The Importance of a Checkmark: An Investigation Into the Perceptions of Social Media Verification and Its Effects on Consumer Trust

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THE IMPORTANCE OF A CHECKMARK: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA VERIFICATION AND ITS EFFECTS ON CONSUMER TRUST

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors (Marketing)

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ABSTRACT

Media giants, among them Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, support verified accounts. Verification, denoted by a blue checkmark badge visible in search and on one’s profile, is ostensibly a way of confirming one’s identity, yet only accounts with large followings are awarded verification status by the platform. This research investigates the perception of verification in the context of paid partnerships with social media influencers, a topic relatively absent from the literature despite the billions of dollars spent on influencer partnerships. Verified influencers cost more, therefore, this research could allow brands to capitalize their ad return if they are made aware of the implications associated with verification. Specifically, I investigate if consumers perceive verification as more directly associated with credibility or celebrity and if this relationship yields discrepancies in consumer’s trust of the brand, advertisement, and endorser in paid partnerships on social media. Two questionnaires administered via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk tested two hypotheses. 342 respondents completed a pre-test that tested, and proved true, the assumption that verification is viewed as the same regardless of platform. In the primary study, 413 participants were randomly assigned to one artificial Instagram post in a 2 x 2 between-subject design: (beauty vs. fitness industry) x (verified vs. unverified). Surprisingly, results indicated that verification had no impact on user’s perceptions of credibility, celebrity or trust. Interestingly, verification did play a significant role in user’s perceptions of endorser attractiveness and beauty and verified endorsers were viewed as less attractive. Given the findings, supplemental, future research is discussed
as well as implications for marketers since verified endorsers showed no statistically significant benefits, yet they are costlier to work with.
DEDICATION

To Mom, Dad, Jake and Jared,

I dedicate this thesis to you.

It is you who have pushed me to reach my full potential and have shown me the true value of hard work. You, who have supported and encouraged me through every endeavor in life. You have paved the way, and without you, I would not have completed this thesis. I am so grateful you encouraged me to choose the road less traveled by and it truly has made all the difference.

To my lifelong friends,

Thank you for always being there and lending a hand when I need it most. Your reassurance and listening ears encouraged me through this process more than you know.

To the Professors who had a hand in this project,

Namely, my advisor, Dr. Stefano Tijerina. Thank you for your tireless work and dedication to my project and to changing the stigma around undergraduate research. To Dr. Rusty Stough, thank you for teaching me research principles and data analysis with patience and gusto. Your advice and guidance was monumental to my project. Finally, to my entire committee, thank you for agreeing to take part in my greatest endeavor yet.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypotheses</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Interaction with Social Media, Influencers &amp; Verification</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in the Literature: A Look at Brand, Advertisement &amp; Endorser</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility: Perception &amp; Interaction</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity: Perception &amp; Interaction</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendices 68
Author’s Biography 79
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Paid Partnership Tags 10
Figure 2: Verified Endorser’s Cost 15

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Study 2 Demographics 39
Table 2: Study 3 Demographics 41
Table 3: Results of T-Test 42
INTRODUCTION

The overwhelming growth and accessibility of social media in the past decade has transformed communication globally. Industry giants Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have fueled the creation of social media “influencers” or SMIs. The term influencer has existed for centuries and even dates back to ancient Rome when the gladiators actually endorsed products (Forbes, 2020). Modern endorsement with influencers has been a popular tactic since the 1930s and broadly describes someone, typically a celebrity, with influence over others. Traditional influencers included movie stars, public figures such as the Catholic Pope or the British Queen, Olympic athletes, etc. However, social media influencers are unique in that they are not necessarily celebrities or well-known experts in a given field. Today, any user can become an SMI by posting organic content and growing their following, a lucrative career that did not exist 15 years ago. De Veirman et al. (2017) define them as “people who built a large network of followers, and are considered as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches.” In this study, a social media influencer¹ is defined as a user who has built a reputation for their content or knowledge in a particular area and garner a considerable following on a social media platform (Grin, 2019). In fact, SMIs have hijacked the term “influencer” all together and the word officially entered the dictionary in 2019 defined in the context of social media (Merriam Webster, 2019).

For years now, marketers have capitalized on the enormity of social media for advertisement purposes. Influencer endorsements and partnerships provide marketers the

¹ Social media influencers will be referred to as simply “influencers” or SMI’s throughout this paper.
ability to reach large, targeted audiences quickly and effectively, which has made them a key element of many firms’ marketing strategies. SMIs can also gain a source of income from endorsement deals which has led to many influencers focusing on their social media accounts full-time and thus, heavily engaging with their followers.²

Many social media platforms including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have created verification status for accounts. These platforms describe verification as a way to “verify” that an account is the authentic presence of that person rather than, say, a fan account. However, not just anyone can become verified. Verification is typically enjoyed by the platform’s largest celebrities and public figures. Some influencers are or may become “verified,” presumptively indicating that their account is authentic. A small, blue checkmark, typically placed next to one’s name on the main profile, symbolizes verification status. The symbol is now widely recognized across various platforms (see Appendix A). How verification is widely perceived and whether it promotes trust in the eyes of the consumer when present in an endorsement has not been thoroughly studied, despite the popularity of influencer advertising. Verification is a new field of research with much to do be done. The chapters of this theses’ literature review will provide a look at primarily related work, since research actually focused on verification is slim. Ultimately, this study aims to identify the perception of verification. Will the general public more closely identify verification with the idea of notoriety or with credibility? The research will also report on the effects of verified endorsers on various factors such as trust in the ad and brand.

² An example of a popular influencer is @andrearussett who gained fame organically through vlogging (video-logging) and has 4.3 million followers. (Mediakix, 2021)
The official research question that is studied by this thesis is as follows: do consumers perceive verification as more directly associated with credibility or celebrity and will this relationship yield discrepancies in consumer’s trust of the brand, advertisement, and endorser in paid partnerships across different media platforms? Two hypotheses are tested:

**H1:** Consumers will more strongly associate verification with celebrity status over the characteristic of credibility. The first hypothesis rests on the assumption that platforms award verification based on notoriety.

**H2:** Presence of the verification badge will negatively correlate with consumer trust levels in the brand, advertisement and endorser. The second hypothesis assumes that associating verification with celebrity status will decrease trust due to a lack of perceived fit and relatability.

This research yields important implications for marketers. Companies are spending billions of dollars every year to gain paid partnerships with well-known influencers. Brands are set to spend 15 billion by 2022 on influencer marketing, up from 8 billion in 2019 (Business Insider, 2021). There has been very little work done on verification’s impact on trust, as noted in the following literature review. Therefore, this research will greatly contribute to educating marketers on the implications associated with verified versus unverified endorsers. Results could allow marketers to make better decisions on what influencers to partner with. The right choice of SMI can have major benefits for the brand including positive attitudes towards it or a higher purchase intent (Evans et al., 2017). Companies can get more return on ad spend (ROAS) if they are choosing influencers who are more trustworthy. Research shows that higher trust is correlated with
higher purchase intention (Casalo et al., 2020). In addition, verified influencers often charge brands more for posts because they believe it qualifies them as more notable and persuasive (AspireIQ, n.d.). If the study shows that people trust verified endorsers less, than brands can choose non-verified influencers and save money. If results show verified endorsers are more trustworthy, marketers may choose to spend more to partner with someone who is verified and that decision will be justified by hard data. Also, influencers themselves would be able to choose whether to pursue verification status or not based on the knowledge.

**Research Design**

To test the stated hypotheses, three questionnaires were administered via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. First, a pre-test was created in order to test whether participants viewed verification as virtually the same across the social media platforms Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. This test was run so that the primary questionnaire’s visuals could be modeled off of one platform’s design aesthetic for consistency. If the pre-test showed that participants perceive verification as the same across different social media apps, then it can be assumed that the research findings apply to various social media platforms that award verification status. 350 participants were paid $1.00 to answer the 2-minute survey. A pre-test was run on the results of the pre-test to support or deny this assumption.

The primary questionnaire used a 2x2 between-subject design: (verified vs. unverified endorser in the advertisement (i.e. presence of verification badge)) x (fitness ad vs. beauty ad) = 4 conditions. Fitness and beauty advertisements were chosen and created because these industries notoriously employ social media influencers and rely
heavily on visual forms of advertising. According to appypie.com (2019), 47% of the fitness industry uses influencers and 52% of the beauty industry.

Lastly a follow-up study tested the same four conditions as study 2 as well as two additional conditions to further test for perceptions of celebrity.

Research has shown that to reduce cognitive strain, people tend to believe information that stems from familiar sources (Gigerenzer et al., 1999) and it’s more likely that one will view a familiar celebrity as more credible (Erdogan, 1999). To reduce these effects, conditions utilized faux Instagram posts showcasing a product, endorser, and descriptive text were created using stock photos and fictional names and products.

The two primary surveys began by asking participants to view one randomly assigned Instagram post. After moving to the next screen, they were asked questions about the post’s text, photo, endorser, etc. and were not allowed to return to view the post again. They were also asked to recall if they had noticed if the endorser was verified. A sample size of 400 was collected in both studies and participants were paid $1.00 and $0.50 respectively. In addition to dependent variable questions, Ohanian’s source credibility scale (1990) and Delgado-Ballester’s (2003) brand trust scale were used as controls to measure trust in the endorser, ad and brand in study 2. A seven-point Likert scale was used in all studies. Finally, demographics were measured as well as familiarity with verification. The questionnaires provided quantitative data primarily through analysis of variance (ANOVA) conducted via IBM’s SPSS Statistics.
CHAPTER 1
HUMAN INTERACTION WITH SOCIAL MEDIA, INFLUENCERS & VERIFICATION

Being active on social media platforms has become a normality in today’s society. The platforms are attractive and different from traditional outlets such as newspaper and television for their reach, interactivity, usability, and ubiquity. According to studies conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2019, 72% of Americans use social networking sites daily. Facebook was a first mover in 2004 and has grown to be one of the highest reaching platforms with 69% of U.S. adults reporting they use the site, behind number one YouTube’s 73% (Pew, 2019). The shares of young adults that use these platforms is astounding. Roughly seven-in-ten U.S. teens say they use Instagram and 76% of this age group say they visit the site daily (Pew, 2019). The technologies have grown exponentially and even garner addictive properties. Social media has prompted a great deal of research efforts surrounding its many intricacies and the social psychology of users. There have been various studies linking the platforms to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, fake news, and addiction. For many, social media appearance has become an obsession and factors such as obtaining a new max number of likes can actually release dopamine in the brain (Haynes, 2018). Regardless of research reporting the negative effects, social media platforms have enjoyed steady increases in reach every year and the big players have rarely been challenged. 80% of the U.S. population uses social media and 4.2 billion worldwide as of January 2021 (Statista, 2021). In 2018, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, in that order, had the top four highest number of users
These platforms also represent some of the first sites of the social media movement with Facebook founded in 2004, YouTube 2005, Twitter 2006 and Instagram 2010.

