the trend independent of whether or not he/she had the intention to do so (Watts, 2007). Also, the classification system of Gross and Van Wangenheim (2018) suggests that social media influencers do not always develop strategies to influence. Whereas what they call 'informers' are oriented at intentionally sharing information and educational content and feel responsible for keeping their followers up-to-date, 'snoopers' categorises social media influencers whose sharing behaviour is the result of pure amusement and fun, flowing from their passion for the topic and not from strategy (Gross & Van Wangenheim, 2018). Some influencers merely create content with an eye on personal motives, such as self-expression and creativity, and not so much for the potential impact (Heinonen, 2011). In our classification, we make a clear distinction (node 3) between on one hand social media influencers that intentionally develop strategies for making money (i.e. scoring high on social media entrepreneurship) and on the other hand non-intentional social media influencers (i.e. scoring low on social media entrepreneurship).

Three nodes, five groups of (potential) influencers and the dynamics between them

Based on these three nodes, we group the web of social media influencers into three distinct blocks (see Table 1). The first block of the classification represents the top influencers and

consists of the following three types: *Passionate Business Influencers*, *Passionate Influencers* and *Celebrity Influencers.* These three groups score high on passion and online admiration, two necessary ingredients to be social media influencers (Ouvrein et al., 2020). Nevertheless, their types of passion are different (node 1) – whereas the *Passionate Influencer* is driven by a topic-specific passion, the *Celebrity Influencer* is stimulated by entrepreneurial passion and the *Passionate Business Influencer* by both. Also, the types of online admiration (node 2) differ. The *Celebrity Influencer* is already famous, meaning that his/her online admiration can be traced back to previous media performances. The online admiration of the *Passionate Influencer* and the *Passionate Business Influencer,* on the other hand, develops based on prestige. The next difference between them is social media entrepreneurship (node 3) – whereas the *Passionate Business Influencer* and the *Celebrity Influencer* are driven by entrepreneurial motives, the *Passionate Influencer* does not use strategies to influence but rather develops accidental online admiration. For many social media influencers, this first category of top social media influencers is the one they want to belong to. Some may aim to achieve access to this group by means of starting their adventure with an already a clear intent to influence others, in other words, social media entrepreneurship. Yet, if their audiences do not follow, they get stuck in the second group of potential social media influencers consisting of *Dreaming Business Dormants* and *Passionate Topic Enthusiasts.* These influencers have the passion (topic-specific passion for the *Passionate Topic Enthusiast* and entrepreneurial and/or topic-specific passion for the *Dreaming Business Dormant),* but the online admiration from the audience is not there (yet). The dynamics in our classification allow these potential social media influencers to switch to the first group when online admiration further develops. The difference between *Dreaming Business Dormants* and *Passionate Topic Enthusiasts* lies again in the presence of social media entrepreneurship. Whereas *Dreaming Business Dormants* act based on entrepreneurial motives, *Passionate Topic Enthusiasts* are not strategically looking for influence; if they do develop

online admiration, it will be accidental. The last block of influencers refers to people who are often referred to as social media influencers but do not actually earn this title based on the mechanisms of our classification and existing definitions (e.g. Freberg et al., 2011; Ouvrein et al., 2020). This has to do with the fact that they do not have a passion that drives their online activities. Even though it is possible that they are admired by the audience, not having a passion disqualifies them from being categorised as a social media influencer. This, however, does not mean that he/she cannot be a successful endorser. For both the top influencers and the potential social media influencers, their celebrity status, authenticity and potential revenue acquired from their passion will further define their specific status as a social media influencer. As mentioned before, we do not see these aspects as being absent or present but rather place them on a continuum.

Sliding scales of celebrity and authenticity

Whereas some *Top Influencers* are celebrities (i.e. *Celebrity Influencer*), it is less certain whether we can call *Passionate Influencers* 'celebrities'. Several definitions have been used to describe a celebrity. An often cited one is the definition formulated by Boorstin in 1961. He described a celebrity as 'a person who is well-known for his/her well-knownness' (Boorstin, 1961, p. 58). Although this definition is regularly criticised, it seems to represent the most critical element of being a celebrity, namely being 'known' (De Backer et al., 2019). Whereas everyone is known ('famous') within his/her personal network, celebrity status requires recognition outside one's personal network, established through the media (Rojek, 2001). One thus becomes a celebrity as soon as the number of people that recognises this person outscores the number of people this person knows. Thanks to the interactive features of Web 2.0. and practices such as blogging and vlogging, becoming a celebrity has become easier than ever before. People who use digital culture, and technologies such as video, blogs and social networking sites are often referred to as *micro celebrities* (Giles, 2018). This term was first

