

INVESTIGATING THE INDIVIDUALS' PERCEPTION ABOUT SOCIAL
MEDIA INFLUENCERS: A SURVEY STUDY ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
OF
MIDDLE EAST TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
IN
THE DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

SEPTEMBER 2022

Approval of the thesis:

**INVESTIGATING THE INDIVIDUALS' PERCEPTION ABOUT SOCIAL
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ABSTRACT

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September 2022, 73 pages

Internet and social media have become integral to our lives, creating social media celebrities or influencer terms. This thesis explores social media influencers' effects on social media users. Perceived similarity by the user to the influencer, wishful identification by the user with the influencer, perceived credibility of the influencer, and parasocial identification between the user and the influencer are investigated. This thesis aims to contribute to the literature by simultaneously analyzing perceived similarity, wishful identification, credibility, and parasocial identification in the Turkish social media context. An online survey was sent to Middle East Technical University students, and 100 valid answers were collected. Findings revealed that perceived similarity, wishful identification, and trustworthiness dimension of credibility are strong predictors of parasocial identification.

Keywords: credibility, parasocial identification, wishful identification, perceived similarity, social media influencer

ÖZ

BİREYLERİN SOSYAL MEDYA ÜNLÜLERİNE İLİŞKİN ALGILARI: ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİYLE BİR ANKET ÇALIŞMASI

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Yüksek Lisans, İşletme Bölümü

Tez Yöneticisi: Prof. Dr. Özlem ÖZDEMİR YILDIRIM

Eylül 2022, 73 sayfa

İnternet ve sosyal medya hayatımızın ayrılmaz bir parçası haline geldi. Bu tez, sosyal medya fenomenlerinin (influencer) sosyal medya kullanıcıları üzerindeki etkilerini araştırmaktadır. Sosyal medya kullanıcısı tarafından influencer ile algılanan benzerlik (perceived similarity), sosyal medya kullanıcısının influencer ile özdeşleşmesi (wishful identification), influencer'ın algılanan güvenilirliği ve kullanıcı ile influencer arasındaki parasosyal etkileşim (parasocial identification) araştırılmaktadır. Bu tez, Türk sosyal medya bağlamında algılanan benzerlik, özdeşleşme, güvenilirlik ve parasosyal özdeşleşmeyi eş zamanlı olarak analiz ederek literatüre katkı sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Anket, Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi öğrencilerine email ile gönderilmiş ve 100 geçerli cevap toplanmıştır. Bulgular, algılanan benzerlik, özdeşleşme ve güvenilirliğin parasosyal özdeşleşme üzerinde pozitif etkisi olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: sosyal medya, sosyal medya fenomeni, ürün yerleştirme

To my 17-year-old self

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank my advisor Prof. Dr. Özlem Özdemir Yıldırım for her patience, guidance, and never-ending positive attitude throughout the process. I would not be able to complete this thesis without her support, and I will always be grateful from the bottom of my heart.

My dear sister Elifnaz Yüksel was always there for support whenever I needed it. Thank you very much, Elif, for proofreading everything I had written on subjects that were never in your field of interest. Thank you for guiding me when I lose my way and encouraging me to continue. I am blessed to have a sister as generous, loving, and wonderful as you.

Ekin Berkyürek is the best thing the MBA program has added to my life. Ekin, thank you so much for your friendship, for listening to my problems, calming me down when I panic, being someone that I could talk to about everything without judgment, and for every day we suffered together.

Maria Heine is the most supportive, positive, encouraging, understanding, lovely, and kind person I have ever met. Maria, I can't thank you enough for your presence in my life and your support for everything. You were always there for me whenever I needed help during this process. Thank you for being you and thank you for being my friend.

I want to thank my dear friend Ece Demirer. Ece, I can't thank you enough for answering all of my questions and sharing your experience while keeping your soothing presence and calming attitude without ever getting frustrated with me.

Lastly, I would like to thank Gülşah Gülebakan for everything she is. Thank you, Gülşah, for being there for me, supporting me, and helping me to get through life alongside my thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PSI: Parasocial Identification

PS: Perceived Similarity

WI: Wishful Identification

CR: Credibility

AT: Attractiveness

TR: Trustworthiness

EX: Expertise

PI: Purchase Intention

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The internet and smartphones have become integral to our lives in the last 20 years and have changed our habits. With the widespread use of smartphones, the primary media medium has shifted to social media apps. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter created communities and changed how people communicate. Facebook has 2,9 Billion, Instagram has 1.5 Billion, and Twitter has 436 Million monthly active users (Statista.com, 2022b). Following the shift in user trends, companies also created social media presence and started to use social media as an advertisement tool. According to (Statista.com, 2022c), 14.9% of the marketing budget of companies in the U.S. is dedicated to social media. This percentage has been rising since 2015 and has had a pike in the COVID-19 pandemic (Statista.com, 2022a). According to a study by Michaelidou et al., (2011) companies use social media for various reasons: attracting customers, cultivating relationships with customers, increasing brand awareness, and communicating the brand online. Furthermore, social media platforms are used by companies to boost sales revenues (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). As a signal of the shift in advertisement medium, in 2020, Instagram advertising revenues were over \$17 Billion in the United States alone (Statista.com, 2022c).

Although technology, digitalization, new media, and marketing methods arise, the relationship between the viewers and celebrities still exists. Questions like whether celebrity endorsement is efficient, what makes celebrities credible, what kind of relationships exist between celebrities and viewers, and why some viewers like certain celebrities more than others in the literature are answered considering the mass media and traditional celebrities such as movie stars or sports people. Social media's mutual

interaction power opened a new page in marketing literature, and now the questions mentioned earlier are being answered in social media and influencers' context.

Parasocial identification between a media figure and a viewer is a concept where the viewer imagines having a real relationship with the media figure or a show character as if they were friends. First, parasocial identification is analyzed in the literature considering one-way communication channels such as TV and Movies. In social media, the situation is accelerated. The social media user follows influencers according to their interest areas; they can comment on the posts or even interact with the influencer via direct messaging. These two-way communication possibilities create a higher degree of parasocial identification with the influencer.

The perceived similarity is the degree to which a viewer sees themselves as similar to a media personae regarding appearance, background, values, and attitude (McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly, 1975). People expect characters or influencers similar to them to share relevant information. Also, perceived similarity can affect communication effectiveness (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). The perceived similarity is widely used to investigate the viewer-celebrity relationship in the literature, and now it is used in the social media context.

Wishful identification is another aspect of the viewer-media character relationship and can be explained as the viewer's longing to be like the media character. While consuming a media product such as a movie or book, the user sees the world from the characters' eyes and emphasizes the character. Giles (2002) suggested that wishful identification is one of the development stages of parasocial identification.

Source credibility is another significant topic in the literature that demonstrates the necessary attributes of a celebrity to be perceived as credible by the consumers. The credibility scale with attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise dimensions, developed by Ohanian (1990), is widely used in the literature. Research shows that celebrities found credible by the audience reflect the credibility of the brand or product they are promoting. In addition, credibility is seen as the predictor of parasocial identification in the literature (Bond, 2018). Investigating the relationship between

parasocial identification and all three, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise, dimensions of credibility are relatively scarce in the literature.

Purchase intention has been seen as the main predictor of purchase behavior in the literature (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977). One of the primary purposes of advertisement activities is to trigger purchase behavior. The effect of celebrity endorsement on purchase intention and its relationship with parasocial and wishful identification, credibility, and similarity is analyzed in the literature. Taking it into the social media context is relatively novel in the literature.

Considering that social media and influencers are relatively recent concepts in the literature in contrast to mass media, there are still many undiscovered areas in social media research. This thesis aims to investigate the effects of influencers on social media users from parasocial identification, perceived similarity, wishful identification, and credibility perspectives. Examining the relationship between selected variables will provide a better understanding of the concepts and contribute to Turkish and global literature.

The following chapter consists of a review of relevant literature to study. The literature review starts with defining the influencers and influencer marketing. It will continue with parasocial identification, perceived similarity, wishful identification, credibility, and purchase intention. Definitions of the concepts and the reasons why the concept is relevant to the study are discussed in this chapter.

The conceptual model and the hypotheses are presented in the following chapter. The hypotheses emanated from the previous literature on the topic.

After the conceptual model and hypotheses chapter, the methodology chapter is presented. Data collection is made by online survey. Scales used in the survey are derived from previous literature and slightly adjusted to fit the social media context. One hundred valid answers are collected and used for the analysis. This chapter presents detailed information about the survey design, sample, variables, and scales used.

The results chapter follows the methodology chapter. Factor analysis, reliability analysis, correlations, and linear regression analysis are conducted on the data using IBM SPSS v28, and the results are presented in this chapter.

Results show that wishful identification, perceived similarity and trustworthiness, and expertise dimensions of credibility are predictors of parasocial identification with the influencers. Also, the attractiveness dimension of the credibility construct and wishful identification appear positively correlated. Findings show that models and theories used in traditional media research with traditional celebrities also apply to social media research with influencers. This thesis contributes to the social media and influencer marketing subjects by expanding the topic to the context of university students and by shedding light on the effects and relationships between social media users and influencers in Turkey.