Social media has become a fantastic avenue for advertising due to its reach and popular use. Review42.com reported in 2020 that about 50% of marketers have implemented a social media strategy for at least two years and as a result, have experienced an increase in sales (Galov, 2021). Also, 90% of marketers believe their social media efforts have increased exposure and 75% say it has increased traffic (Galov, 2021). Social media strategy is being taught in business schools and stressed by some of the biggest brands in the world. Thus, the advent of influencers is not surprising. The history of these figures is not as cut and dry as there being one first influencer, though there are disputes over this title. Instead, many came to be over time. Famous people such as celebrities and athletes garner many followers on social media due to their existing popularity and are considered social media influencers. However, a new phenomenon emerged as a handful of “normal” people started amassing large followings as well, due to their engaging organic content and close interactions with their followers. Therefore, influencers can be both self-made online personas and celebrities with pre-existing fame. Today, brands are doing less and less traditional celebrity advertising through television and print because social media gave birth to new categories of influencers (Jones, 2020). An influencer may have a few thousand followers to millions. Therefore, the terms

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3 Influencers are largely outpacing more traditional advertising avenues due to the popularity and addictive nature of social media (Jones, 2020). Facebook IQ conducted an in-home eye tracking study in 2017 that showed that 94% of participants kept a smartphone on hand while watching TV. According to the study, viewers focused on the TV screen just over half of the time (53%), and one of the main reasons they looked away was to use their phones (Facebook IQ, 2017).
micro-influencer and macro-influencer have been coined in many academic studies. The spectrum of influencers, whether they started on social media as a regular person or already had fame, share two commonalities: authentic voices and the power to engage their followers with aesthetic content (Grin, 2019). As defined in the introduction, an influencer in the context of this study is a user who has built a reputation for their content or knowledge in a particular area and garners a considerable following on a social media platform.

When considering paid partnerships, minimal encroachment entails marketers sending influencers free products in hopes they communicate to their audience some information about the product or brand, for example, an Instagram post. Maximum encroachment means that marketers offer payment to an influencer in return for a post whose content has been fully determined contractually by the advertiser (Audrezet, 2020). From maximum encroachment partnerships, SMIs can make social media their career since they are able to make a considerable amount of money. Joe Gagliese is a co-founder of Viral Nation, an influencer management agency that touts the ability to “create the most viral, captivating and ROI-focused social media influencer campaigns for global brands.” In a 2018 interview with Vox.com Gagliese said:

“A micro-influencer, which is someone that has 10,000 to 50,000 followers, is actually pretty valuable. They used to only pick up a couple hundred bucks, but today, they get a minimum of a few thousand dollars a post. Influencers with up to 1 million followers can get $10,000 [per post], depending on the platform, and 1 million followers and up, you’re getting into territory where they can charge $100,000. Some can even get $250,000 for a post!”

The lucrative industry has caused old controversies of advertising to reemerge. Are influencers truly impressed with a product or brand they promote or are those
endorsements motivated by compensation? This has created a considerable need for advertising transparency among influencers and brands.

Some of the first online influencers could be considered mommy-bloggers (Forbes, 2020). A decade ago, these were some of the most influential non-celebrity personalities on the internet. So much so, that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) enacted a law in 2012 stating that any blogger receiving payment from a company in exchange for a review has to clearly state that in the first line of their blog (Forbes, 2020). Adapted from this initial law, the FTC released similar guidelines in 2019 for influencers titled: “Disclosures 101 for Social Media Influencers.” The 8-page guide states that if an influencer has a material connection to a brand, they must make it obvious somewhere in the endorsement message. A material connection includes a personal, family, or employment relationship or financial relationship such as the brand paying you or giving you free or discounted products or services (FTC, 2021). Despite these guidelines, influencers and brands enjoy a lack of accountability as the FTC falls incredibly short on enforcing protocols. While the guidelines are clear enough, they place the bulk of the responsibility of advertising disclosure on the influencer. Disclosure usually comes in the form of a hashtag in a post’s caption such as “#ad” or “#sponsored” or identifying themselves as an “ambassador,” for instance. In one case, the department store Lord & Taylor did not insist that 50 influencers endorsing the brand disclose their affiliation (TechCrunch, 2020). The FTC settled the matter for no customer refunds, no forfeiture of ill-gotten benefits, no disclosure to consumers, no deletion of wrongfully obtained personal information, and no findings or admission of liability (TechCrunch, 2020). Because there are rarely consequences for not disclosing a paid partnership, it is argued
that online endorsers contribute to a serious lack of truthful, unbiased, and credible information (TechCrunch, 2020). Also, with the push for influencers to use “#ad,” wannabe influencers have begun posting “#ad” content in hopes to seem more notable than they are, blurring the line further. Product placement has existed on television for years and sponsored journalism in newspapers is not new. And now, there are influencers that are literally digital avatars and not people, for example @lilmiquela, a computer-generated female, who boasts 3 million followers (Forbes, 2020; Instagram: @lilmiquela, 2021). Like TV and print, the line between authentic voice and paid endorsement on social media is no longer recognizable (Forbes, 2020).

The culture surrounding ad disclosure does seem to be improving, however, with Instagram and YouTube creating paid partnership tags located below the account name in a post (Forbes, 2020).

Figure 1: Paid Partnership Tags

(Tribe.com, 2017)
In 2020, the FTC voted to review the influencer marketing rules and penalties. An FTC representative said that they are considering “codifying elements of the existing endorsement guidelines into formal rules so that violators can be liable for civil penalties” (TechCrunch, 2020). Additionally, many news outlets and research articles have been written about the proven benefits of ad transparency in the context of influencer marketing. One study found that sponsorship transparency mitigated the negative effects of advertising recognition on brand attitudes (Evans et. al, 2018).

Audiences care about influencer transparency. One survey, from The Influencer Report, based on over 2,000 interviews with 13-38-year-olds, reported that 88% said authenticity is the key trait they look for when following an influencer (Morning Consult, 2020).

Therefore, like any endorser, influencers have a duty to inform their followers about partnerships to ensure the public is not deceived.

There are many recognized benefits to using SMIs. According to influencer management service, Traacker, 72% of brands are dedicating a major portion of their advertising budgets to using SMIs (Vox, 2018). Influencers often have a targeted audience who are heavily swayed by their content in matters such as purchase decision.

In an article published in the *Journal of Business Research*, researchers found that many characteristics of SMIs help improve behavioral intentions. Additionally, they reported that perceptions of uniqueness and originality produce higher intentions to interact, recommend, and follow said advice which, in turn, improves purchase intent (Casalo et al., 2020). Audiences usually follow SMIs with high perceived fit which can mean greater influence since research shows the higher congruence, the higher psychological closeness (Casalo et al., 2020). Influencers have become a useful tool in advertising to
the younger generations as well. Millennials (23-36) and Gen Zers (16-22) are not following traditional consumer trends and have helped fuel influencer marketing. They need social proof before they decide to buy anything (Grin, 2019). In a study conducted by research company Kantar, 44% of Gen Z respondents had made a purchase decision based on an endorsement from an influencer compared with 26% of the general population (Williams, 2019).

What may be perceived as another form of social proof and opinion reassurance is verification. The website Instasize wrote “You may already have a ton of followers that provide you with social proof, but Instagram verification makes it known that you’re worth following. After all, people like to follow who and what other people are following” (2020). The idea and symbol behind verification was introduced on Twitter in June 2009, followed by Google+ in 2011, Facebook in 2012, and Instagram in 2014 (Wikipedia, 2021). Today, the blue checkmark badge can be seen on various platforms including LinkedIn, Tinder, Snapchat, Pinterest, TikTok, and Google My Business. Due to the internet’s broad reach, verification is not just recognized in the U.S., it’s enjoyed by select influencers and celebrities around the world.

Instagram and its parent company Facebook define verification as the platform’s confirmation that the account “is the authentic page or profile for [the] public figure, company or brand” it represents (Facebook, 2021). Instagram, as well as Facebook, list four components necessary for verification. The account must be authentic, complete, unique, and notable (Instagram Help Center, 2021). Twitter’s definition is similar: “the blue verified badge on Twitter lets people know that an account of public interest is

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4 See Appendix A for visual examples of the checkmark badge.
authentic…to receive the blue badge, your account must be authentic, notable, and active” (Twitter, 2021). YouTube also cites uniqueness and authenticity as requirements (YouTube Help, 2021).