introduced by Senft (2008) and defined as ‘people amping up their popularity through social media to attaining celebrity status’ (p. 25). One important difference compared with ‘traditional’ celebrities is that micro celebrities do not need an affiliation with a powerful player, such as TV, to become famous (Khamis et al., 2017). Despite the lack of a powerful media actor, these ordinary people can develop a reach that coincides with that of television networks, thus reaching a mass audience, and thus questioning the ‘micro’ component in micro celebrities (Giles, 2018). New terms such as meso and macro celebrities were introduced to create a more realistic categorisation of online influencers, but the actual meanings of the terms remain unclear. As described above, it is hard to put exact numbers to these categories. Moreover, what may matter most is not so much the number of followers but the relationship between the social media influencer and each of their audience members. If we go back to the definition of a celebrity as a person that is being known by more people than (s)he knows personally, this implies that celebrities cannot have meaningful interactions with everyone that knows them. Their interactions with some of their followers will no longer be *social* but *parasocial*. A parasocial interaction refers to the feelings of an intimate reciprocal social interaction with a media figure despite knowing that it is only an illusion (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Following the increase in online interactivity, these interactions can take more direct and intimate forms especially with social media influencers because they are close to their audience. For a number of individuals, many of these parasocial interactions and feelings will eventually lead to parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956). A parasocial relationship can be defined as a celebrity-fan relationship in which the ‘ordinary’ person knows much about the celebrity, but the celebrity knows little about that person (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Research has confirmed that although social media influencers have regular contact with their followers, the maintained relationships still exists at a parasocial level (Ouvrein et al., 2020). The bigger the group of

followers, the more social media influencers will mainly maintain parasocial relations with their audience, and loose on authenticity, another important feature of being a successful influencer.

Authenticity gives people the feeling being closer to and familiar with the famous person (Tincknell & Raghuram, 2004), which in turn increases their identification with the person (Tincknell & Raghuram, 2004) and boosts his/her persuasive power (Kelman, 1961). The scientific literature has defined two dimensions of authenticity in the research area of parasocial interaction – perceived similarity to the audience member and perceived realism (Tsay-Vogel & Schwartz, 2014). The first dimension, the extent to which the media figure (or influencer) resembles the audience member, has a distinct impact on their parasocial interaction (Tsay-Vogel & Schwarz, 2014). Research has indicated that higher perceived similarity is a significant predictor of identification and parasocial interaction (Tian & Hoffner, 2010), which increases the social influence potential. Indeed, social influence theory states that greater perceived similarity is associated with increased compliance (Burger et al., 2004). The second dimension is described as whether the audience member has actually experienced the events of a certain narrative (Tsay-Vogel & Schwarz, 2014). The power of a narrative, for example in the form of a testimonial, can be attributed to the storyteller, who becomes an exemplary figure for the readers (Zillmann, 2006). Apparently, these effects might be extra strong when a social media influencer is the one testifying about his/her own stories since they score higher on the availability (i.e. the extent to which information is available in memory is higher when being a celebrity) and the representiveness heuristic (i.e. the degree to which an event is judged as similar is higher for a social media influencer because they are closer to the audience), two heuristics that underlie the exemplification processes (Yoo, 2016). This implies that it is important for influencers to cover both of these dimensions well if they want to be perceived as authentic.

Taken together, social media influencers with smaller groups of followers and who bring their content in a narrative format can thus better connect with their audience and score higher on authenticity. Especially among adolescents, social media influencers ascribe their popularity to their 'special' position in-between traditional celebrities and ordinary people (Ando, 2016). Adolescents seem to have more adoration for YouTubers compared with traditional celebrities (Westenberg, 2016), and call vloggers 'not real celebrities, just simple' (Ando, 2016, p. 133). Even though their relationship may not be very social but rather parasocial, social media influencers gain power by being perceived as a 'friend' (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019), who has an influence similar to that of 'friends' (Westenberg, 2016). When social media influencers become more famous, this sometimes challenges their popular position, authenticity and relationships with the audience. This has been confirmed several times in the literature on offline leadership, indicating that the quality of the relationship between a leader and his/her followers decreases when the number of followers becomes large (e.g. Schyns & Blank, 2010) and can be explained by the limited resource approach (Dansereau et al., 1975). Looking at the career development of specific social media influencers, many of them seem to fit this pattern, such as Kylie Jenner (Bosley, 2017) and Caroline Calloway (Newcomb, 2019). However, some exceptions can also be found, with some celebrities with high status who seem to manage to keep their authenticity high (e.g. Ed Sheeran). By working with sliding scales on revenue, authenticity and celebrity status, our classification is able to identify and classify these exceptions as well.