In the conclusion chapter, alongside a summary of the study, realized results are explained, discussed, and the study's possible implications, limitations, and further directions are presented.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Micro celebrities and Influencer Marketing

Social media platforms facilitated communication and allowed people to interact online (Gruzd, 2011). These platforms give the opportunity to people to create their profiles and share their experiences. Some people started to gain a high number of followers and became known by certain groups. These people are called micro-celebrities or influencers in the literature. In other words, influencers are people who carefully and strategically create an online presence on social media, present their persona life within that strategic frame, and reach followers by doing so (Marwick, 2015). Their difference from traditional celebrities is that they are everyday people, share personal opinions about products or services, and are usually focused on a specific topic such as food, technology, lifestyle, fashion, or training.

With digitalization, marketing methods have adapted to the digital age. Media and advertisement are mutually dependent on each other. To be commercially viable, media depends on advertising income, and marketing people depend on media to reach their audience (Khamis et al., 2016). The main goal of media is to create engaging content for their audience, and celebrities are traditionally significantly popular among audiences (Khamis et al., 2016). Using celebrities for advertisement, in other words, celebrity endorsement is a proven way of increasing the efficiency of advertising (Schouten et al., 2020). With the rise of social media, brands started to use influencers alongside "traditional" celebrities (Marwick 2015). The marketing budget allocated for social media is becoming an amount that cannot be ignored. According to Statista (2022), 14.9% of the marketing budget of companies in the U.S. is dedicated to social

media. This percentage has been rising since 2015 and has had a pike in the COVID-19 pandemic (Statista, 2022).

In contrast to mass media, influencers can appeal to niche audiences and create unique and personal narratives while promoting a product. This is one of the most appealing aspects of influencer marketing in the eyes of companies. Since they are everyday people, and they usually frequently interact with their audience, influencers gain the trust of their followers and can affect their shopping choices (Beldad et al., 2010). According to Tafesse (2016), the influencer marketing concept is built upon the idea of genuine peer consumer review and brand interaction. If people know that the online source is also human, they feel more at ease transacting with the online source (Shen, 2012). The influencers on social media, with their "true self and personal lives," make the interactions and promotions look real (Jin et al., 2018) and gain followers' trust. Brands use this trust to promote their product to well-defined and diverse audiences.

All social media platforms have their influencers. Instagram started as a photo-sharing application and, in time, gained new features such as video and story sharing. Instagram influencers share their daily life, what they eat, what they wear, where they go, and which brands they use. At some point, influencers started recommending their products or services, and Instagram became an advertising medium (Marwick, 2015). Following this change, Instagram brought rules, and now it is mandatory to state "#paidpromotion" for any paid recommendation any Influencer makes. Because of the features mentioned earlier, Instagram is the most cited social media platform for influencer marketing in the literature (Ki & Kim, 2019), and also Instagram is selected as the social media platform for the scope of this thesis.

2.2. Parasocial identification

After watching a movie or TV series for a while, the audience feels like they know the characters in real life as well as their friends (Hoffner, 1996). The audience can emphasize the character, and the characters become familiar as if they have a relationship. Parasocial identification (PSI) is the term established by Horton and Wohl (1956) to explain this pseudo-relationship a viewer feels with a media performer.

Since this definition, broad research has been made to differentiate parasocial identification from wishful identification or perceived similarity (Hoffner, 1996). The perceived similarity is the viewers' perception of similarity to the media personae. Wishful identification is the longing to be like a media character, whereas parasocial identification is the feeling of knowing and having an imaginative relationship with them (Noble, 1975).

Parasocial identification studies were evaluated in line with the technological possibilities and trends of the time the research was conducted. Before digitalization and the internet, television and movies were mass media mediums. As a result, for many years, parasocial identification has been studied in the television context (Lou & Kim, 2019). With the rise of the internet, social media, and micro-celebrities, recent studies started to explore the parasocial relationship with social media context (Lou & Kim, 2019).

Tsai and Men (2013) introduced parasocial identification as an individual's "interpersonal involvement with a media personality through mediated communication" (p. 78). Since social media allows users to comment and interact with the micro-celebrity they follow, it is argued that, in the social media context, parasocial identification is more potent (Tsai and Men, 2013).

The viewer's or user's benefit from parasocial identification is investigated widely in the literature, and proof suggests that emotional and social gratifications are provided to the viewer alongside the motivation to continue following the micro-celebrity or viewing the show (Hoffner, 1996). On the other hand, parasocial identification can raise the willingness to accept the information coming from the followed media personae (Hoffner, 1996).

2.3. Perceived similarity

Perceived similarity can be explained as the degree to which a person believes or perceives a target to be similar to themselves compared to their personality traits or attitudes (Montoya et al., 2008). People anticipate that individuals who are similar to

them would share personally relevant information, and they would provide rewarding interactions. Also, according to the research, the perceived similarity is affiliated with the wish to mimic the characteristics and the behavior of the other individual (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). If certain behaviors and characteristics of an individual are perceived as favorable and rewarding, in that case, the desire to be like that individual can be promoted by the perceived similarity (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). In their study, Bandura (1969) stated that similarity to a particular extent with media personae promotes a longing to be like them. Conceivably, some similarities indicate to the viewer that it is appropriate and possible to become like the media personae in other ways.

Early research about similarities between media figures and viewers argues that both demographic characteristics such as age, race, and gender (Hoffner, 2005) and personal characteristics such as personality and behaviors (Murray, 1999; Turner, 1993) are essential aspects of perceived similarity in the mass media context. (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005)

According to research, the likelihood of communication attempts and communication effectiveness between the source and the receiver depends on source-receiver similarity (homophily) (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). McCroskey et al. (1975) created the perceived homophily scale to measure source-receiver similarity from the receiver's eyes. This scale is used in this research to measure perceived similarity.

The literature indicates the perceived similarity as the predictor of parasocial identification. Researchers strongly suggested that similarity is vital to developing personal relationships (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). It is also noted that shared characteristics with the other person should be meaningful within the relationship context (Duck & Barnes, 1992). Literature proposed that the perception of similarity is partially responsible for creating a parasocial relationship and people expect similar others share personally relevant information (Tian & Hoffner, 2010).

2.4. Wishful Identification

The audience of a movie, a television series, a book, or a YouTube video; often become immersed in the story and identifies with the displayed characters. This phenomenon is explained as a mechanism that makes the audience experience the events happening in the plot as if they were happening to them (Cohen, 2001). The audience becomes the participant in the characters' experiences by sharing their perspectives during the program (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957) . Wishful identification is the extended version of "identification" where the audience starts to behave similarly or have a wish to be like the character portrayed (Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005).

Research suggests wishful identification can be perceived as an essential predecessor of symbolic modeling (Bandura, 2001) and social learning (Bandura, 1969). The unique thing in wishful identification is the audience's aspiration to mimic and emulate the fictional character (Cohen, 2001; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019).

Both identification and wishful identification are considered in the context and the media used during the era of the research. The audience identified themselves with novel characters, newscasters, TV and movie characters, YouTubers, and social media influencers. According to previous studies, fans' possibility of mimicking celebrities increases when they strongly identify with celebrities (Fraser & Brown, 2002) . The celebrity that is emulated can be a TV star (Hoffner, 1996) sportsperson (Pan & Zeng, 2018), or a YouTuber (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019).

Some researchers in recent years have investigated the relationship between wishful identification and parasocial identification. According to Giles (2002), parasocial interaction has development stages. Through a fictional encounter, the audience will start to emulate the behavior of the media character that they have wishful identification. The strength of the parasocial interaction will rise as the audience increases the level of fictional encounters and mimicking behavior. (- Ramasubramanian & Kornfield (2012) confirmed the relationship between wishful identification and parasocial identification. Their study demonstrated that the fans'

level of wishful identification of fictional characters is a positive predictor of their parasocial identification with the characters (Lim et al., 2020).

2.5. Credibility

Source credibility is a subject in media, psychology, and marketing research aiming to understand celebrities' persuasive power over the audience. Ohanian (1990) refers to "Source credibility" as the "communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message" (p.41). Research coming afterward on endorsement credibility supports Ohanian, 1990's definition. Findings show that brands promoted by people perceived as credible in consumers' perspectives are more likely to be assessed positively by the customers (Schouten et al., 2020). Also, a common finding behind the decades of research on credibility is that a highly credible source yields more influence compared to the low-credibility one (Pornpitakpan, 2004).

The power of influence the media figures have over the audience is used to promote products, in other words, for "celebrity endorsement." There were two leading schools of thought considering celebrity endorsement; the source credibility model by Hovland et al., (1953) and the source attractiveness model by McGuire (1985) In the source credibility model, Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) concluded that source credibility has two main dimensions trustworthiness of the source and expertise of the source (Ohanian, 1990). McCroskey & Teven (1999) suggested that the main factors of credibility are trustworthiness besides the experience, knowledge, and expertise a person has in a specific area of interest. Perceived honesty, integrity, and believability of the spokesperson refer to trustworthiness (Schouten et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

The source attractiveness takes its roots from the source valence model by McGuire (1985) studied in the social psychology field. The attractiveness model suggests that the source's attractiveness, familiarity, and likeability are the critical elements for the message's persuasiveness to the receiver (Ohanian, 1990).