Verification seemingly arose to tackle credibility and authenticity issues. Platforms were receiving criticism from well-known figures whose accounts were being imitated. In 2009, Tony La Russa, then manager of the St. Louis Cardinals filed a suit against Twitter because of their negligence in removing an imitation account (TechCrunch, 2009). After the incident, Twitter announced they would begin beta testing verification with a small amount of accounts who run the risk of impersonation (TechCrunch, 2009). It granted the public reassurance that a profile was who it says it is. Yet, platforms do not grant verification to just anyone. This is most likely because notable figures and brands are much more likely to derive parody or fan accounts. However, in citing both notoriety and authenticity as requirements for verification, the definition is blurred in the eyes of the public. On one hand, it seems the authenticity indicator is a measure to help increase credibility. Authenticity and credibility are literally synonyms in a Thesaurus (Merriam-Webster, 2021). On the other, its proof of celebrity status. For example, on YouTube, a channel cannot apply for verification until it reaches 100,000 subscribers (YouTube, 2021). In a statement from Instagram, they said that only some public figures, celebrities and brands have verified badges (Instagram Help Center, 2021) and less than 1% of accounts are verified (ShipStation, 2018). The average verified Twitter user has just over 125,000 followers (Kamps, 2019). Verification is reserved for the most notable people and it has become something to brag about. A recent tweet reported how one can request a blue checkmark badge crest to display on
their house with a link to a website where one can apply for the badge (Morrison-Thiagu, 2021). However, the service, “bluecheckhomes.com” turned out to be a joke, yet the tweet was liked and retweeted thousands of times and hundreds of users navigated through the website to request a checkmark for their residence (Katz, 2021). Despite the joking nature, this exemplifies how the symbol has become something to show off and is an indicator of clout. Everyone wants to be a part of what AspireIQ (n.d.) called the “exclusive club” of verified users giving the badge a prestigious feel. Synthesis of these resources, has led to the formation of hypothesis 1: Consumers will more strongly associate verification with celebrity status over the characteristic of credibility.

Ostensibly, the badge is simply to prevent impersonation, yet a Google search reveals that there are hundreds of articles written about the benefits of account verification. The article “Influencer Advice: 5 Reasons to Verify Your Facebook Page” stated that benefits include improved search footprint, more followers, and early access to new features, but they cited no evidence or research to support these claims and explain why that may be (Linquia, 2021). These articles assume that by having the blue badge, it signifies that your account is relevant and that users who are cautious when they see a giveaway or deal, unsure of whether it is a scam, are likely to consider the account as credible and potentially more trustworthy when they notice the symbol (Shipstation, 2018). Instasize (2020) wrote that one of the greatest benefits of verification is that no one can imitate you and BlogHer.com stated that benefits include brand preference to work with verified endorsers and increased trustworthiness (2020). However, many of these claims and assumptions have not been thoroughly researched. After viewing the top 3 Google results when searching “benefits of account verification” (Shipstation, 2018; BlogHer, 2020;
Instasize, 2020), not one source cites any research or quantitative data to support their claims and academic research has shown that verification doesn’t increase credibility (Edgerley et al., 2019; Vaidya et al., 2019). In fact, it may actually be disadvantageous to become verified if the wealth of consumers view the badge as a validation of notoriety.

Verification is an important topic to consider since verified endorsers are costlier. Verified endorsers can be said to be correlated with higher followings, since you need a large following to be considered for the blue tick (Instagram, 2021). Hootsuite (2019) reported that the baseline influencer pricing formula for a post is $100 x 10,000 followers + extras = total rate. Researchers have proved the costliness of verified endorsers. AspireIQ (n.d.) found in their study that verified endorsers charged a premium to partner with a well-known fitness brand in comparison to non-verified influencers. Results are shown in the graph below. One can see that verified endorsers charged more than their unverified counterparts despite virtually the same engagement per post. AspireIQ also reported that verification does not necessarily mean a higher engagement rate noting that “because agents generally have set prices for their clients, there is a lack of correlation between engagement rate and price for verified influencers.”

**Figure 2: Verified Endorser’s Cost**

(AssureIQ.com, n.d.)
Additionally, BookingAgentInfo.com (2017) wrote in a blog post: “on average, verified accounts typically charge 584% more than the recommended price for an Instagram campaign, while unverified accounts only charge 14% above the recommended price,” though they did not cite any source of this information.

A 2019 “Benchmark Report” from Influencer Marketing Hub showed that lesser-known SMIs, (whom are more comparable to a “non-celebrity” endorser in the literature) with a smaller following of 50,000-250,000 followers deliver a 30% better return on investment (ROI) per dollar spent in comparison to those with 250,000-1 million and these SMIs are reported to have 20% better ROI than influencers with over 1 million followers. In short, the larger the influencer, the smaller the ROI. There is research to support that celebrities are less effective than a lesser known opinion leader for their lack of fit and relatability (i.e. Erdogan, 1999, Saeed et al., 2014). Non-celebrity endorsers have been shown to score higher in some product categories because there is less credibility of celebrities since there is no clear indication as to whether they are actually using the product advertised (Saeed et al., 2014). Previous research reporting the downside to celebrity advertising, which is further covered in chapter 4 of the literature review, has led to the formation of Hypothesis 2: Presence of the verification badge, when associated with celebrity status, will negatively correlate with consumer trust levels in the brand, advertisement, and endorser.

The development of influencer marketing's own literature (i.e. De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova et al., 2017) is gaining momentum but is not yet extensive. However, studies surrounding characteristics of influencers and what makes them most effective are increasing (i.e. Lou & Yuan, 2019; Schouten et al., 2019). This thesis is unique in that it
contributes to the literature surrounding authenticity indicators in the context of social media. I aim to determine if verification affects trustworthiness, therefore a discussion of trust in the literature follows.
CHAPTER 2

TRUST IN THE LITERATURE: A LOOK AT BRAND, ADVERTISEMENT AND ENDORSER

This study examines the effects of verification’s perception on trustworthiness in the brand, ad, and endorser. Therefore, it is important to provide a definition and background of trust in the literature. Overall, trust plays a beneficial role in marketing, often leading to better attitudes, decision making, and purchase intentions.

Trust has been a leading research topic in management and marketing. The many definitions of trust and variability of opinions amongst scholars makes integration of perspectives challenging. An early definition states trust is the confidence that one will find what is desired from another, rather than what is feared (Deutsch, 1973). In 1995, Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman wrote that trust is the willingness of a person to be vulnerable to the actions of another. The bulk of existing research shows agreement among scholars that confident expectations and risks are critical components of trust (Ballester et al., 2003). Sources of risk are typically correlated with vulnerability and/or uncertainty about effects. Risk has been connected to situations involving flawed information since in complete ignorance, it’s only possible to have blind faith and/or gamble (Blomqvist, 1997). With perfect information, trust is not present, just rational calculation. The source of risk is the uncertainty about whether another party will act appropriately (Rousseau et al., 1998). Therefore, it can be said that trust is a psychological state expressed in terms. Research on trust in the field of psychology focuses on the motivational dimension of the idea. The motivational dimension is derived
from the acknowledgement that in an exchange, one’s behavior is guided by positive intentions towards the well-being and interests of his/her partner (Andaleeb 1996). The dimension indicates one’s partner does not have the intention to lie, break promises, or take advantage of one’s weakness. In the management and marketing context, a second class of attributions is brought to light with a competence or technical nature. This idea has arisen because in business there is a dependence on delivering expectations and performing tasks. In this way, a necessary component of trust is knowing one’s capacity and abilities to perform activities and produce the desired outcomes (Andaleeb 1996). In essence, the motivational dimension of trust is based on the level in which one party believes the other to be interested in their well-being. The competence dimension rests on one’s belief that the partner has the necessary expertise to meet expectations, complete obligations and keep promises.

Trust, when referring to traditional celebrity endorsements is defined as the level at which a message’s audience perceives the sender (endorser) as being able to communicate a sense of integrity, honesty, and credibility by means of a marketing medium (Tripp et al., 1994). In 1994, Roobina Ohanian created a well-known scale to measure source credibility in endorsers with trustworthiness being a key dimension. In Ohanian’s work, trustworthiness refers to the perception that the endorser is honest, believable, and has integrity. Ohanian’s scale is used in this research to measure influencer trust when the verification badge is present and absent.

Trust is an important measure to consider when advertising, especially in the context of online advertisement where risk and uncertainties are particularly difficult to discern. A definition of online trust was stated as “an attitude of confident expectation in
an online situation of risk that one’s vulnerabilities will not be exploited” (Beldad & Steehouder, 2010) and reflects consensus among researchers that the nature and basic meaning of online trust is not fundamentally different from the concept of face-to-face trust (Shankar, Urban, & Sultan, 2002). Online trust, while defined in various different wordings, focuses on the following elements: two actors: trustor and trustee, vulnerability must be present and trust is context-sensitive (Baumann & Bachmann, 2017). Online trust has been identified as a crucial component of a business strategy as it reduces perceived risk and creates positive word of mouth which, consequently, impacts a customer’s decision to buy (Chen & Barnes, 2007). In the case of online partnerships, it is important for individual firms and their representatives (influencers) to develop trust because otherwise consumers won’t have trust in the business environment and context (Grayson et al., 2008). In the business context, numerous studies have proven trust’s effects on attitude change, persuasion, likeability and purchase intentions among other things.

Developing trust in your brand is very important. Bainbridge (1997) wrote that brands must place the consumer at the forefront and understand their needs to best fulfill them, saying that this attitude was “not merely responsive, but responsible.” Brand trust is defined as the “feeling of security held by the consumer in his/her interaction with the brand that is based on perceptions that the brand is reliable and responsible for the interests and welfare of the consumer” (Ballester et al., 2003). There are two dimensions of brand trust when developing a comprehensive scale. First, the intentionality dimension which reflects emotional security and comfort on the part of individuals. Second, the

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5 For more on online trust and its history, see Bauman & Bachmann’s “Online Trust: Trends in the Research” (2017).
6 For more on trust’s benefits, see “The Role of Trust in Understanding the Impact of Social Media Marketing on Brand Equity and Brand Loyalty” (Ebrahim, 2019).
fiability dimension which is concerned with the perceptions that the brand can accomplish and satisfy a customer’s needs. This scale is used in this research to measure trust in the brand and was adapted in wording to apply to trust in the advertisement as well. With large benefits to be reaped from gaining brand trust, it’s important that it’s examined in this study when evaluating the perceptions and effects of verification.