Sliding scale of revenue

Finally, a last aspect we capture in our classification of social media influencers is that of revenue. Top influencers that have an intent to influence and are also perceived as having an influence may receive a form of revenue from an organisation in order to exert influence. Some

social media influencers admit that earning revenue is one of their core drivers (Solis, 2016), whereas others indicate that the free products might not be the reason why they do it (Ouvrein et al., 2020). Revenue can vary from receiving free products/services to discounts to cash (Murphy & Schram, 2014); therefore revenue can be placed on a continuum, or sliding scale. Social media influencers that have no intent to strategically influence (*Passionate Influencers* and *Passionate Topic Enthusiasts*) will not approach organisations for collaborations as their goal in posting is mainly to share information about their passion, not to influence the thoughts, attitudes and behaviours of their audiences. Nevertheless, these social media influencers, especially those with online admiration, are regularly approached by companies. These social media influencers might consider accepting these offers, but only when they really like the product, as research has indicated that this is the first criteria for considering the collaboration (Ouvrein et al., 2020). When accepting several of these commercial offers, social media influencers can switch to the part of the categorisation of 'social media entrepreneurships' and further develop themselves into *Passionate Business Influencers*.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main goal of the present study was to classify social media influencers and potential social media influencers and highlight their features as a group. We suggest classifying them as Top Social Media Influencers and Potential Social Media Influencers based on their level of online admiration and the presence of social media entrepreneurship. This leads to five types of (potential) social media influencers, including *Passionare Business Influencers, Passionate Influencers, Celebrity Influencers, Dreaming Business Dormants* and *Passionate Topic Enthusiasts*. For each of these groups, their celebrity status and inherently connected authenticity as well as their potential revenue will influence the relations they develop and maintain with their followers and should be taken into account.

Five types of (potential) social media influencers: Examples from the domains of fashion and food

In the block of Top Influencers, we distinguished between *Passionate Business Influencers, Passionate Influencers* and *Celebrity Influencers.*

The group of *Passionate Influencers* represents individuals with still no strategies to influence the behaviour of others. They have a passion for a topic and openly share this passion with others who see them as influential (online admiration is present). Compared to *Passionate Business Influencers*, *Passionate Influencers* do not seek any revenues for their posts. As the influence of this group results only from the respect and adoration granted by the audience and not from strategic efforts to influence, this group will generally score high on authenticity; their content springs out just because they are being themselves, not steered by any other intentions. A Flemish example of a *Passionate Influencer* in the fashion domain is Marjolein Delva (@MarjoleinDelva). Marjolein has slightly more than 4,000 followers and is considered to be a micro influencer, who inspires her audience with posts about fashion, beauty, food and travel (Vervaet, 2018). In a short exploratory interview to test our classification in practice, Marjolein indicated that she is not doing any sponsored posts (low score for revenue) and frequently makes use of quotes to describe her posts, which she sees as an indication of self-expression and being passionate about the topics. Several of her posts contain quite a lot of text and discuss her personal life and experiences, which contributes to the narrative character (high score on authenticity). Marjolein's motives are mostly oriented at herself: 'I use Instagram mostly to gain inspiration to make certain pictures, get to know new people, travelling, or just for outfits'. Her number of likes and comments is limited, but Marjolein reacts to almost all of them, which points to a more social relationship with her followers. Nevertheless, Marjolein does not use Instagram in a strategic way to further develop these relationships (low social media

entrepreneurship): ‘I don’t really have a strategy to post, I know I should have one, but I just try to post as much as possible’. Another example from Belgium is Chloe (https://www.instagram.com/chloekookt/), who maintains an Instagram account about healthy food. She is a medical student (aged 21) who is keen on cooking and creating healthy dishes. She started her blog from this true topic-specific passion, and during the COVID-19 pandemic she suddenly attracted 30.000 followers in a few days’ time and gained attention from marketers. She started as a *Passionate Influencer*, with no specific entrepreneurial motives, yet attracted so much social admiration that she was lifted to the level of Top Influencer by her audience, and the development of social media entrepreneurship soon followed. She is now sponsored by several brands.