Ohanian (1990) analyzed all previous literature about source credibility and devised a source credibility scale. He used Hovland et al. (1953)'s source credibility model and McGuire (1985)'s source attractiveness model as the primary dimensions of the credibility scale. In the end, Ohanian's source credibility scale has three dimensions; Trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise. This scale is widely used in the literature and also in this thesis.

When researchers investigate the antecedents of parasocial identification, credibility is considered a possible predictor. They usually explored the influencers' attractiveness as a characteristic to anticipate parasocial identification (e.g., Bond, 2018; Cohen, 2009). Results showed that viewers tend to have more robust parasocial identification with celebrities they perceived as attractive. Other dimensions of credibility are not thoroughly investigated in the literature. Lou & Kim (2019) investigated the effect of expertise and trustworthiness dimensions of credibility on parasocial identification.

2.6. Purchase Intention

Numerous studies have been conducted to understand the complex process of customers' decision-making and purchasing behavior. Fishbein & Ajzen (1977) state that the predictor of any behavior can be the "intention." The purchase behavior is bound to be affected by the perceived value, quality, and price of the product. Kotler & Armstrong (2010) suggested six stages (awareness, knowledge, interest, preference, persuasion, and purchase) of the decision to purchase. Also, the external and internal motivations of the customers affect the purchase process (Mirabi et al., 2015).

Product quality, price, and packaging affect the customer's decision-making process alongside advertising. Brands frequently used celebrities and media figures for advertising their products as an effective way of promotion. Studies showed that celebrity endorsement is an excellent way to raise brand recognition and recognition, brand attitude, and purchase intention (Pradhan et al., 2016). The image of celebrities affects consumer response and purchase intention to the product promoted (Kim et al., 2015). Baker & Churchill (1977) stated that the physical attractiveness of an

information source draws positive consumer attitudes. Celebrities' social value is transferred to the product, gathering attention using their status (Park & Yang, 2010).

Brands started using social media micro-celebrities, such as influencers, to promote products. Researchers started to investigate whether credibility, wishful identification, perceived similarity, and parasocial identification have a positive effect on purchase intention as it is on traditional celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Kim et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2020; Lou & Kim, 2019b; Schouten et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

2.7 Models, Theories and Studies Analyzed During Literature Review

During this thesis's literature review, past studies on the issue were assessed, and the research model was developed based on existing models. This section provides an overview of the models and research that have been evaluated.

2.7.1. Stimulus-Organism-Response Model

Mehrabian and Russell (1974) established the Stimulus-Organism-Response Model, which proposes that environmental stimuli (S) directly impact organisms (O) (i.e., consumers), affecting consumers' behavioral reactions (R) (Chan et al., 2017).

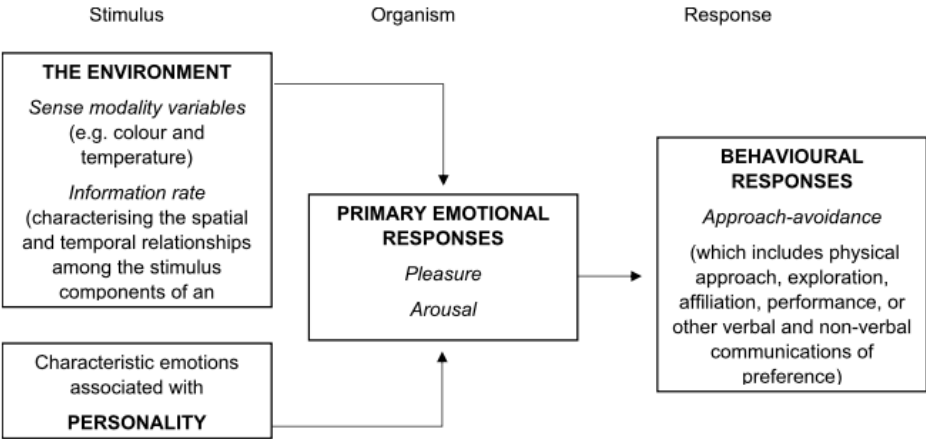


Figure 1: Stimulus-Organism-Response Paradigm (Mehrabian et al., 1974, p.12)

Djafarova and Bowes (2021) used Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model to analyze Gen Z's impulse purchasing behavior in the UK, as well as the efficiency of Instagram marketing tools on this behavior. According to a modified version of the S-O-R model, commercials, opinion leaders, and user-generated material operate as stimuli (S) in eliciting pleasant emotions (O), which then stimulate impulse purchases (R) in Generation Z females (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

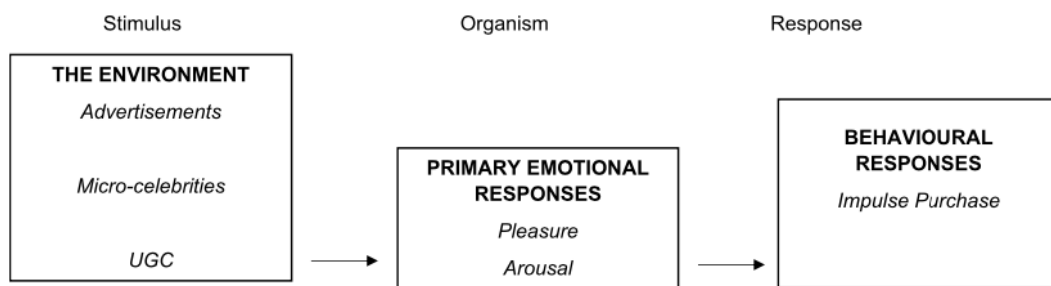


Figure 2: Revised S–O–R model by Djafarova et al. (2021, p.7)

The findings of this qualitative study indicated that male and female Instagram users had different impulsive purchasing behaviors. While Instagram influences female users' spontaneous buying behavior, the study finds no such effect in males.

Casaló et al. (2021) also used S-O-R model to investigate effects of brand publications in Instagram on the engagement of Instagram followers. The study suggested that brand publications (stimulus) may generate perceptions of creativity and positive emotions in their followers (organism), which, in turn, may influence their affective commitment and interaction intentions (response) (Casalo et al., 2021).

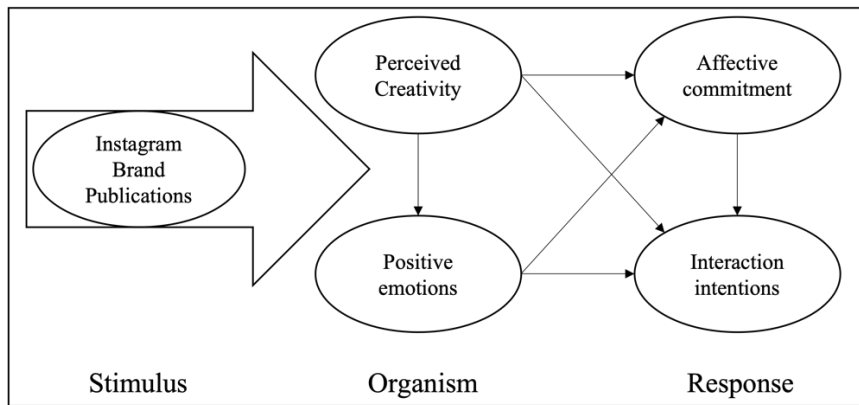


Figure 3: Revised S-O-R Model by Casalo et al. (2021, p.419)

The data collected from 808 Instagram users is analyzed using structural equation modeling. According to the findings, perceived creativity is one of the most important aspects of Instagram. Furthermore, emotional commitment and positive emotions have been found to be partial mediators of the association between perceived creativity and interaction goals.

2.7.2. Instagram Celebrity vs. Traditional Celebrity

Effects of traditional and Instagram celebrities on social presence, envy, brand attitude, and trustworthiness are investigated by Jin et al. (2019). In the proposed theoretical model, celebrity type is presented as the independent variable, self-discrepancy as the moderator, and social presence as the mediator (Jin et al., 2019).

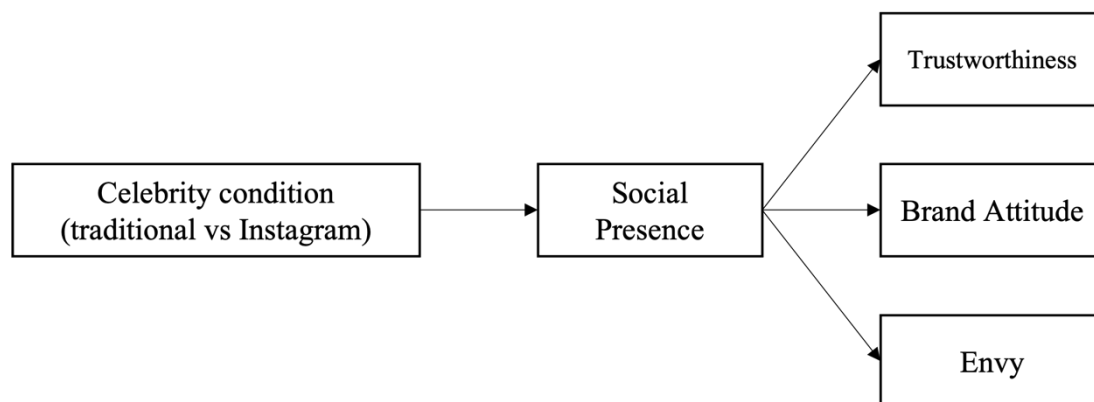


Figure 4: Theoretical model by Jin et al. (2019, p.574)

The data collected from 808 Instagram users is analyzed using structural equation modeling. According to the findings, perceived creativity is one of the most important aspects of Instagram. Furthermore, emotional commitment and positive emotions have been found to be partial mediators of the association between perceived creativity and interaction goals.