Brand trust aids consumers in making decisions about brands (Lee et al., 2011). Dwivedi et al. (2013) found that brand trust has a positive impact directly on relationship commitment. Consumers who are more committed to a brand are less likely to switch to competitors which leads to higher likelihood of future intent to repeat purchase (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). There is also a tendency to upkeep the relationship (Gounaris, 2005). Therefore, relationship commitment leads to increased brand equity or value (Dwivedi et al., 2013). Brand trust has also been shown to have high significance in generating loyalty (Ballester, 2001). Such positive consumer response is ultimately a large advantage for the brand leading to larger market shares and higher prices (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). In 54% of cases, brands that are trusted by consumers will be recommended by their consumers to others (Brown and Hayes, 2008).

Endorser trust is also incredibly important and valuable. Friedman et al. (1978) showed that likeability of the endorser was the most important attribute of trust and the authors urged marketers to select endorsers carefully. It has been linked to a more positive attitude toward the advertisement message as well (Tripp et al., 1994). McGinnies and Ward (1980) found that people who were considered trustworthy caused the greatest change in other’s opinions. Trustworthiness, as a mediating variable,

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7 For more on brand trust, see “Development and Validation of a Brant Trust Scale” (Ballester, 2001).
improves effects of micro-celebrities on purchase intention and brand trust (Kolarova, 2018) and the personal traits of an endorser can enhance brand trust (Lassoued and Hobbs’, 2015). An influencer that engages with his/her audience also has a greater likelihood of a formed relationship with individuals. This relationship can eventually turn into trust in a brand recommended by an influencer, reducing the uncertainty that others might have had towards the brand (Reinikainen, 2020).

Evaluating trust in an advertisement, independent of attitude towards the endorser and brand, is also important. Advertisements that seem genuine and trustworthy will have a more positive effect on audiences. Ultimately, a marketer wishes to communicate a message and ideally cause some type of action, whether that be internal processing, sharing, purchasing, etc. and the message (ad) begins this process (Kelman, 1961). Ad trust is important because perceptions of trust are a key input into a consumer’s tendency to internalize an endorsement message. Internalization is the process by which consumers adopt a social actor’s (endorser) belief system as their own (Kelman, 1961). However, for internalization to be successful, consumers must be engaged cognitively with the ad’s message and the endorser must be considered believable and honest as well (Kelman, 1961). In a social media context, engaging ads may also help generate comments and likes which improve trust because consumers look for social proof. People often use different signs or “cues” in online encounters to validate the self-perception and truthfulness of others, or in this case influencers (Walther and Parks, 2002). Positive comments and likes can serve as these cues.

A review of existing literature makes clear that trust in the brand, endorser, and ad is beneficial when marketing. Recent studies have been published comparing non-
celebrity endorsers or influencers, specifically, to traditional celebrity endorsers. This comparative literature is discussed more in depth in chapter 4, but some findings apply to the context of trust. Influencers, in this context, refer to self-made personalities on social media as opposed to traditional celebrities who garner fame for something other than their online presence. Expert influencers were found to have a definite advantage in trust over attractive celebrities in the marketing of electronic products (Trivedi and Sama, 2020). Similarly, in 2019, Schouten et al. ran two studies to compare influencer vs. celebrity endorsement. Their results noted that consumers trust and feel more identified with influencers than celebrity endorsers. They also found audiences felt more similar to influencers and identify with them more. Therefore, because H1 hypothesizes that verification will be more directly associated with celebrity, H2 postulates that perceiving verification as a mark of celebrity or notoriety will negatively impact consumer trust levels.

Previous literature indicates that influencers rather than celebrities are more trustworthy because in many ways, they are similar to their audience (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014) and are regarded as authentic (Petrescu et al., 2018) and accessible (De Veirman et al., 2017). Parasocial relationships also play a factor in forming trust with an influencer (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Parasocial relationships (PSR) are “imaginary relationships with media performers that begin with spending time with the performer through media consumption and that are characterized by perceived relational development with the performer and knowing the performer well” (Brown, 2008). It can be argued that influencers who create content as their full-time job will have better PSRs with consumers than celebrities who are known for their career outside of social media. This
assumption can be made because full-time influencers will have more time to spend engaging with their audiences, for instance, by responding to comments left on a post. However, consumers are still skeptical of influencers. Similar to how companies have paid to obtain positive reviews online (Lee & Koo, 2012), many have also paid influencers to create content favourable to a brand or to share content created directly by a brand (Chatterjee, 2011). This creates doubt in one’s mind as to the trustworthiness of influencers and their impartiality (Stubb et al., 2019). Consumers want influencers to recommend and share their real opinion about brands without biases or payment involved. Yet, discerning whether an influencer is paid is not always clear, leaving consumers to look for other factors or cues when evaluating an endorsed post. I believe that the verification badge is a cue that audiences have come to look for to evaluate their perception of trust, but whether verification increases or decreases trust is not well understood.

Trust in brands, ads, and endorsers is incredibly beneficial. It is a psychological state important in influencing a message’s receiver. Trust can increase satisfaction, the likelihood of purchase and recommendation, and aid in creating brand loyalty. While many researchers have studied the cause and effect of a trusting relationship, few have aimed to measure it when studying the effects of verification. In order to understand verification’s effects on trust, it’s important to measure how consumers perceive it. Therefore, effects of credibility which may be related to perceptions of verification are discussed.
The idea of credibility has been extensively researched for many years in many fields. In this thesis, the perception of credibility is tested versus the perception of celebrity. Therefore, a review of existing literature specifically surrounding source credibility is discussed here. Ultimately, credibility is viewed positively and is typically increased when there is sponsorship transparency.

Source credibility refers to “a communicator’s positive characteristics that affect the receiver’s acceptance of a message” (Ohanian, 1990). Source credibility was first coined by Hovland, Janis and Kelly (1953) as a characteristic associated with a communicator who exerts influence on message receivers. They argued that expertise and trustworthiness are the two determinants of source credibility. In later works, academics postulated that source credibility boasts several dimensions including expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness of the endorser (source) (Ohanian, 1990; Goldsmith et al., 2000).

**Expertise** is an important component of the source credibility model which comprises the characteristics that influence one’s overall credibility. Expertise has also been referred to as authoritativeness (McCroskey, 1966) or qualification (Berlo et al., 1969) among other synonyms. Vocabulary such as trained-untrained, educated-uneducated, and skilled-unskilled are often used in relation to this dimension. The literature generally agrees that perceived expertise of an endorser has a positive impact on attitude change (Horai et al. 1964). Crano (1970) found that individuals exposed to an
expert source were more likely to be in agreement with the endorser’s advocated position than those exposed to a low-expertise source. In 1973, Crisci et al. manipulated a communicator’s title between “Mr.” and “Dr.” Their results found that subjects were more likely to follow the recommendations and advice of the communicator when exposed to the more expert title of “Dr.” Expertise is an important factor to consider when evaluating SMIs. While traditional celebrities are well-known for their accomplishments in areas unrelated to the product class endorsed, influencers are often chosen for their relationship with the product class and tend to have grown for their perceived expertise in an area or high level of interest (Friedman, 1976).

**Trustworthiness** is also an important measure of source credibility. While trust has already been discussed in the previous chapter, it is necessary to stress its interconnectivity with credibility. Credibility is often a mediator of trust and vice-versa meaning that one is likely to cause the other, as evidenced by Ohanian’s source credibility scale among others (Chu and Kamal, 2008). Tripp et al. (1994) linked trust to a consumer’s sense of integrity, honesty, and credibility by means of a marketing medium stressing that without credibility, trust is significantly marred. Trustworthiness and credibility of an endorser also impact attitude toward the endorsed brand and advertisement. For instance, Martínez-López et al. (2020) showed that trust in the influencer leads to belief in greater credibility of the post (advertisement) and in turn, credibility of the post predicts interest of the post.

**Attractiveness** was added to Ohanian’s source credibility model in addition to Hovland, Janis and Kelly’s original two-component model. There has been a considerable body of research to show attraction levels as valuable and important in
evaluating source credibility. Early research showed that physically attractive endorsers tend to be more persuasive no matter what product category is endorsed (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). In the western hemisphere, people count on the heuristic that what is beautiful is good which automatically makes attractive communicators appear more intrinsically legitimate (Ohanian, 1991). Joseph (1982) concluded that attractive communicators are consistently liked more and have a positive impact on attitude towards the endorsed product. Attractiveness has become an important determinant in evaluating an endorser and is increasingly important to consider due to the popularity of influencer and celebrity advertisements. Social media accounts and posts are highly visual and influencers spend time creating their own “aesthetic” or look and feel of their accounts. Attraction to the endorser and their crafted posts may have significant effects on source credibility.

Endorsers who are perceived as credible produce many benefits. As stated Martínez-López et al. (2020) showed credibility of a post predicts interest of the post. In turn, interest in the post predicts willingness to search for more information. Source credibility adds to message acceptance (Kapitan and Silvera, 2016) and positive endorsement attitudes (Goldsmith et al., 2000). Credible endorsers have been proven to have a positive effect on consumers attitude toward the ad (Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999) as well as attitude toward the brand (Atkin and Block, 1983). These attitudes are important in the business context since research has shown that they have positive effects on intentions. For example, attitude toward the ad is positively and directly related to purchase intent (Goldsmith et al., 2000, Sokolova and Kefi, 2019). Additionally, perceptions of high source credibility are a key input into the audience’s tendency and
willingness to internalize an advertising message, meaning that one adopts the endorser’s beliefs as their own (Kelman, 1961). Endorsers play a role in mediating the perceptions of credibility in messages as well. Berlo et al. (1969) found that the endorser affects message credibility along three axes: safety, or whether the recipient believes the source has an agenda, qualification, or how qualified the endorser is to comment on the given product, and dynamism, or how persuasive or charismatic a source is.

Advertising transparency also plays a role in determining source credibility. Sponsorship transparency has significant negative impacts on attitude towards the ad, brand and purchase intention (Evans et al., 2019). However, including indicators of sponsorship as a mediator did help mitigate the negative influence of advertising recognition. In the social media context, these include indicators such as “#ad” or “#sponsored.” Another way in which influencers can manage the negative effects of sponsorship disclosure is to create balanced messages. These messages cover both the strength and weaknesses of the product or brand discussed (Stubb et al., 2019). Balanced messages can be used to partially mitigate the effects of sponsorship disclosure and are regarded as more credible than one-sided messages (Uribe et al., 2016).

