Social media have indisputably changed the way consumers and brands interact. Nowadays, many users generate contents on brands they like, or do not like, and share those opinions with other consumers from all over the world (Smith, Fischer and Yongjian, 2012). In this environment, some content providers have been able to come out of the crowd, and their opinions have gained a lot of credit among their peers. Called social media influencers (SMI), their influence is such that before deciding to buy a product, some of their followers, i.e. consumers who demonstrate a particular interest in the SMIs’ contents and “follow” all their posts, would systematically consult the SMIs’ opinion (Moon & Han, 2011).

Brands did not fail to notice this influence and quickly identified the numerous advantages that working collaboratively with these SMIs represent. By establishing partnerships with influencers, brands see their products praised in the content offered by the SMIs, which increases followers’ positive exposure to the marketing communication. The practice, called Product Placement (PP), refers to the covert brand/product embedding in a non-commercial support, in order to influence the follower, in the context of mass media (Russell, 2002). Although the practice is common with celebrities, most targets still do not clearly identify the commercial dimension behind a PP offered on social media (Boerman, Willemsen and Van Der Aa, 2017), which increases the effectiveness of the practice (Charry & Tessitore, 2016).
The SMI’s specific influence differs from that of celebrities because of the unique relationship the SMIs build with their followers. They built a special bond with their followers that lead the latter to see them as friends. SMIs interact frequently with their followers, and share personal details with them, which contributes to their particular para-social status and credibility (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015). An emotional bond is therefore constructed between the SMI and his followers, bond that immerge and engage the follower (Grant, Guthrie and Ball-Rokeach, 1991; Rubin, Perse and Powell, 1985).

Yet, research seems to focus on the direct consequences of exposure to the recommendation. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have investigated the consequences –in terms of influence and effectiveness- of a follower not being satisfied with the product recommended on subsequent recommendations by the same SMI. With this research, our objective is to evaluate the impact of dissatisfaction on different dimensions such as engagement in the SMI and his/her community, word-of-mouth intentions and consequences on post purchase intentions of other brands than the one which is the source of dissatisfaction. We also want to understand the processes that explain followers’ responses to an unsatisfying recommendation by an SMI. Considering the particular relationship built, this question seems relevant now that these SMIs become “professional” influencers, recommending products day in day out, not from one but from many different brands. Although the SMI may be candid about the product recommended, the followers’ dissatisfaction could negatively affect the SMI’s influential role and consequently, the many other brands he/she would keep on recommending. This, of course, would be a matter of concern for brands.

We conducted an online experiment with 2 scenarios in which respondents were either satisfied or dissatisfied with a product bought on the basis of a vlogger’s recommendations. 85 respondents completed our questionnaires. Participants were between 16 and 35 years old. 96% of the respondents were women.

The results show that dissatisfaction leads to lower purchase intentions of subsequent unrelated products. Interestingly, engagement in the SMI, in following the SMIs’ contents, in the SMIs’ community, and in WOM is not negatively impacted. The mediating role of the SMI’s credibility explains the process.
Concretely, this means that although followers might not withdraw from the SMIs and their communities, they will not follow recommendations to the same extent they used to do. The role of credibility in the subsequent purchase intentions of a different product is also demonstrated. Above the theoretical contributions, this study enables important managerial implications for SMIs and brands. While brands rely on number of followers or interaction intensity to infer level of influence, we show that these cues may not be representative of the influence. Although followers do not intent to follow recommendations, they are still engaged in the SMIs’ community and the number of followers does not decrease. Furthermore, this warns SMIs and brands from using this type of communication when the product to recommend does not meet all the quality requirements most followers may expect.

References