2.7.3. Self-Presentation and Credibility

Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) investigated the link between celebrity endorsement and customer behavior using self-presentation theory and the credibility scale.

Self-presentation, according to Goffman (1959), is the presentation of and by an individual in a social environment. This presentation is how the individual want to be regarded by others, and self-presentation allows individuals' pictures to be accepted by others (Goffman, 1959). This notion is used in this research because it is relevant and important in social media. People expressing themselves in their preferred manner form the foundation of social media. Goffmann (1959) also suggested that persons or performers may portray themselves in a way that the audience expects in order to be viewed as more trustworthy.

Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) performed 38 in-depth interviews with Russian female Instagram users to study the impact of micro-celebrities' trustworthiness and self-presentation on Instagram on their followers' buying decisions. The study's goal is to develop a broader credibility framework that can be applied to the online setting (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

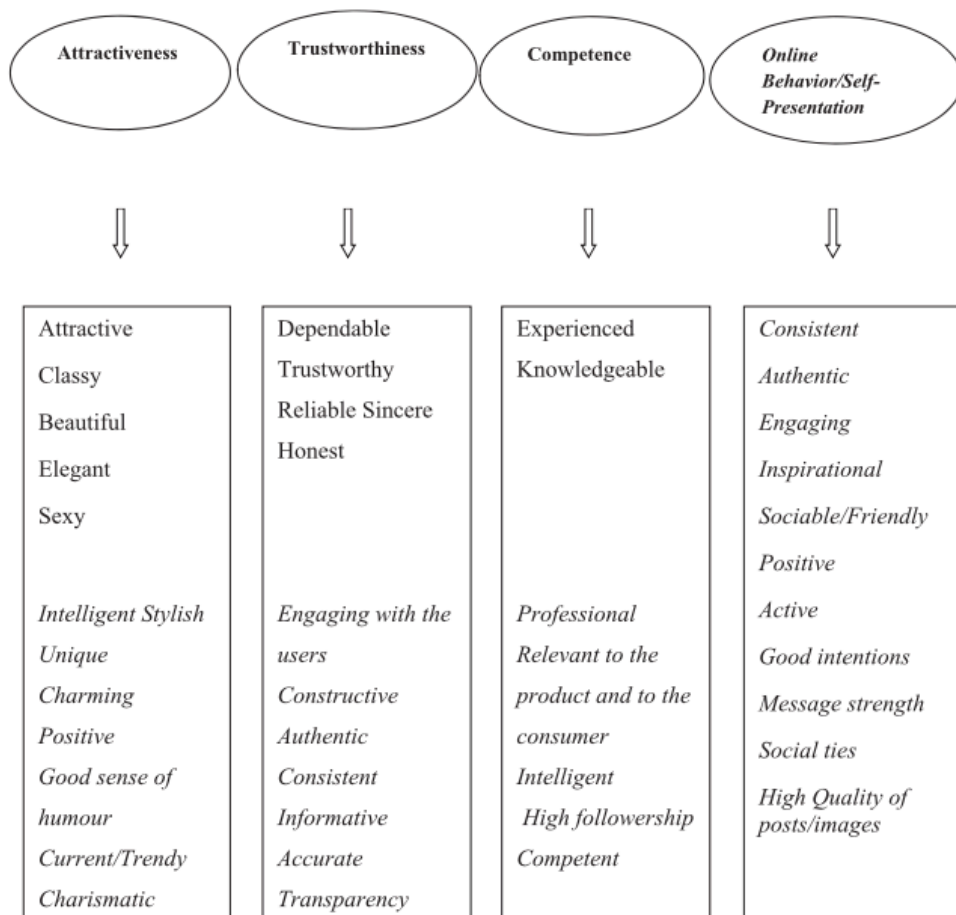


Figure 5: Online Source Credibility Model by Djafarova et al. (2019, p.1441)

The study introduced online behavior/self-presence as a new metric to Ohanian's credibility model (1990). Users regard micro-celebrities as trustworthy if they follow a certain self-presentation and online activity, according to the findings (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

2.7.4. Social Identity Theory

Langner, Hennigs, and Wiedmann (2013) want to create a conceptual model for social group influencers. They developed their model using social identity theory, and they identified individual capital and social capital as the primary characteristics of social influences in the social identity context.

The individual's perception that they belong to a certain social group, and they place emotional worth and significance on this membership, is characterized as social identity theory (Langner et al., 2013). According to Langner et al. (2013), purchasing behavior can predict social identity. People may, for example, dress in a specific style or purchase specific things to advertise status or participation in a given group. Langner et al. present a structural model that incorporates customers' individual capital (desire to influence), social capital (opportunistic use of social effect), and social leadership skill (persuasive "power") (2013). Data was obtained from 428 German residents in order to assess their socially impacted vehicle purchasing behavior (Langner et al., 2013).

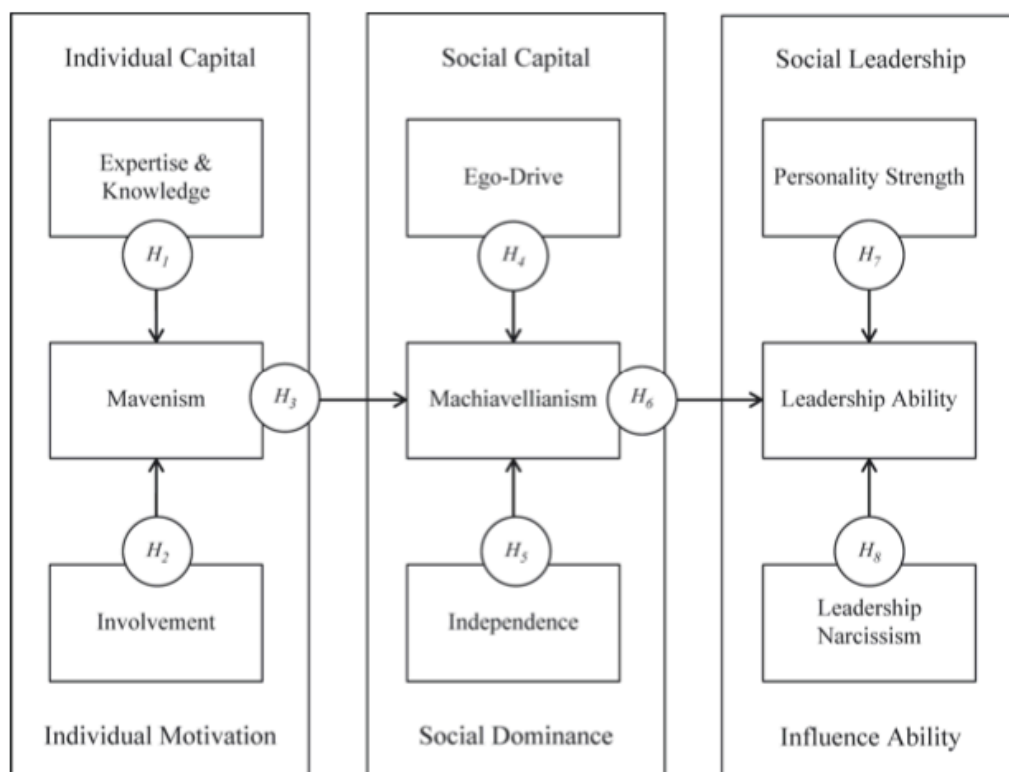


Figure 6: Theoretical Model by Langner et al. (2013, p.38)

Langner et al. present a structural model that incorporates customers' individual capital (desire to influence), social capital (opportunistic use of social effect), and social leadership skill (persuasive "power") (2013). Data was obtained from 428 German residents in order to assess their socially impacted vehicle purchasing behavior (Langner et al., 2013).

2.7.5. Uses and Gratifications Theory

Lee et al. (2022) explored the motivations of social media users to follow influencers and their links to consumer behaviors such as trust in influencers and consumerism. They used the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory to investigate the motivations of those who follow influencers. According to U&G theory, media selection and utilization is a goal-directed action to meet individuals' distinct social and psychological requirements, resulting in frequent media consumption (Lee et al., 2022). Whiting and Williams (2013) define social media gratifications and reasons as social engagement, information seeking, passing time, amusement, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information seeking, and surveillance/knowledge of others (Lee et al., 2022).