Influencers often don’t disclose sponsorship and are not punished for this negligence, as discussed previously. In addition, many wannabe influencers use vocabulary such as #ad to seem more established (Forbes, 2020). Therefore, determining credibility in an influencer can be difficult, especially in an online context. Consumers are looking for other cues to help aid their evaluation of credibility and in turn, their willingness to internalize and/or trust a message. This is a global issue since social media is used around the world and brands can strategically leverage influencers for their reach.
Verified badges may be exactly what audiences are looking for and research shows the badge is noticed by audiences ((in the U.S.) Edgerley, 2020) but the symbol may be viewed as a tout of fame rather than an authenticity indicator. To better understand verifications’ effects if viewed as a mark of notoriety, celebrity endorsement literature is discussed.
Celebrity endorsers have been a popular focus of researchers for years. In this study, it’s hypothesized that verification is associated with celebrity status. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a comprehensive background on celebrity endorsement and its effect on consumers, brands and products to understand how verification’s perceptions might influence consumer trust and attitude.

Academics have described celebrities in slightly different ways. Stafford et al. defined a celebrity endorser as a “famous person who uses public recognition to recommend or co-present with a product or ad” (2003). Another definition states that celebrity endorsers are people that are recognized by the general public for their best performance in a particular field (McCracken, 1989; Friedman, 1979). Celebrities are not viewed as unidimensional individuals because they represent a variety of meanings drawn from their roles in TV, politics, sports, film, etc. (McCracken, 1989). Influencers, on the other hand, can be self-made online personalities and garner a following for their relationship with specific areas or a product class. Also proposed as defining characteristics of influencers in the literature are a considerable following (Jin et al., 2019), the ability to monetize their following (Abidin, 2016), and personal branding (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Enke and Borchers (2019) also cited influencer’s relationship-building capabilities and interaction with followers.

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As previously stated, this paper rests on the view that celebrities are those famous for their accomplishments in a given area unrelated to the product class endorsed. Celebrities are also those who are famous outside of their online presence.
Research has been conducted surrounding the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement and how to best utilize it. An important aspect of celebrity endorsement lies in the product match-up hypothesis (Forkan, 1980; Kamins, 1990). It holds that effective celebrity endorsement must have congruence between the product message or perceived fit of the brand and the message conveyed by the celebrity’s public appearance (Misra & Beatty, 1990). Proper match-up is considered very important, with one practitioner stating that celebrities are an unnecessary risk unless they are logically related to products (Watkins, 1989). Another practitioner quoted by Bertram and Todd (1992) postulated that if there is a combination of an appropriate tie-in between the brand’s product and the endorser’s image, advertisers can get both the fame and tie-in working for them. Many studies report that consumers have also come to expect good match-up (Ohanian, 1991). Proper match-up can positively impact consumer’s perceptions of not just the endorser, but the ad and brand (Choi & Nora, 2005). Absence of this connection can be detrimental and lead the consumer to conclude that the endorser has been bought (Erdogan, 1999).

There have been many published studies explaining the dangers and disadvantages to using celebrity endorsers. For example, because celebrities are famous, they may receive and accept more offers to partner with brands. This is logical since celebrities are associated with the classical conditioning paradigm. The paradigm holds that people learn the association between an unconditional stimulus or endorser, and a conditional stimulus, or a product, through repeated exposure (Erdogan, 1999). Interestingly, Erdogan reported that, in relation to the classical conditioning paradigm, association was much stronger between a created spokesperson (i.e. Flo from Progressive) than with popular endorsers (celebrities) (1999). This may be, in part, due to
the fact that celebrities receive many offers for sponsorship. When celebrities become associated with many brands, impact and identity with each product endorsed is lessened and consumers become more aware of the fact the endorser is paid generously (Erdogan, 1999). Partnering with too many brands can also cause boredom and resistance to advertising creating a lack of trust in the ad and product (Erdogan, 1999). In 1994, Tripp et al., found that as number of products endorsed increased, perceptions of credibility, likeability, and attitude toward the ad became less favorable. Celebrities can also negatively impact advertising if their image changes suddenly, they lose popularity, act immorally, or lose credibility through excessive endorsement (Cooper, 1984). This is dangerous, since in meaning transfer, social and cultural views of celebrities become reflected onto the product endorsed (McCracken, 1989). Another common concern with celebrity endorsement is that consumers will not notice the brand being promoted (Rossiter & Percy, 1987). Fame and notoriety can produce what’s called the “vampire effect,” in which a celebrity overshadows the brand or product advertised. The vampire effect causes the viewer to only remember the celebrity rather than the actual product endorsed (Evans 1988). Typically, the more familiar someone is, the less liked they become (Norton et al., 2007). In the same way, the more knowledge consumers have of a celebrity’s faith, social attitudes, and politics, the less celebrities are favored (McCracken, 1989). Academics believe one reason celebrities may not have a positive effect on purchase intent is because celebrity advertising seems to impact the cognitive

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9 Meaning Transfer: “The theory that the close association of a product, brand, or service with an already positively-evaluated person (see endorsement) will lead to the transfer of that person’s qualities to the brand. In semiotic terms this involves generating a new sign by combining two existing ones: the signifier of the brand becomes combined with the signified of the person, so that the brand directly signifies their qualities” (Oxford Reference, 2021).
and affective components of attitudes rather than the behavioral components (Fireworker & Friedman, 1977). However, despite research demoting the use of celebrity endorsement, there is also a bulk of work explaining the benefits of it.

Celebrities are helpful in reaching large audiences and can create acceptance for a product (Saeed et al., 2014). In 1995, Agraval and Kamakura analyzed the market value effects of the announcement of 100 celebrity endorsement contracts. They found that, in the eyes of practitioners, celebrity endorsement contracts are generally perceived as a worthwhile investment. Also, good fit between a celebrity and brand enhances the endorsers believability, attractiveness, credibility and helps to produce positive attitudes (Kamins & Gupta, 1994). In a study focused on Twitter, researchers found that consumers perceived celebrities with a higher number of followers as more physically attractive, trustworthy and competent (Jin & Phua, 2014). Also, celebrity endorsement may not play as big of a role in fostering distrust as other studies have reported. Kapitan and Silvera (2015) used Tom Brady as an example. Even if consumers know that Tom Brady is paid to promote a product, it takes less cognitive effort to factor in the impact of Tom Brady being paid (Gilbert et al., 1988). Further, attributions might be facilitated by the fact that consumers tend to assume celebrities have choice in the matter of what products they endorse. If Tom Brady chooses to advertise a sports drink, he must actually like it (Freiden, 1984).

Research examining the effectiveness of celebrities in comparison to non-celebrity endorsement is pertinent to this thesis since we define influencers as separate entities from celebrities. Celebrities have been found to produce more positive attitudes towards marketing and higher purchase intent than a non-celebrity advertiser (Atkin &
Block, 1983). However, Tom et al. (1992) identified weak linkage between celebrities and a product in comparison to non-celebrities. Non-celebrity advertising has been shown to score higher in some product categories such as the beauty industry, since there is no indication as to whether a celebrity is actually using the product or not (Saeed et al., 2014). Gaied and Rached (2010) found that a non-celebrity has higher persuasion credibility and a higher impact on consumer perception. It has been argued that non-celebrity conditions produced consumer concentration on the brand and its features while in the celebrity condition, consumers focused only on the celebrity (Mehta, 1994).

Noting these findings, researchers have more recently studied celebrity endorsement specifically compared to influencer endorsement. This is logical since SMI’s may be more strongly associated with the endorsed product because of their linkage to a particular industry compared to a celebrity. The synthesis of research surrounding this comparison has shown that influencers top celebrities in terms of overall effectiveness. Schouten et al. (2019) conducted two studies manipulating poor fit vs. good fit with the endorsed product. Interestingly, regardless of fit conditions, consumers trust and feel more identified with the influencer which, in turn, improved ad effectiveness. Another recent study proved audiences rely more on Instagram influencers than traditional celebrities which produced an overall better attitude towards the brand (Jin et al., 2019). Also, Trivedi and Sama showed expert influencers were more persuasive than their celebrity counterparts. This relationship was mediated by brand admiration, brand attitude, and purchase intention (2020).

The popularity of influencer marketing is growing substantially as celebrity advertisement has been shown to have higher risk of damaging the brand image (Prieler
et al., 2010). Mintel was cited in Charlie’s 2005 article reporting that three out of five adults are “bored with celebrities and a further one in five [are] celebrity-resistant.”

Literature indicates there is more trust in influencers than other figures (Kiss & Bichler, 2008), since they are, in many ways, similar to their audience (Uzonoglu & Kip, 2014), regarded as authentic (Petrescu et al., 2018) and they are highly accessible (De Veirman et al., 2017). With the influencer marketing industry becoming so large, it’s necessary to study other factors present in these paid partnerships so that marketers can fully capitalize on their ad spend. Few studies have been conducted surrounding verification and its perception. However, Edgerly et al. (2019) measured the extent to which verification effected tweet credibility and account credibility on Twitter. They collected 600 responses and found that verification did not influence evaluations of source credibility. In a similar study, researchers stated that verification, as an authenticity indicator, had no effect on source credibility.

These findings are consistent with H1. Verification had no profound effect on credibility scores, therefore, it’s postulated that its perception is associated with celebrity status and fame. As the literature exhibits, celebrity perceptions often harm trust and overall positive attitudes, hence, H2 is supported by the literature.
Funding for the all primary data collection was provided by the University of Maine’s Center for Undergraduate Research Artificial Intelligence Fellowship and the University of Maine Honors College’s Charlie Slavin Research Grant. All studies were also approved by the University of Maine’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B).