As time goes by, and *Passionate Influencers* attract more followers, they will also attract the attention of marketers and might rise on the revenue scale. It is, however, not as simple as to say that as soon as social media influencers receive financial or other material incentives, they become *Passionate Business Influencers*. *Passionate Business Influencers* are influencers who not only intentionally use strategies to exert influence over their audience but also succeed in being granted influence from their audience. Gaëlle Garcia Diaz (https://www.instagram.com/gaellegd/) is a Belgian example of this category. With her one million followers, this influencer is one of the top influencers in the fashion industry in Belgium (Influo, 2019). Based on secondary data from an interview by a local newspaper, it seems that Gaëlle developed her success from a long history of passion for fashion: ‘As a kid, I always dreamt about making this content’ (De Corte, 2019). There is a large discrepancy with the number of people Gaëlle is following herself (189), which indicates that she has obtained celebrity status. This is also further confirmed by the fact that she has a verified account, which is an indication of a real famous person or brand. Moreover, she also sometimes receives media attention. Gaëlle’s interaction rate is rather low; the number of comments is very limited, and

she rarely responds to them, which points to a rather distinct relationship with her followers. Throughout the years, Gaëlle has become a brand ambassador for several international brands, such as Puma. Gaëlle recently also developed her own clothing line and is responsible for the launch of several fashion trends. Her revenues are thus high. In the domain of food, a classical example we can give here is Chrissy Teigen. Chrissy started her career as a model, and became even more famous when marrying singer John Legend, but it was only when she became admired for her genuine passion – cooking (family) food – that she became very famous. It was her genuine passion for food, and posts about that (https://cravingsbychrissyteigen.com), which caused many start to admire her, and she eventually attracted +29 million followers. She is considered one of the most prominent food influencers in the world.

The last group in the category of Top Influencers are *Celebrity Influencers*. These are people who are already famous (macro celebrity status) from another context but whose entrepreneurial passion drives them to start making sponsored social media posts with the purpose of extra revenues (social media entrepreneurship). Given their existing fame, these influencers reap high revenues. Their authenticity is rather low as they are already an existing brand and do not have much space for personal adaptations to their existing image, although there are exceptions. The most famous example of this category is Kim Kardashian. She became famous with the reality-TV programme 'Keeping up with the Kardashians'. Due to the programme, she already had quite a lot of online admiration, which she then further developed by doing sponsored posts (entrepreneurial passion). Today Kim Kardashian has 193 million followers (celebrity status) and charges about one million per post (high revenue) (Sid, 2020). Kim Kardashian is one of the exceptions who, despite her celebrity status, still maintains her authenticity, and this is also what keeps her popular as a social influencer. Another story can be found, for instance, with the Dutch Demi Rutting, known from Temptation Island (https://www.instagram.com/demirutting/). Demi admitted in an interview with the Dutch

magazine Trouw that she partly participated in the programme because of the fame. Accordingly, she reached the status of celebrity and shortly after also became a social media influencer, making quite a lot of money. This, however, turned out to be a five-seconds-of-fame experience as the reality-TV star eventually was confronted with many negative comments and criticism on her (lack of) authenticity (Baneke, 2019). As a result, her fan base decreased quickly from 216K to144K today.

In the block of potential social media influencers, we distinguished between *Passionate Topic Enthusiasts* and *Dreaming Business Dormants*. The *Dreaming Business Dormants* category describes social media influencers that have the intention to influence, just like the *Passionate Business Influencers,* but they are not perceived as influential by the receivers (no online admiration). What these influencers sometimes seem to lack is the storytelling component, with a lack of authenticity as a result (Klassen et al., 2018). This can be observed in examples such as Ellemilla (https://www.instagram.com/ellemilla/). Ellemilla has a very popular and famous webshop, which resulted in a large follower base on her personal account as well (24.6K followers). However, her interaction rates indicate that her real influence through that account is rather limited. Several pictures contain only one or a couple of comments, and she only reacts to them once in a while. The majority of her pictures are focused on promoting her clothes. The story element is missing here (low score on authenticity). An example from the health domain is Marc Ryan (https://www.instagram.com/hashimotoshealer/). He is well-known from his career in functional medicine and the book he wrote, 'The Hashimoto healing diet', resulting in 13.9K followers. Marc wants to reach out to millions of people with health advice (entrepreneurial drive) and does this from a personal passion for healing, as both he and his daughter had been diagnosed with Hashimoto. Despite his topic-specific passion and entrepreneurial drives, his social media posts do not succeed. His engagement rate is only around 1% (Weber, 2020). His

posts often consist of medical pictures taken from books or the Internet, lacking authenticity. As a result, Marc does not enjoy online admiration from his audience. Only when these *Dreaming Business Dormants* become liked by many followers can they wake up from their dreaming-about-success position and become the Top Influencers they want to be.