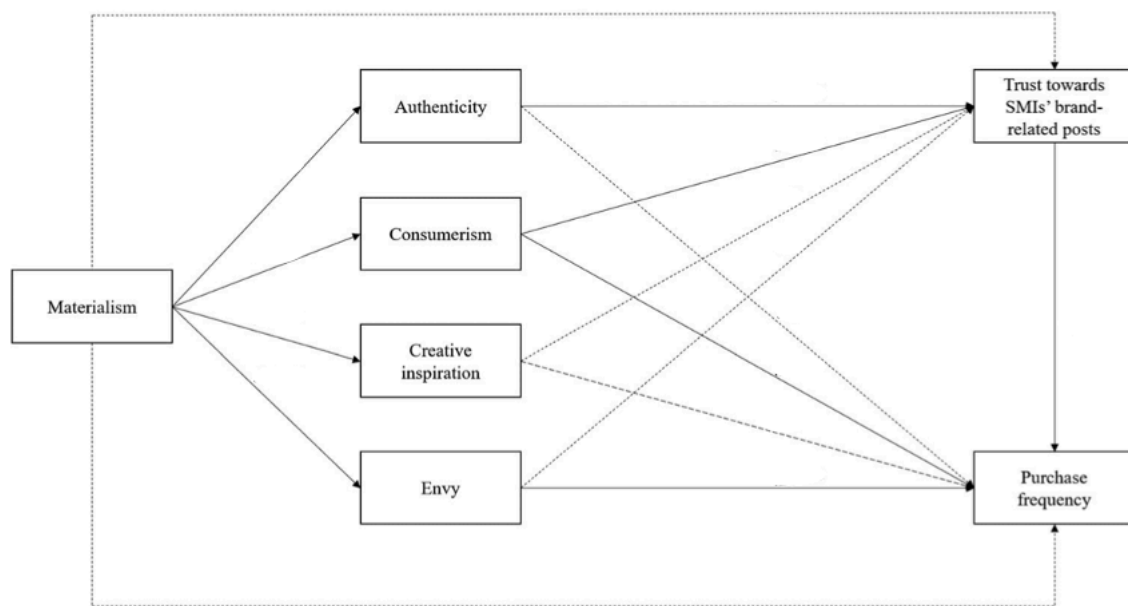


Figure 7: Theoretical Model by Lee et al. (2022, p.88)

According to the study's findings, the top motivations for following influencers are authenticity, consumerism, creative inspiration, and jealousy, and they appear to have diverse effects on trust and buy frequency.

Croes and Bartels (2021) used the U&G theory in their study to explore the incentives that drive young people to follow influencers. They also looked at the underlying motivations for advertisement clicking and purchasing behavior in relation to the things pushed by influencers.

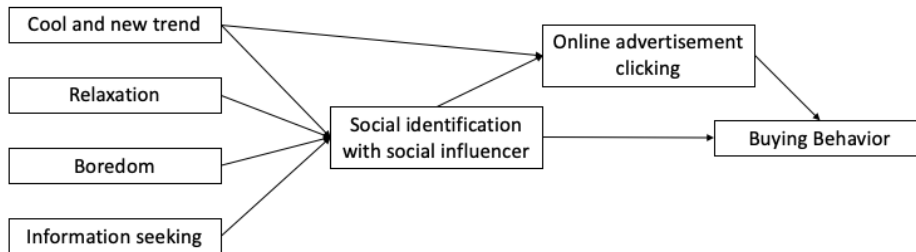


Figure 8: Theoretical Model by Croes & Bartels (2021, p.6)

Following the survey, 415 valid responses were examined. The findings found that six major motives inspire young people to follow influencers: knowledge sharing, fresh and new trends, relaxing entertainment, camaraderie, boredom/habitual pass time, and information searching. The significance of incentives varied according to educational background, gender, and age group. The association between six causes and online advertisement clicking and purchasing behavior is also highly influenced by social identity (Croes & Bartels, 2021).

CHAPTER III

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

3.1. Conceptual Model

This study explores the effects of perceived similarity between the Instagram user and influencer, wishful identification of the Instagram users with the influencer, and credibility of the influencer; on the parasocial identification with the influencer and purchase intention of Instagram users. The relationship between perceived similarity, wishful identification, credibility, and parasocial identification was analyzed separately and in different contexts in previous literature. All concepts are brought together, the study is limited to the Instagram context, and their relationships are investigated.

Wishful identification, perceived similarity (attitude, background, value, and appearance similarity dimensions), and credibility (attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise) are used in this model as independent variables, while parasocial identification is the dependent variable.

Purchase intention was added to the hypotheses to see whether any correlation exists between wishful identification, perceived similarity, credibility, parasocial identification, and purchase intention.

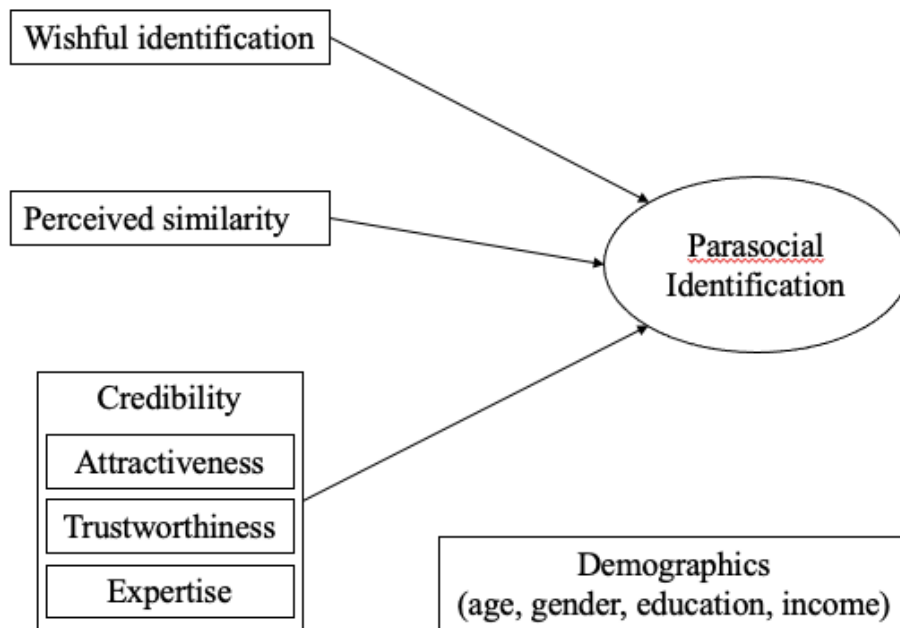


Figure 9: The Conceptual Model

3.2. Hypotheses

Perceived similarity-parasocial identification relationship was investigated in the literature by other researchers, and perceived similarity as a predictor of parasocial identification. Therefore, the followings are hypothesized:

H1: Perceived similarity with an influencer has a positive effect on parasocial identification with that influencer.

Other researchers have investigated the relationship between wishful identification and parasocial identification in different contexts. The relationship between wishful identification and parasocial identification is explained in the previous chapter. The hypotheses are reached by synthesizing previous literature on this relationship.

H2: Wishful identification with an influencer has a positive effect on parasocial identification with that influencer.

Credibility with source attractiveness, source trustworthiness, and source expertise is employed in earlier literature as a predictor of parasocial identification with the source. The previous literature on influencer-Instagram user relationships are adopted in order to reach the following hypotheses:

H3: Credibility of the influencer has a positive effect on parasocial identification with that influencer.

H3A: Attractiveness of the influencer has a positive effect on parasocial identification with that influencer.

H3B: Trustworthiness of the influencer has a positive effect on parasocial identification with that influencer.

H3C: Expertise of the influencer has a positive effect on parasocial identification with that influencer.

Influencer marketing and product promotions are becoming robust marketing tools. Thus, researchers studied the relationships between wishful identification, credibility, parasocial identification, and purchase intention. The purchase intention was added to the hypotheses to see whether any positive correlation exists between wishful identification, credibility, parasocial identification, and purchase intention.

H4: Wishful identification has a positive correlation with the purchase intention of the products promoted by that influencer.

H5: Credibility has a positive correlation with the purchase intention of the products promoted by that influencer.

H6: Parasocial identification with the influencer has a positive correlation with the purchase intention of the products promoted by that influencer.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

4.1. Survey Design

As the data collection tool for the study, METU Survey was used. The survey was structured with seven groups of questions. The first group consisted of consent and prerequisite questions to ensure participants took the survey voluntarily and fulfilled all requirements to complete the survey. The second part consisted of demographic information questions. The third group of questions measured perceived similarity with a Likert type semantic differential scale. The fourth group measured wishful identification with a Likert scale. The fifth question group measured credibility with a Likert type semantic differential scale. In the sixth group of questions, parasocial identification is measured using a Likert scale. Lastly, the seventh group measured purchase intention with a Likert scale. In the survey, at the beginning of each group of questions, participants were asked to think about an influencer they are currently following on Instagram and answer the questions while keeping that influencer in mind. The survey is conducted in English. A copy of the survey with an entire list of questions is provided in the Appendix. Detailed information about questions and the scales is provided in this chapter.

4.1.1. Dependent Variables

4.1.1.1. Parasocial Identification

Parasocial identification is measured using an 11-item scale adapted by Rosaen, S. F., & Dibble, J. L. (2016) from Hartman et al. (2008). Items in the scale are slightly adjusted to social media and Instagram context since Rosaen, S. F., & Dibble, J. L. (2016) 's version is created to measure parasocial relationships with TV figures. On the survey, the “he/she” pronouns which referred to the favorite TV characters were replaced with “my influencer”.

1. My influencer makes me feel comfortable as if I am with a friend. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
2. I look forward to seeing my influencer's posts. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
3. I see my influencer as a natural, down-to-earth person. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
4. If my influencer starts another social media channel, I will also follow. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
5. My influencer seems to understand the kind of things I want to know. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
6. If I see a story about my influencer in other places, I would read it. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
7. I would love to meet my influencer in person. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
8. My influencer would fit in well with my group of friends. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
9. If something happens to my influencer, I will feel sad. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
10. I would invite my influencer to my party. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
11. If my influencer lived in my neighborhood, we would be friends. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Responses are collected utilizing a 5-point Likert scale, and higher scores show a higher degree of parasocial identification with the influencer. The overall score for this scale is calculated by taking the means of all answers.