Primary data collection began with study 1, a 2-minute pre-test survey administered on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk to support assumptions that verification holds the same meaning across the Twitter, Facebook and Instagram platforms. Participants were paid $1.00 to complete the survey. A sample of 350 participants was collected. Due to unfinished surveys, 342 were analyzed. The first question of study 1 asked if participants could define verification to help filter respondents. The pre-test study is attached as Appendix C.

Study 2, as the research’s primary method, utilized a 5 to 7-minute behavioral experiment conducted as an anonymous, electronic, online survey also conducted on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. A sample of 440 responses (37.53% female, 61.5% male) was collected, each was paid $1.00, and 413 were analyzed. The sample size is sufficient to conduct this study based on Slovin’s Formula:

\[ n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2} \]

The lowercase “n” represents sample size, N, total population, and e, margin of error. In 2021, in the U.S., 223 million people are social media users (Statista, 2021). Hence, based on Slovin’s formula, the ideal sample size should have been 385. Therefore, the
number of responses in this research is acceptable in quantum.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of 4 conditions in a 2 x 2 between subject design: (ad: beauty vs. fitness) x 2 (verification symbol: present vs. not). The fitness and beauty industries were chosen for their popular use of influencers. In 2018, Vox reported that fashion bloggers and gym instructors are the next step in advertising (Vox, 2018) and appypie.com wrote that 47% of the health/fitness industry uses influencers and 52% of the beauty industry uses influencers (2019). The 4 conditions were created to look like Instagram posts because previous research has studied verification’s effects on Twitter (Edgerly and Vraga, 2019; Vaidya et al., 2019). Instagram has also become a very popular platform for influencer marketing. Mediakix (2019) reported that Instagram is the most important platform for strategic influencer marketing and that 69% of advertisers planned to spend the most on Instagram in 2019. Hootsuite (2019) cited numerous benefits of advertising through an Instagram photo including the ability to predict and track post performance, partnership disclaimers can be added clearly, further promotion in an Instagram story and more. The graphics utilized faux names, accounts, and products. Names were created through a random name generator and images were taken from a free stock photo website (Pexels.com, 2020). The use of faux characters ensured there would not be recall bias since, to reduce cognitive strain, people tend to believe information that stems from familiar sources (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999). Thus, participants were guaranteed to have no familiarity with the endorsers, brands or products, regardless of verification status. Survey takers were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. After viewing the post, the participants were subsequently asked questions about the ad, endorser, and product/brand
they viewed. They were not allowed to return to the original post (visual) they were shown. Ohanian’s source credibility scale was used to evaluate endorser credibility and trustworthiness and Delgado-Ballester’s brand trust scale was used to measure both brand and ad trust. IBM’s SPSS statistics software and Microsoft Excel was used to analyze the data. Study 2 is attached as Appendix D.

Of the 413 analyzed, 61.5% (n=254) of participants were male and 37.53% (n=155) female. The largest age group was 25-34 comprising 38.11% (n=160) followed by ages 35-44 (n=145). 57.9% (n=239) of respondents had completed a 4-year degree, 16.95% (n=70) had completed a master’s program, and 12.83% (n=53) held GED as their highest educational merit. More detailed demographics can be found in Table 1.
Table: 1: Study 2 Demographics

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<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37.53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
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<td>35 - 44</td>
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<td>45 - 54</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
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<tr>
<td>55 - 64</td>
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<td>65 - 74</td>
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<tr>
<td>75 - 84</td>
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<td>85 or older</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say.</td>
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<table>
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<td>2.18%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>28.33%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A moderate amount</td>
<td>20.82%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>24.70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>23.00%</td>
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<table>
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<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>1.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>1.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree not disagree</td>
<td>4.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>15.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>43.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>32.20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Viewing Influencer Ads</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None at all</td>
<td>2.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>28.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A moderate amount</td>
<td>20.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>24.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>23.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A subsequent follow-up questionnaire was also hosted on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. 400 participants (determined again by Slovin’s formula) were paid $0.50 and 395 responses were analyzed. The purpose of study 3 was to further investigate perceptions of celebrity in verified vs. unverified endorsers. The study design was nearly the same as study 2, though participants were asked different questions after viewing an ad. Two new ad conditions were also used in the follow-up study in addition to the original four utilized in study 2 (see Appendix F). Again, a between-subject design was used (2 ad:
beauty vs. fitness) x 2 (verification present vs. not) x 2 ((ad disclosure vs. not). The new conditions were comprised of the same fitness ad with a verified symbol and without, but “#ad” was absent from the ad caption. This was done to determine if sponsorship disclosure has an effect on the perception of verification and celebrity. Participants were asked if they considered the endorser they viewed to be a celebrity, among other questions. Additionally, questions were drawn from Hoffner & Buchanan’s (2000) wishful identification scale. The scale has been used in the literature to measure media figures and it is used in this study to help determine attitudes towards the verified and un-verified endorsers. These included: (a) He/she is the sort of person I want to be like myself, (b) He/she is someone I would like to emulate, and (c) I’d like to do the kinds of things he/she does. Schouten et al. (2020) used the scale hypothesizing that celebrities would produce higher levels of wishful identification due to their “glitz and glam” than influencers who are presented as “ordinary, approachable” people. However, their results showed that influencers produced higher levels of wishful identification (F(1, 127) = 14.99, p < .001, η² = .106). Based on that study, I believe unverified endorsers, if perceived as credible influencers, will have higher levels of wishful identification since influencers, unlike celebrities, are more relatable. Study 3 conditions and questions are included in Appendix E.

Study 3 participants (34.5% female, n=134) were primarily aged 25-34 (50.13%, n=198) and had completed a 4-year degree (56.71%, n=224). A detailed account of participant demographics is listed in Table 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>65.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 - 24</td>
<td>3.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 - 34</td>
<td>50.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 - 44</td>
<td>27.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 - 54</td>
<td>9.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 - 64</td>
<td>6.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 - 74</td>
<td>1.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 - 84</td>
<td>0.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85 or older</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say.</td>
<td>0.24%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None at all</td>
<td>2.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>28.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A moderate amount</td>
<td>26.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>19.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>23.29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Metric</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Familiar with Verification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>0.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>2.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
<td>4.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree not disagree</td>
<td>5.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>24.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>34.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>28.86%</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Viewing Influencer Ads</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None at all</td>
<td>7.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little</td>
<td>22.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A moderate amount</td>
<td>32.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot</td>
<td>22.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>14.68%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
DATA ANALYSIS

Study 1: Pre-Test

The first study was conducted in order assume that the primary findings apply to other social media platforms. Namely, as stated in H1, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. The primary study utilized a 7-point Likert scale and conditions that were related to the Instagram platform, so the pre-test was conducted to evaluate whether participants view verification on the different platforms as similar or dissimilar. A paired samples t-test was first conducted to support this assumption. Twitter and Facebook ($t(340) = 1.89, p > .05$), Facebook and Instagram ($t(339) = -0.72, p > .4$), and Twitter and Instagram ($t(339) = 1.43, p > .1$) did not yield statistically significant differences. A subsequent t-test showed that the more familiar with verification participants were, the more likely they were to view the different platforms’ verification badges as similar. To show this, participants who responded a 4 and up on the likert scale of strongly disagree - strongly agree when asked if they could define verification were chosen from the sample. Results from this t-test are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Results of T-Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Samples Test</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Deviation</th>
<th>Std Error Mean</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sg (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Par 1 TW/SimilarityFB-FB/SimilarityIG</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>1.274</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>-0.068</td>
<td>0.219</td>
<td>1.054</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>0.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Par 2 FR/SimilarityIG-TW/SimilarityIG</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>1.278</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>-0.134</td>
<td>0.154</td>
<td>0.135</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>0.893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Par 3 TW/SimilarityFB-TW/SimilarityIG</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>1.230</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
<td>0.234</td>
<td>1.353</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>0.177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10 A t-test is a statistical test that compares means between two data sets and assesses if the difference between means is statistically significant.
Results from study 1 reveal that the majority of respondents are familiar with verification with 70% reporting they have seen the symbol before and 89.7% said they agreed (somewhat agree-strongly agree) to some degree that they could define what verification is.

**Study 2**

Study 2 was conducted to test H1 and H2. All questions were measured using a 1-7 scale where they were asked to agree with statements (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). An average scale (1 = far below average, 7 = far above average), and likelihood scale (1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely) were also used.

Social media use proved high amongst respondents (68.5% of respondents): 24.7% responding that they used social media “a lot”, 20.8% use it “a moderate amount”, and 23% use it “a great deal.” Only 2.18% answered they did not use social media at all. Influencer advertisements were also highly recognized. Only 7.26% of all respondents (n=30) answered that they never see advertisements from influencers on their social media feeds. Verification again proved to be well-known with 376 respondents or 91.04% agreeing (those responding somewhat agree (5) - strongly agree (7)) with the statement “I am familiar with verification.” 55.5% (n=229) were correct in answering if the endorser they viewed was verified, however 16.7% responded they were unsure.

Analysis of variance or ANOVA was used to analyze the results of Study 2.\textsuperscript{11} Results show that few verification measures were significant. However, verification was

\textsuperscript{11} Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is a statistical test that is used to check if the means of two or more groups are significantly different from each other. ANOVA checks the impact of one or more factors by comparing the means of different samples. In my research, I use a 95% confidence level meaning that the “p” value must be less than 0.05 in order to show statistical significance.
statistically significant when rating the endorser's “beauty.” Surprisingly, un-verified fitness and beauty endorsers scored higher in this dimension than those who were verified ($M_{\text{Verified Beauty}} = 5.08$ vs. $M_{\text{Unverified Beauty}} = 5.41$; $M_{\text{Verified Fitness}} = 4.88$ vs. $M_{\text{Unverified Fitness}} = 5.14$; $F(1,409) = 5.518$, $p > 0.02$). In the “attractive” dependent variable, verification was again significant ($p > 0.04$). Verified fitness and beauty endorsers were seen as slightly more attractive ($M_{\text{Unverified Fitness}} = 5.34$, $SD=1.32$ vs. $M_{\text{Verified Fitness}} = 5.27$, $SD=1.23$; $M_{\text{Unverified Beauty}} = 5.51$, $SD=1.055$ vs. $M_{\text{Verified Beauty}} = 5.08$, $SD=1.36$; $F(1,409) = 4.29$, $p > 0.04$). Trustworthiness between verified and unverified conditions were not significant, though the verified endorser did produce a slightly lower mean score then the verified endorser ($M_{\text{Verified}} = 4.67$ vs. $M_{\text{Unverified}} = 4.83$, $SD=1.55$, $F(1,408) = 0.80$, $p < 0.015$).