Finally, the category of *Passionate Topic Enthusiasts* mostly describes people who use social media as a logbook. Their motives for using it are self-oriented, such as to collect pictures, ideas or memories for themselves. Users of Pinterest, for example, oftentimes collect pictures (fashion) or recipes (food) online as a kind of personal diary, without any intent to share with others. If their content is not subjected to any broad spread or influence, these persons will just stay passionate users (e.g. fashionista, foodie) but nothing more. Many Instagrammers can be placed within this category as they just love to share things about themselves, such as their outfits, but have no further intention with it. Their behaviour is mostly guided by motivations of fun and self-expression (Gross & Van Wangenheim, 2018). In the fashion domain, for instance, very often, young girls imitate the fashion-related behaviour of social media influencers, such as the use of #OOTD (Outfit of the Day) or tag brands in their posts because it is 'cool', and they want to show off with their latest fashion items (Abidin, 2016), not so much because they want to be a social media influencer themselves. The same goes for food, where many people (Rousseau, 2012), including adolescents (Holmberg et al., 2016), talk online about what they ate, will eat and want to eat. It is a way of expression identity (Rousseau, 2012), and many may have no further ambition than to express this identity or keep a food diary, yet some become so admired that they are lifted to the Top Influencer level by the audience, as was the case for the earlier-mentioned example Chloe.

Implications of the Proposed Classification

The aim of this work was to develop a conceptual classification of social media influencers based on the literature on social media influencers from different perspectives. The nature of the proposed classification remains exploratory, and more research is necessary to further refine the classification and elaborate the practical usage of it. Nevertheless, this classification makes some important contributions, resulting in implications for marketers and brands. Firstly, the classification allows marketers to look beyond the existing social media influencers, allowing them to analyse who might be interesting potential social media influencers. Given the fast growth as well as rapid decrease in the popularity of top influencers, marketers and brands might consider working together with potential social media influencers and ride on the success of their explosive growth. Secondly, in contrast to other classifications of social media influencers, the present classification combines the measurable characteristics from previous classifications with experiences and perceptions on both the side of the influencer (e.g. De Veirman et al., 2017) and that of the audience. Marketers and researchers should take these differences between and within types into account. If marketers want to rely on scientific conclusions in order to advertise more effectively by means of social media influencer marketing, it is important that both marketers and researchers have a common understanding of the different types of social media influencers. In this way, the study builds further on the arguments made by several scholars in different domains (e.g. opinion leadership: Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; advertising: Shan et al., 2019). Moreover, this classification has some implications for social influencer theory (Forbes, 2016). Although this theory recognised the importance of the exemplary figure in order to establish social influence, our study went one step further by also taking the admiration towards that exemplary figure into account on the side of the audience. Not every exemplary figure will be liked and imitated. The reception and perceptions of the audience should therefore be taken into account. Following the research on

offline leadership (e.g. Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), we thus advise social marketing research to further include the role of the followership.

Marketers and researchers that want to apply the proposed classification need to understand the perceptions of both the social media influencers and his/her audience in order to be able to position a (potential) social media influencer at the table and on sliding scales. An observable indicator of social media entrepreneurship is sponsored/paid posts. Although some countries have instated guidelines and/or regulations with regard to disclosing sponsored social media posts (e.g. Federal Trade Commission, 2017), disclosures are not always used or are vague/not clearly visible (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2016). Another observable indicator of social media entrepreneurship is a fixed posting schedule, such as with an app saying when and what the social media influencers need to post in order to have the highest reach. To gain deeper insights into the underlying motives, it is suggested to talk to social media influencers themselves. An observable indicator of the perceived admiration of the audience is appreciative comments on posts. Another strategy is administering a short survey questionnaire and/or (short) interviews among a sample of followers to measure indicators of perceived influence, such as prestige, authenticity and credibility as well as followers' perceived passion underlying influencers' activities (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016).