4.1.1.2. Purchase Intention

To examine the purchase intention, the 6-item scale from Jiang, Hoegg, Dahl, & Chattopadhyay, (2010) and See-To and Ho (2014), which was created to measure purchase intention in the online context, was used. A 5-point Likert scale is used to collect data. The wording in the scale was altered in order to fit into context. (e.g. The word “clothes” in the original scale is changed to “products” to measure purchase intention in a broader sense. Also, the word “blogger” is replaced with “influencer.”)

1. I am interested in buying products that my influencer showed through Instagram. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
2. I expect to buy products similar to my influencer’s fashion on Instagram. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
3. I plan to buy products similar to that my influencer showed through Instagram. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
4. I would like to buy products similar to my influencer’s fashion on Instagram. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
5. I would purchase the products promoted by my influencer in the future. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
6. I would encourage people close to me to buy the products promoted by my influencer. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

The means of each statement are used to calculate the purchase intention score. Higher scores indicate that the participant has a greater purchase intention towards the products promoted by the influencer.

4.1.2. Independent Variables

Independent variables in the study are perceived similarity, wishful identification, and credibility constructs (attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise).

4.1.2.1. Perceived Similarity

Users' perceived similarity to the influencer they are following is measured with the Perceived Homophily Measure designed by McCroskey et al. (1975). The scale uses semantic differential items that range between 1-5, where higher scores demonstrate more significant perceived similarity in terms of attitude, background, value, and physical appearance.

Attitude:

1. (1 = Doesn't think like me, 5 = Thinks like me)
2. (1 = Doesn't behave like me, 5 = Behaves like me)
3. (1 = Different from me, 5 = Similar to me)
4. (1 = Unlike me, 5 = Like me)

Background:

1. (1 = From social class different from mine, 5 = From social class similar to mine)
2. (1 = Economic situation different from mine, 5 = Economic situation like mine)
3. (1 = Status different from mine, 5 = Status like mine)
4. (1 = Background different from mine, 5 = Background similar to mine)

Value:

1. (1 = Morals unlike mine, 5 = Morals like mine)
2. (1 = Sexual attitudes unlike mine, 5 = Sexual attitudes like mine)
3. (1 = Doesn't share my values, 5 = Shares my values)
4. (1 = Doesn't treat people like I do, 5 = Treats people like I do)

Appearance:

1. (1 = Looks different from me, 5 = Looks similar to me)
2. (1 = Different size than I am, 5 = Same size as I am)
3. (1 = Appearance unlike mine, 5 = Appearance like mine)
4. (1 = Doesn't resemble me, 5 = Resembles me)

Means of attitude, background, value, and appearance item scores are used to produce the overall perceived similarity score.

4.1.2.2. Wishful Identification

Instagram users's wishful identification with the influencer they follow is measured using the five-item measure created by Hoffner (1996). Usage of pronouns in the statements is moderately updated to fit in the Instagram and influencer context. Hoffner (1996) used "he/she" in the original version to refer to the viewer's favorite TV character. In the survey, "he/she" pronouns are replaced with "my influencer." Participants showed on a 5-point Likert scale to extend to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement.

1. My influencer is the sort of person I want to be like myself. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
2. Sometimes I wish I could be more like my influencer. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
3. My influencer is someone I would like to emulate. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
4. I'd like to do the kinds of things my influencer does on Instagram. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
5. I would NEVER want to act the way my influencer does on Instagram. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

The means of each statement are used to calculate the wishful identification score. Higher scores indicate the participant has a higher wishful identification with the influencer.

4.1.2.3. Credibility

Influencer credibility is evaluated by using the credibility scale created by Ohanian (1990). The measure is constructed by subscales of the source's attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise. A Likert-type 5-point semantic differential scale is used to collect data.

Attractiveness:

1. (1 = Attractive, 5 = Unattractive)
2. (1 = Classy, 5 = Not Classy)
3. (1 = Beautiful, 5 = Ugly)
4. (1 = Elegant, 5 = Plain)
5. (1 = Sexy, 5 = Not sexy)

Trustworthiness:

1. (1 = Dependable, 5 = Undependable)
2. (1 = Honest, 5 = Dishonest)
3. (1 = Reliable, 5 = Unreliable)
4. (1 = Sincere, 5 = Insincere)
5. (1 = Trustworthy, 5 = Untrustworthy)

Expertise:

1. (1 = Expert, 5 = Not an expert)
2. (1 = Experienced, 5 = Inexperienced)
3. (1 = Knowledgeable, 5 = Unknowledgeable)
4. (1 = Qualified, 5 = Unqualified)
5. (1 = Skilled, 5 = Unskilled)

The mean of the answers given to each subscale is taken to measure attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise. Higher scores indicate greater influencer credibility in users' eyes.

4.2. Ethical Approval and Consent of the Participants

Before the collection of data, a copy of the survey was sent to the Human Subjects Ethics Committee for their evaluation. After getting their approval, the survey has conducted. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and participants' consent was collected before starting the survey. Also, all answers were collected anonymously, and participants were informed at the beginning of the survey. In the Appendix, there is a copy included in the approval document.

4.3. Sampling

The data was collected through an anonymous online survey for this thesis. The online method is selected due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Convenience sampling was used. METU Survey interface is used to conduct the survey. Middle East Technical University Students are included in the survey and emailed through their student emails. The purpose of the study, the amount of time necessary to complete the survey, and the link to the survey is provided in the body of the email. Data was collected between May 24, 2022, and July 17, 2022.

4.4. Data Description

The survey was opened by 242 people, and 105 out of 242 completed the survey. In the completed answers, the partial answers are extracted from the analysis. 5 of 105 completed answers are also excluded from the analysis due to repetition of the same answer to all questions. In the first part of the survey, alongside the voluntary participation consent, participants were asked if they have an Instagram account and are following at least one influencer. A description of what constitutes an influencer is also provided with the question. Participants were told not to continue the survey if

they did not meet one of these conditions. After extracting invalid and partial responses, 100 response is left to analyze.

4.5. Descriptive Statistics

Information concerning the demographic attributes of the participants is shown in Table 1. Results demonstrated that 68% of participants were woman, 30% was men, and 2% was non-binary. The mean age of the participants was 23.26, and the standard deviation was 3.53. 51% of the participants were between 18 - 22 years old, and 36% were between 23-26 years old. The youngest participant in the survey was 18, and the oldest was 35. 22% of the participants were first-year students, 14% were second-year students, 10% were third-year students, and 28% were fourth-year students. 20% of the participants were master's students, and 6% were Ph.D. candidates.

Regarding income level, participants were asked to consider all income resources, including their salary, scholarships, and money they take from their families. Results showed that approximate income level was between 0-2000 TL for 32%, between 2001-4000 TL for 31%, between 4001-6000 TL for 15%, between 6001-8000 TL for 7%, and 8001 TL and more for 15%. Considering our sampling made amongst university students, the income levels are as expected.

To measure how often the participants use Instagram, they were asked the approximate number of times they use the application daily. The mean daily number of Instagram use is 17.25, while 78% of the sample uses Instagram between 1-20 times a day. On average, the number of Instagram influencers followed by users is 10.42, while 76% of the participants follow 1-14 influencers on Instagram.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Woman	68	68,0
	Man	30	30,0
	Non-Binary	2	2,0
Age	18 - 22	51	51,0
	23 - 26	36	36,0
	27 - 30	7	7,0
	31 - 34	5	5,0
	35+	1	1,0
Education	1st Year	22	22,0
	2nd Year	14	14,0
	3rd Year	10	10,0
	4th Year	28	28,0
	Master's Student	20	20,0
	PhD Candidate	6	6,0
Income	0-2000 TL	32	32,0
	2001-4000 TL	31	31,0
	4001-6000 TL	15	15,0
	6001-8000 TL	7	7,0
	8001+ TL	15	15,0
Daily Number Instagram Use	1 - 20	78	78,0
	21 - 40	12	12,0
	41 - 60	6	6,0
	61 - 80	1	1,0
	81 - 100	3	3,0
Number of Followed Influencers in Instagram	1 - 14	76	76,0
	15 - 28	17	17,0
	29 - 42	3	3,0
	43 - 56	3	3,0
	57 - 70	1	1,0

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

Following the data collection period, IBM SPSS v28 is used to perform statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics are calculated as the first step of the analysis to understand the sample. After descriptive statistics, factor analysis was conducted on scales in the survey to see if all the constructs were loading to the correct dimensions. The items's internal consistency and the scales's reliability are assessed using Cronbach's alpha. To see relationships between variables, inter-variable correlations were analyzed. Lastly, linear regression analysis is conducted to calculate the impact of independent variables on dependent variable parasocial identification.

5.1. Correlations

This section outlines the bivariate correlations between dependent and independent variables. A correlation matrix is presented in Table 2 to visualize the relationships between individual relationships between variables. Statistically, significant correlations are flagged in the matrix.