Interestingly, there were statistical differences in relation to the dependent variables between the beauty and fitness ads, regardless of verification status. For example, there was a statistically significant result between beauty and fitness when ranking endorser qualification ($M_{\text{fitness}} = 5.13$ vs. $M_{\text{beauty}} = 4.73$, $F(1,409) = 7.606$, $p < 0.007$), and expertise ($M_{\text{fitness}} = 5.07$ vs. $M_{\text{beauty}} = 4.78$, $F(1,409) = 4.405$, $p < 0.04$). In both categories, the fitness endorser scored higher. The beauty and fitness categories were also significant ($M_{\text{fitness}} = 5.00$ vs. $M_{\text{beauty}} = 4.61$, $F(1,408) = 6.313$, $p < 0.013$) in relation to whether the influencer added credibility to the brand with fitness ads rated as adding slightly more credibility than the beauty category, but verification did not prove to be different in relation to this variable in any meaningful way. Beauty and fitness ads were also significant ($M_{\text{fitness}} = 5.09$ vs. $M_{\text{beauty}} = 4.75$, $F(1,409) = 5.698$, $p < 0.02$) in consumers perceptions of endorser knowledge, one of the determinants of source expertise. Differences in purchase likelihood were not significant, however, verified
fitness endorsers (M=5.31, SD=2.26) and unverified beauty endorsers (M=5.19, SD=2.42) had higher means than the relative juxtaposition (unverified fitness: M=4.9, SD=2.5; verified beauty: M=4.69, SD=2.55). This suggests that industry and product category play a large role in consumer’s evaluation of purchase intent. This isn’t surprising since consumer involvement, fit, and interest in the industries plays a role in consumers attitudes (Schouten et al., 2020)

Ad and brand trustworthiness, measured with Delgado-Ballester’s scale, were indexed. Neither measures were affected by any of the conditions. Other dependent variables yielded no statistical significance in relation to any of the conditions including experience and whether the endorser was advertising solely for the money.

Study 2 found that credibility was not affected by verification. Study 2 findings are in line with previous work surrounding verified badges. Edgerley et al. (2019) found that participants paid little attention to the verification mark when judging credibility, even when little other information is provided about the account or the content. Instead, account ambiguity and congruence dominate credibility assessments of news organizations on Twitter. Additionally, Vaidya et al. (2019) also showed that verification did not affect user’s perceptions. In their study, participants who were shown a tweet with a verified badge (53.1%) found the tweet credible (“much more likely” or “more likely” to act) and those in “None” conditions provided similar answers (51.2%). This finding partially supports H1 in showing that verification is not strongly associated with credibility. The lack of any statistical difference may be because respondents consider all endorsers of the test, regardless of verification status, as celebrities. Some evidence supports this theory. For example, all conditions had fairly low means when evaluating
whether the “influencer endorses products they actually believe in”, meaning answers were closer to “disagree” with the statement ($M_{fitness} = 4.3, SD=1.92$ vs. $M_{beauty} = 4.12$, $SD=1.9$). Whether the endorser was “advertising solely for the money” also was not significant but all conditions had relatively high means showing that respondents did mostly agree ($M_{Total}=5.38, SD_{Total}=1.4$).

The presence of #ad was included in all conditions’ text and therefore, respondents may have felt all endorsers, regardless of verification, were notable since they were made aware that the endorser is capable of gaining paid partnerships. Also, awareness that the endorser has received payment for appearing in an ad produces negative attitudes (Silvera & Austad, 2004). In addition to the main objectives of Study 3, I also tested to see if #ad had any significant effect on perceptions of celebrity or purchase likelihood.

**Study 3**

To test for perceptions of celebrity, study 3 was conducted. Participants’ use of verification was measured using a 1 -7 scale where they were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statement, "I do look at the verified symbol when searching for or viewing accounts on social media" (1= strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Participants largely agreed with 75.44% (n=298) responding in the agree range (somewhat agree-strongly agree). Not surprisingly, study 3 yielded similar results to study 2 in relation to if they were active on social media with 80.25% (n=317) agreeing and 87.09% (n=344) agreeing they were familiar with verification. Of the 6 ads, respondents were equally distributed with about ~16% viewing each condition.
ANOVA was again the primary method of analysis. The fitness conditions that eliminated the hashtag “#ad,” surprisingly, had no significant effect on any of the dependent variables and specifically, whether participants viewed the endorser as a celebrity or not ($M_{Hashtag} = 4.41$ vs. $M_{noHashtag} = 4.25$, $F(1,130) = .241$, $p > 0.6$). I theorized that ad disclosure might impact perceptions of celebrity since viewers can postulate that the endorser must be well-known if they are capable of gaining a paid partnership evidenced by the ad disclosure. Research has shown that advertising disclosure is correlated with advertising recognition (Cicco, 2019). Ad disclosure also had no effect on purchase intention. This is interesting since there is literature to support that disclosure is impactful on purchase intention. Weismueller et al. (2020) studied ad disclosure with Instagram influencers and showed advertising disclosure indirectly and positively influences consumer purchase intention by influencing source attractiveness. Since there was no statistical significance of ad disclosure, subsequent data analysis excludes these two fitness conditions, where #ad was absent, to allow for easier and more equal comparison between the original beauty and fitness ads that were also tested in study 2. Thus, 132 responses were not analyzed further.

In the 4 original conditions that were tested further, there was no significance between verification and whether participants viewed the endorser as a celebrity ($M_{Verified} = 4.41$ vs. $M_{Unverified} = 4.25$, $F(1,130) = .241$, $p > 0.3$) or as well-known ($M_{Verified} = 5.02$ vs. $M_{Unverified} = 4.82$, $F(1,259) = .919$, $p > 0.3$) and mid-range means suggest perceptions were fairly widespread. Although, 52.66% (n=208) of respondents agreed to some extent (somewhat agree- strongly agree) that they felt the endorser was a celebrity, 31.14% (n=123) disagreed and 16.2% (n=64) were non-decisive. Verification was also not
statically significant when asked if the endorser was “qualified to make these claims”
(M_{verified} = 4.83 vs. M_{unverified} = 5.01, F(1,259) = .986, p > 0.3) or with any of the wishful identification measures. For example, the results of verification’s presence on “I’d like to do the kinds of things the (endorser) does” is as follows: M_{verified} = 4.46 vs. M_{unverified} = 4.42, F(1,259) = .986, p > 0.3.

Verification was not significant in response to “(endorser) is the type of person I want to be like myself,” however, the type of industry was significant (M_{fitness} = 4.65 vs. M_{beauty} = 4.08, F(1,259) = .049, p > 0.8) with fitness boasting a higher overall mean. None of the other wishful identification scales produced any significant results regarding the type of industry. Although, the verified beauty endorser did score decently higher (M=4.31, SD= 1.95) in terms of mean than the unverified beauty endorser (M=3.9, SD=1.93) when answering “(endorser) is someone I’d like to emulate” while the fitness industry ad enjoyed higher overall means than beauty in all of the wishful identification variables.
Social media is vital to marketers in the 21st Century. It’s popularity and addictive nature has made it a common practice around the world. This thesis, in examining verification, an aspect of social media, contributes to the literature on how best to utilize endorser partnerships. Many interesting and unexpected findings were produced in this research. The presence of the verified badge was not statistically significant in almost all cases. It did not affect perceptions of celebrity, credibility, or trust. However, in the beauty and attractiveness dimensions, it was found that verification played a significant role in user’s perceptions. Un-verified endorsers were actually viewed as more beautiful and attractive. This is an interesting finding, and from it, one could argue that marketers should partner with unverified endorsers.

Trustworthiness and credibility, whether in the ad, brand, or endorser was not affected by verification status. Wishful identification was also not affected by verification. There were significant differences in the dependent variables when manipulating the industry. Regardless of verification, type of product category affected attitudes towards the endorser and marketers should consider this. The majority of the time, participants favored the fitness conditions. This may be because the beauty industry, is typically targeted towards women and the majority of study participants was men (Study 2: 61.5% male (n=254)). The Influencer Report (2020) found the highest percentage (59%) of women follow beauty influencers. Also, the beauty industry may be more saturated as it is an industry that utilizes influencer marketing very heavily. SocialBook.com rated the fashion/beauty product category as the number 1 industry in
terms of use of influencers (2019). Marketer’s working for beauty brands should therefore aim to maintain originality and uniqueness in their paid partnerships to stand out and produce better overall attitudes (Casalo et al, 2020).

Ultimately, H1 and H2 were not supported but there are interesting implications for marketers from this study. Firstly, type of industry was significant in endorser qualification, expertise, and adding credibility to the brand. Fitness endorsers scored much better and therefore, fitness marketers are validated in their use of influencers. Additionally, verified endorsers charge more (AspireIQ, n.d.) and yet, results show that verification had no positive impact on trust or credibility, so why should marketer’s pay a premium? There are many sources online that recommend users try to get verified for the benefits that come along with it, but study findings showed no apparent benefits to being verified. Additionally, verification significantly and negatively impacted endorser attractiveness in the eyes of the consumer. This is interesting since previous work shows that influencers with higher follower counts are viewed as more attractive and verification is typically associated with a high following (Jin & Phua, 2014). Attractiveness is an important component of source credibility (Ohanian, 1990) which, in turn, has been shown to increase purchase intention (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019), message acceptance (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016), and positive endorsement attitudes (Goldsmith et al., 2000). Therefore, marketers could get better return on ad spend (ROAS) and conversions from partnering with non-verified accounts. Based on the results of this research, there is no justification or benefit to paying more to work with a verified endorser, though these findings should be further researched and supplemented. Future research should focus on verification’s impact on post engagement, sharing likelihood,
electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and intentions to share, comment, etc. More research needs to be done to see if verification has positive or negative effects on consumers when marketing; is there a comprehensive framework that can be made? Also, why are verified badges so exclusive and what are the traits necessary to earn one? What would social media look like if all accounts were to be verified?