Based on the proposed classification, our study can also make some concrete recommendations for marketers and brands in regard to which types of social media influencers are best chosen in which situations. Important to keep in mind here is that every situation and brand is different, and choosing the correct social media influencer is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Marketers and brands should aim for a fit between the product, the influencer, the intended audience and the future goals of both. *Passionate Business Influencers* and *Celebrity Influencers* have the advantage of easily reaching a large audience. Moreover, they are experienced and strategic in their approach. However, they often have little to no time to have

contact with their followers (Ouvrein et al., 2020), which makes them lose some authenticity and less applicable when you want to reach small local markets. Moreover, *Passionate Business Influencers* and especially *Celebrity Influencers* expect large revenues as this is often their main source of income. *Passionate Business Influencers* and *Celebrity Influencers* should be used when they are at the top of their popularity because the moment their content becomes too repetitive or dips in quality, they very quickly lose reach, resulting in what is called 'influencer fatigue' (Bazaarvoice, 2028). The interview study by Gustavsson and colleagues (2018) among social media managers on how their companies build relationships with influencers indicated that these two groups of influencers are therefore very interesting for short-term collaboration in which fast sales is the main purpose.

Passionate Influencers are at the start of their careers. They are very approachable both for marketers and for the audience. They already have some online admiration, not by making strategic posts but by just being themselves. They might lack experience but have much potential and can be translated into large successes when given the appropriate guidance. *Passionate Topic Enthusiasts* have a profile similar to that of *Passionate Influencers* except that the online admiration is not there yet. The perfect match between this social media influencer, the brand and the audience is crucial here because no foundation yet exists. Although they can become a huge success, it will be necessary that both marketers and the potential social media influencers invest enough time in the process. Once the *Passionate Influencers* and *Passionate Topic Enthusiasts* start to grow, this growth can emerge very rapidly. Potential social media influencers can become Top Influencers within six months (Tigar, 2018), which is why it might be more interesting for certain brands to collaborate with the 'right' passionate influencer or potential social media influencer and take advantage of their explosive growth from the beginning instead of working with top influencers who might soon end up in a downward spiral. Moreover, this strategy guarantees a long-term collaboration,

which is considered the most attractive influencer marketing strategy (Gustavsson et al., 2018) as this allows better conversion, increased trustworthiness, higher brand exposure (Gustavsson et al., 2018) and the development of closer (para)social relationships with the endorser (Munnukka et al., 2019). Such a long-term collaboration is considered a 'win-win' (Pang et al., 2016) situation, especially for small to medium-sized companies that do not have the large budgets to collaborate with *Passionate Business Influencers* or *Celebrity Influencers* (Gustavsson et al., 2018). Moreover, their smaller size makes them very flexible to adapt to new social media trends and environments (Sammis et al., 2015).

Lastly, the *Dreaming Business Dormants* seem to be the least attractive group for marketers as these people have already actively tried to develop influence but failed in this. Once you have a negative online image, it is difficult to change that. Social media influencers that are trying too hard are easily depreciated as begging (e.g. Uptas, 2019). Using begging strategies oftentimes results from narcissistic motives to become famous. Although (potential) social media influencers score higher on narcissistic personality traits in general (Erz et al., 2018), the problem with *Dreaming Business Dormants* is that they do not have the knowledge and/or take the time to set up a marketing plan and translate it into practice. Begging sometimes has public shaming as a result (Uptas, 2019).

Based on the proposed classification, is should be clear that the position of social media influencers is dynamic. We highlighted that social media influencers might change their strategy over time (e.g. no strategic use to influence to strategic ways to influence) or are perceived differently over time by their audience (e.g. no perceived influence to perceived influence). These changes might affect their authenticity and their celebrity status as well as their relationship with their core group of loyal followers – those that follow the social media influencer and have already engaged with the content for a long period of time and should thus be taken into account by marketers. Moreover, this also points to some opportunities for future

research. To the best of our knowledge, research has not yet focused on these changes over time. An interesting research topic might be following a group of initial followers of social media influencers who grow from being *Passionate Topic Enthusiasts* to *Passionate Business Influencers* in order to further specify the different nodes of the classification. These followers might 'move' from being able to have meaningful interactions with the social media influencer to becoming part of an ever-growing community where meaningful interactions become more challenging and may disappear. Another suggestion for future research relates to possible cultural differences. The proposed classification has not yet been applied in different domains and countries, nor does it take specific cultural differences into account. Future research can apply the model to social media influencers in different domains, such as fashion versus food, and/or among social media influencers from different countries/continents/societies.

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