Table 2: Correlations Amongst Variables

Variables		PSI	PS	WI	AT	TR	EX	PI
Parasocial Identification (PSI)	Pearson Correlation	--						
	N	100						
Perceived Similarity (PS)	Pearson Correlation	.515**	--					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000						
N	100	100						
Wishful Identification (WI)	Pearson Correlation	.398**	.203*	--				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,043					
N	100	100	100					
Attractiveness (AT)	Pearson Correlation	-0,089	-0,195	-0,026	--			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,378	0,052	0,800				
N	100	100	100	100				
Trustworthiness (TR)	Pearson Correlation	.499**	.264**	0,145	0,062	--		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,008	0,151	0,542			
N	100	100	100	100	100			
Expertise (EX)	Pearson Correlation	.409**	0,149	.203*	.291**	.518**	--	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,139	0,042	0,003	0,000		
N	100	100	100	100	100	100		
Purchase Intention (PI)	Pearson Correlation	0,109	0,046	.235*	.209*	-0,022	0,048	--
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,280	0,652	0,019	0,036	0,825	0,632	
N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

******. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*****. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As presented in Table 2, the parasocial identification is positively correlated with perceived similarity ($r=0.515$, $p<0.01$), wishful identification ($r=0.398$, $p<0.01$), trust ($r=0.499$, $p<0.01$) and expertise ($r=0.409$, $p<0.01$). Results align with the previous literature. According to the analysis, parasocial identification does not seem to be significantly correlated with purchase intention and attractiveness. The perceived similarity is positively correlated with wishful identification ($r=0.203$, $p<0.05$), and trust ($r=0.264$, $p<0.01$). Expertise seems to be significantly positively correlated with wishful identification ($r=0.203$, $p<0.05$), trust ($r=0.291$, $p<0.01$), and trustworthiness ($r=0.518$, $p<0.01$). Purchase intention seems to be only positively correlated with variables wishful identification ($r=0.235$, $p<0.05$) and attractiveness ($r=0.209$, $p<0.05$), which reveals that the attractiveness of an influencer and wishful identification to be like that influence can be related to the purchase intention of the user. These findings support hypotheses H4 and partially H5.

5.2. Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was conducted on scales of perceived similarity, wishful identification, credibility, parasocial identification, and purchase intention. Hair, Black, Babin & Anderson (2010) stated that the factor analysis is valid if the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy value is bigger than 0.5 and Barlett's test of Sphericity value is less than 0.05.

For the factor loadings can be considered significant, Hair et al. (2010) suggested that loading values should be greater than 0.5 for a sample size of 100. These principles were applied while the factor analysis was conducted on the sample. The following chapter shows a detailed explanation of the factor analysis process and results.

5.2.1. Factor Analysis of Perceived Similarity

Factor analysis was conducted of perceived similarity items. The sample's KMO Measure of sampling accuracy score was 0.784 significant at $p < 0.001$, demonstrating that the sample is fit for factor analysis. The principal component analysis is used as an extraction method. For rotation, Promax with the Kaiser normalization method is used. Rotation converged in 6 iterations. No item was deleted from the data since there were no significant cross-loadings in the analysis. Factor analysis revealed that perceived similarity items all show loadings over 0.5 and significant. The Table 3 shows factor loading values and communalities for each item.

Table 3: Factor Loadings and Communalities for Perceived Similarity Scale with 16 Items

Construct/Item	Factor Loading	Communality
Perceived Attitude Similarity		
Thinks like me	0,626	0,655
Behaves like me	0,725	0,711
Similar to me	0,841	0,733
Like me	0,927	0,788
Perceived Social Class Similarity		
From social class similar to mine	0,890	0,752
Economic situation like mine	0,774	0,763
Status like mine	0,659	0,629
Background similar to mine	0,790	0,673
Perceived Value Similarity		
Morals like mine	0,679	0,705
Sexual attitudes like mine	0,883	0,722
Shares my values	0,573	0,709
Treats people like I do	0,901	0,829
Perceived Appearance Similarity		
Looks similar to me	0,819	0,751
Same size as I am	0,771	0,591
Appearance like mine	0,886	0,822
Resembles me	0,820	0,751

16-item perceived similarity scale factor loadings are all above 0.5 (between 0.573-0.927) and thus significant for the sample size.

5.2.2. Factor Analysis of Wishful Identification

The items used for wishful identification were subjected to factor analysis. The sample is suitable for factor analysis, as shown by the sample's KMO Measure of Sampling Accuracy score of 0.735 significant at $p < 0.001$. As the extraction method, principal component analysis is employed. Promax with the Kaiser normalization method is used for rotation. In 3 repetitions, the rotation converged. Since there were no significant cross-loadings in the analysis, no item was removed from the data. Perceived similarity items all display loadings over 0.5 and are significant, according to factor analysis. The factor loading values and communalities for each item are displayed in the following table.

Table 4: Factor Loadings and Communalities for Wishful Identification Scale with 5 Items

Construct/Item	Factor Loading	Communality
Wishful Identification		
My influencer is the sort of person I want to be like myself	0,819	0,740
Sometimes I wish I could be more like my influencer	0,840	0,721
My influencer is someone I would like to emulate	0,767	0,779
I'd like to do the kinds of things my influencer does on Instagram	0,577	0,616
I would never want to act the way my influencer does on Instagram (reversed)	0,720	0,750

5-item wishful identification scale factor loadings are all above 0.5 (between 0.577-0.720) and therefore significant for the sample size.

5.2.3. Factor Analysis of Credibility

Credibility items were subjected to factor analysis. The KMO Measure of sampling accuracy score for the sample was 0.828 significant at $p < 0.001$, indicating that the sample is suitable for factor analysis. As the extraction method, principal component analysis is used. Promax with the Kaiser normalization method is used for rotation. In six iterations, the rotation converged. Due to the lack of significant cross-loadings in the analysis, no items were removed from the data. According to factor analysis, all perceived similarity items have loadings greater than 0.5 and are significant. The following table shows the factor loading values and communalities for each item.

Table 5: Factor Loadings and Communalities for Credibility Scale with 15 Items

Construct/Item	Factor Loading	Communality
Attractiveness		
Attractive	0,666	0,632
Classy	0,806	0,718
Beautiful	0,667	0,555
Elegant	0,824	0,661
Sexy	0,708	0,576
Trustworthiness		
Dependable	0,874	0,826
Honest	0,892	0,857
Reliable	0,893	0,837
Sincere	0,836	0,746
Trustworthy	0,945	0,870
Expertise		
Expert	0,851	0,628
Experienced	0,780	0,674
Knowledgeable	0,808	0,774
Qualified	0,887	0,794
Skilled	0,818	0,742

15-item credibility scale with attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise constructs, factor loadings are all above 0.5 (between 0.666-0.945) and thus significant for the sample size.

5.2.4. Factor Analysis of Parasocial Identification Scale

Factor analysis was conducted of parasocial identification items. The KMO Measure of sampling accuracy score for the sample was 0.869 significant at $p < 0.001$, indicating that the sample is suitable for factor analysis. As an extraction method, principal component analysis is used. Quartimax with the Kaiser normalization method is used for rotation. The rotation converged after three iterations. No item was deleted from the data since there were no significant cross-loadings in the analysis. According to factor analysis, all perceived similarity items have loadings greater than 0.5 and are significant. The table below shows the factor loading values and communalities for each item.

Table 6: Factor Loadings and Communalities for Parasocial Identification Scale with 11 Items

Construct/Item	Factor Loading	Communality
Parasocial Identification		
My influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend	0,730	0,568
I look forward to seeing my influencer's posts	0,559	0,502
I see my influencer as a natural, down-to-earth person	0,591	0,357
If my influencer starts another social media channel, I will also follow	0,609	0,651
My influencer seems to understand the kind of things I want to know	0,673	0,455
If I see a story about my influencer in other places, I would read it	0,645	0,422
I would love to meet my influencer in person	0,760	0,642
My influencer would fit in well with my group of friends	0,645	0,454
If something happens to my influencer, I will feel sad	0,663	0,488
I would invite my influencer to my party	0,723	0,727
If my influencer lived in my neighborhood, we would be friends	0,739	0,751

11-item parasocial identification scale factor loadings are all above 0.5 (between 0.559-0.760) and thus significant for the sample size.

5.2.5. Factor Analysis of Purchase Intention

A factor analysis of purchase intention items was performed. The sample's KMO Measure of sampling accuracy score was 0.839 significant at $p < 0.001$, indicating that the sample is suitable for factor analysis. The principal component analysis is utilized as an extraction approach. There were no significant cross-loadings in the analysis, hence no items were removed from the data. Factor analysis found that all purchase intention components had loadings greater than 0.5 and are significant. The table below displays the factor loading values and communalities for each item.

Table 7: Factor Loadings and Communalities for Purchase Intention Scale with 6 Items

Construct/Item	Factor Loading	Communality
Purchase Intention		
I am interested in buying products that my influencer showed through Instagram.	0,752	0,566
I expect to buy products similar to my influencer's fashion on Instagram.	0,828	0,686
I plan to buy products similar to that my influencer showed through Instagram.	0,886	0,784
I would like to buy products similar to my influencer's fashion on Instagram.	0,804	0,646
I would purchase the products promoted by my influencer in the future.	0,777	0,604
I would encourage people close to me to buy the products promoted by my influencer.	0,664	0,441

6-item purchase intention scale factor loadings are all above 0.5 (between 0.664-886) and therefore significant for the sample size.