Further implications of the findings apply to social networking sites themselves. Previous literature, as well as this study, showed that verification did not help credibility. Also, users can actually buy verification through what many writers have called the “black market” of social media verification. The process entails paying a significant fee, sometimes as much as $7,000, to go through third party services who work with actual employees, who remain anonymous, of social media platforms (Flynn, 2017). Therefore, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram should consider strengthening the value of the verified badge. Partial solutions could include being more selective and making the badge more noticeable and thus, potentially larger. Research should also continue to look at the role of advertising disclosure in the context of social media influencers since this study found that removing disclosure language such as “#ad” and #sponsored” had no effect on any dependent variables, contrary to other researchers work (Weissmuller et al., 2020).

There is still lots of work to be done surrounding verification. The questionnaires prove that verification is very relevant with 91.04% (Study 2: n=376) agreeing that they were familiar with verification and in Study 3, 75.44% (n=298) agreed with the statement: “I do look at the verified symbol when searching for or viewing accounts on social media.” Verification is also becoming increasingly prevalent. It is now in a variety of social apps including the dating service, Tinder (Carman, 2020). As consumers
demand instruments of accountability more and more, with the rise of hackers, security problems and fake news, verification will undoubtedly be used in various contexts including validating official and public institution websites. Additionally, there is an entire industry focused on the sale of knock-off products. Verification could be an important tool in validating that consumers are buying the real thing.

Globally, verification will also play a role. Influencers can help brands globalize their following, since social media’s reach is so broad. Although the highest percentage (32%) of verified accounts are U.S. based, many other countries also boast well-known influencers and they are widespread with Brazil and the U.K trailing the U.S. each contributing 5% of the total verified accounts (Baklanov, 2020). Take fashion influencer Chiara Ferragni, for example. The Italian fashionista based out of Milan, Italy boasts 23.2 million followers on Instagram. Verification is being recognized in many countries and therefore, will undoubtedly continue to play a role globally as consumers continue to look for measures of authenticity and confidence.

The move towards a verified world is just beginning. Twitter is considering adding another checkmark badge, distinct from the classic blue, to show which accounts are automated accounts or “bots” (Hutchinson, 2019). Researchers at the University of Southampton and the Information Technologies Institute in Greece, are working on a new digital forensics platform they call a “media verification assistant” to help verify news sources on social media feeds (Cameron, 2021). Also, Airbnb announced in 2019 that it would verify all of its listings, including the accuracy of photographs, addresses, and other information provided by hosts about themselves and their properties (Caplan, 2020).
There is a clear move towards a verified internet and verification will play an important role in the future, not only in the U.S. but globally. This thesis adds interesting findings regarding user perception of verification to the small, but crucial amount of literature looking at the symbol.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations of this study. First, participants paid on MTurk may have considered the ad, and their response to it, more closely than they would have when scrolling on Instagram. The use of an MTurk sample also limits the ability to generalize the findings, though research does show that MTurk experiments often have similar outcomes in comparison to the general population samples (Coppock, 2018). Also, like all MTurk experiments, participants are younger and more educated than the general public. Content of the ads was not overly opinionated and other subject matter may have produced different outcomes. The effect of verification may have also produced different results if the participants were familiar with the endorser or product/brand. In using fictional accounts, participants did not have any familiarity and literature shows that familiar sources are viewed as more credible (Erdogan, 1999). Further, the study utilized ads centered on the beauty industry, which is more catered to women, and demographic information showed that respondents were majority male. This may have caused a lack of attention and/or different attitudes. Another limitation is that there was not a qualifier question in the studies to exclude participants who do not purchase makeup or fitness products.
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APPENDIX
APPENDIX A: VERIFIED SYMBOLS

[Image of verified symbols including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter logos]
3/29/2021

Application #: 2020-10-10

Title: The Importance of a Checkmark: An Investigation into The Perceptions of Social Media Verification and Its Effects On Consumer Trust

Principal Investigator: Jazlyn Dumas

To Whom It May Concern,

The study referenced above was approved as an exempt 2 study on 11/12/2020 by the IRB. On 3/12/2021 the IRB reviewed and approved a modification to the study.

Any additional changes to the application must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation.

Please contact Paula Portalatin, Research Compliance Officer III, Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, 207/581-2657 or paula.portalatin@maine.edu, with questions.

Sincerely,
Paula Portalatin
APPENDIC C: PRE-TEST QUESTIONNAIRE

- I can define what social media verification is.
- Please list the platforms that you have seen the verification badge on.
- How familiar are you with each of the following? (show verification symbols from Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube)
- Have you seen the following verification symbols? (show pictures of usernames that are verified from each of the sites)
  - *Only ask the following if they answered that they had seen the symbol:
    - Please describe verification on Instagram in your own words.
    - Please describe Verification on Twitter in your own words.
    - Please describe verification on Facebook in your own words.
- How similar or dissimilar is the definition of verification on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram based on your own observations?
APPENDIX D: STUDY 2 QUESTIONNAIRE

Dependent Variable Block:
- Jessica Hamilton adds credibility to the brand Liquid Candy.
- How likely are you to buy liquid candy lipstick?
- I trust that Jessica Hamilton truly feels this way about Liquid Candy.
- Jessica Hamilton is advertising Liquid Candy solely for the money.
- Endorsers advertise things which they actually believe in.
- Endorsers **only** advertise things which they believe in.
- The more likes an advertisement gets, the more likely I am to try the product.

Control Block(s):
- Ohanian
- **Attractiveness**
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of attractiveness.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of trustworthiness.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of expertise.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of dependability.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of honesty.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of reliability.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of trustworthiness.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of expertise.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of experience.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of knowledge.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of qualification.
  - Please rate the above endorser, Jessica Hamilton, based on level of skill.
- **Delgado-Ballester (Brand)**
- **Fiability:**
  - With X brand name, I obtain what I look for in a product
  - X is a brand name that meets my expectations
  - I feel confident in X brand name
  - X is a brand name that never disappoints me
  - X brand name is not consistent in satisfying my needs
- **Intentionality:**
  - X brand name would be honest in and sincere in addressing my concerns
o X brand name would make any effort to satisfy me
o I could rely on X brand name to solve the problem
o X brand name would be interested in my satisfaction
o X brand name would compensate me in some way for a problem with the product
o X brand name would not be willing in solving the problems I have with the product
o Brand X is a trustworthy brand.

• Delgado-Ballester (Ad)
• Fiability:
  o With the above ad, I obtain what I look for in an ad.
  o The above ad that meets my expectations.
  o The ad makes me feel confident.
  o This ad does not disappoint me.
• Intentionality:
  o The above ad is honest and sincere in addressing my concerns.
  o The ad makes any effort to satisfy me
  o I could rely on the above ad to solve the problem
  o I trust the information the ad is giving me.
  o The ad was lying to me.

Demographics + Participant’s Knowledge of Social Media
• Gender
• Age
• Education
  o Agree – disagree scale with below statements:
    ▪ I am active on social media platforms.
    ▪ I am familiar with social media verification (i.e. the blue checkmark on one’s account).
  o How often do you use social media?
    ▪ A great deal – none at all
  o How often do you see advertisements by endorsers or “influencers” on your social media feed (this may include Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram)?
    ▪ A great deal – none at all
  o Was the endorser that you viewed verified?
    ▪ Scale from “sure” to “unsure” to prevent random guesses
APPENDIX E: STUDY 3 QUESTIONNAIRE

*Agree - disagree* scale with below statements:

- (Endorser) is well-known.
- (Endorser) is a celebrity.
- (Endorser) is notable.
- (Endorser) is qualified to make these claims.

How likely are you to buy (product)?

- (Endorser) is the type of person I want to be like myself.
- Sometimes I wish I could be more like (Endorser)
- (Endorser) is someone I would like to emulate.
- I’d like to do the kind of things (Endorser) does.

**Demographics + Participant’s Knowledge of Social Media**

- Gender
- Age
- Education
  - *Agree - disagree* scale with below statements:
    - I am active on social media platforms.
    - I am familiar with social media verification (i.e. the blue checkmark on one’s account).
  - How often do you use social media?
    - A great deal - none at all
  - How often do you see advertisements by endorsers or “influencers” on your social media feed (this may include Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram)?
    - A great deal - none at all
  - Was the endorser that you viewed verified?
    - Scale from “sure” to “unsure” to prevent random guesses
APPENDIX F: STUDY 2 & 3 CONDITIONS

Beauty:
Fitness:

fitnessbychrirsroberts You guys have to try Gain Fitness' new protein powder. Start your morning workout off right!! For more details, see the link in my bio. #ad #GainAmbassador

fitnessbychrirsroberts You guys have to try Gain Fitness' new protein powder. Start your morning workout off right!! For more details, see the link in my bio. #ad #GainAmbassador
Fitness with and without Ad Disclosure (added to study 3):

fitnessbychrishroberts: You guys have to try Gain Fitness' new protein powder. Start your morning workout off right! For more details, see the link in my bio.
AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Jazlyn E. Dumas was born and raised in Lewiston, Maine. After graduating from Lewiston High School in 2017, she went on to pursue a degree in marketing from the University of Maine where she also obtained a minor in graphic design. Jazlyn is an avid skier and was an active member of the Maine Alpha Chapter of Pi Beta Phi, club field hockey and club basketball team.

Upon graduation, Jazlyn will work as a marketing and social media specialist for the Maine retailer Marden’s Surplus and Salvage. She is grateful to her family, friends, the University of Maine, the Maine Business School, and the Honors College for her education and success.