5.3. Reliability Analysis of the Scales

To measure the internal consistency of the constructs on each scale, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used in this study. According to Hair et al. (2013), if Cronbach's alpha (α) value is greater than 0.7, then that construct is reliable. The results revealed that the perceived similarity scale with sixteen items ($\alpha=.821$) and wishful identification with five items ($\alpha=.748$) was reliable. Credibility scale with 15 items ($\alpha=.859$) and its subscales; attractiveness with five items ($\alpha=.790$), trustworthiness with five items ($\alpha=.868$), and expertise with five items ($\alpha=.886$) was found reliable. In addition, the parasocial identity scale with eleven items ($\alpha=.870$) and the purchase intention scale with six items ($\alpha=.875$) was significant. Reliability results are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8: Reliability of the Scales

Scales	Number of items	Cronbach alpha
Perceived Similarity	16	.821
Wishful Identification	5	.748
Credibility	15	.859
Attractiveness	5	.790
Trustworthiness	5	.868
Expertise	5	.886
Parasocial Identification	5	.870
Purchase Intention	6	.875

For all the scales used in the data collection, Cronbach's alpha value is greater than 0.7; therefore, all scales were found reliable.

5.4. Regression Analysis

Multivariate regression analysis was executed to examine how well the perceived similarity, wishful identification, and credibility (attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise dimensions) predict parasocial identification with an Instagram influencer. Measurement is made with a 5-point Likert scale for all variables. Then the means of the answers are taken to create the scores for the respective variable.

The regression model contained five independent variables (perceived similarity, wishful identification, and credibility with attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise dimensions) as predictors of parasocial identification. Regression analysis results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9: Factors Affecting Parasocial Identification

Parasocial Identification				
Model	B	F Value	Standardized Beta	Adjusted R-square
(Constant)	0.417	20.424		0.495
Perceived Similarity	0.313		0.318	
Wishful Identification	0.287		0.320	
Attractiveness	-0.050		-0.059	
Trustworthiness	0.199		0.279	
Expertise	0.141		0.177	
*p<0.05, **p<0.01				
Dependent Variable: Parasocial Identification				

Before analyzing the regression analysis results, the assumptions are checked to see if the data is meeting the assumptions. A standard residuals analysis was conducted to inspect the possible outliers in the data set, and the results revealed that the data does not contain outliers; therefore, no data has been removed from the data set (Std. Residual Min=-3.048, Std. Residual Max=2.104). The results revealed that the assumption of collinearity is met and there is no multicollinearity problem (Perceived Similarity Tolerance=0.857, VIF=1.167; Wishful Identification Tolerance=0.926, VIF=1.080; Attractiveness Tolerance=0.853, VIF=1.173; Trustworthiness Tolerance=0.694, VIF=1.442; Expertise Tolerance=0.643, VIF=1.556). The independence of the observation's assumption is also met since the Durbin-Watson value was 1.971. Standardized residuals histogram revealed that the dependent variable parasocial identification is normally distributed. Also, a normal P-P plot of standardized residuals shows the points are lined up to a 45-degree angle. Lastly, the scatter plot of standardized predicted values is investigated, revealing that the data meet the assumptions of homogeneity of variance, normality, and linearity.

The regression equation is as follows:

Y= PARASOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

Y= 0.417 + 0.313 (PERCEIVED SIMILARITY) + 0.287 (WISHFUL IDENTIFICATION) + 0.199 (TRUSTWORTHINESS) + 0.141 EXPERTISE

The regression analysis showed that the factors affecting parasocial identification explained nearly 50% ($R^2=0.495$) of the variance in the equation. Perceived similarity ($\beta = 0.313$, $p < 0.001$) and wishful identification ($\beta = 0.287$, $p < 0.001$) found statistically significant predictors of parasocial identification. Findings aligned with the literature and support hypotheses H1 and H2.

Amongst Credibility dimensions, Trustworthiness ($\beta=0.199$, $p=0.002$) and Expertise ($\beta=0.141$, $p < 0.05$) found statistically significant predictors of parasocial identification. These findings support hypotheses H3B and H3C. On the other hand, attractiveness dimension of the credibility scale has not been found to be a significant factor in predicting parasocial identification ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < 0.446$).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The effects of social media influencers on social media users are investigated in this thesis. The impacts of parasocial identification, perceived similarity, wishful identification, credibility, and purchase intention perspectives are explored.

The model of the thesis predicted that perceived similarity, wishful identification, credibility with attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise dimensions would positively affect parasocial identification. The regression analysis revealed that the suggested model is statistically significant except for the attractiveness dimension of credibility. Results show that perceived similarity to an influencer in terms of attitudes, values, background, and appearance is a predictor of having a one-sided friend-like feeling towards the influencer. Wishing to be like an influencer also predicts parasocial identification. To comment on this result, social media users aspire to be the influencer they follow; meanwhile, they consider themselves similar to them. This is a form of flattery to oneself's values, character, appearance, and background and wishes to be more like the celebrity they look up to. These variables have been separately investigated before, and the findings of the study aligned with the literature. Results show that university students' perceived similarity and wishful identification with influencers are statistically significant predictors of parasocial relationships with social media influencers in Turkey. These results supported the hypotheses H1, H2, H3B, and H3C.

The attractiveness dimension of the credibility scale is not found as a statistically significant predictor of parasocial identification. As mentioned in the literature review, the attractiveness dimension of the credibility scale is an addition made by Ohanian (1990) to the trustworthiness and expertise dimensions. It is possible to mention that trustworthiness and expertise dimensions still measure credibility, and credibility is nevertheless a statistically significant predictor of parasocial identification.

Purchase intention is positively correlated with wishful identification and the attractiveness dimension of credibility. This shows that as the perceived attractiveness of the influencer and the wish to be more like the influencer increases, the purchase intention towards the goods promoted by the influencer also increases. According to the literature, we expect parasocial identification also to be positively correlated with purchase intention. However, the study's results do not show a such correlation, which is a relevant discussion topic.

Meanwhile, parasocial identification positively correlated with wishful identification, perceived similarity, trustworthiness, and expertise variables. These findings align with the literature and show that when users perceive the influencer as more similar to them regarding values, background, attitudes, and appearance, their belief in their imaginary relationship also increases. As much as the users wish to be like the influencer, their belief in their parasocial relationship also increases. This shows us the literature on mass media and traditional celebrities is also accurate for social media "celebrities."

Expertise and trust dimensions of credibility are positively correlated amongst themselves, which can be interpreted as a logical finding. As the social media user's perceived expertise level of the influencer increase, the trust towards the influencer also increases.

This study's findings help scratch the surface of the relatively undiscovered topic of the social media user-influencer relationship. The study expands the subject to Turkey and university students' contexts and provides further discussion topics.

6.1. Limitations and Future Direction

When examining the results of this study, it should be kept in mind that there are some limitations. Since the covid pandemic is in question, the convenience sampling method was used. Although it was desired to reach the maximum number of participants during data collection, only half of the participants who could be reached completed the survey. Although all scales are reliable, the fact that some correlation and regression results predicted according to the literature are not reflected in the analysis results may be due to the relatively small sample size.

Since the survey dates coincided with the university's final exams, it may have negatively affected the rate of answering or completing the survey. In future studies, sampling with more participants in a longer interval may provide more meaningful results.

According to (Kline, 2011) the sample size for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) should be at least 200. Structural equation modeling could not be applied because this study could not reach a sufficient sample size. If SEM and path analysis could be done, the relationships within the variables could also be examined, and more fruitful results could be obtained.

In addition, purchase behavior requires a certain income. The economic conditions and high inflation in Turkey may have affected the purchase intention and purchase behavior. Especially since the study was carried out in a state university, the purchase intentions of the students other than their basic needs may have decreased.

In addition, some users stated that they were unsure whether they were following the "influencer" while the survey was conducted. This shows that the definition of a micro-celebrity or influencer is still not fully settled in people's minds. Even if the description of the influencer is added next to the question asking if they follow the influencer, the reason why some people stop answering the survey there may be that they are not aware that they follow the influencer. In future studies, photographic examples or influencer names can be added next to the definition to clarify this issue.

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APPENDICES

A. APPROVAL OF THE METU HUMAN SUBJECTS ETHICS COMMITTEE

UYGULAMALI ETİK ARAŞTIRMA MERKEZİ
APPLIED ETHICS RESEARCH CENTER



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20 MAYIS 2022

Konu : Değerlendirme Sonucu

Gönderen: ODTÜ İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (İAEK)

İlgi : İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu Başvurusu

Sayın Özlem ÖZDEMİR

Danışmanlığımı yürüttüğünüz Umutcan Sümeyye Yüksel'in "Kullanıcıların Instagram mikro ünlüleri ile algılanan benzerliği, özdeşleşmesi ve algılanan güvenilirliğinin, kullanıcıların para-sosyal tanımlama ve satın alma niyeti üzerindeki etkisi" başlıklı araştırması İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu tarafından uygun görülmüş ve **0312-ODTÜİAEK-2022** protokol numarası ile onaylanmıştır.

Saygılarımızla bilgilerinize sunarız.

Prof. Dr. Mine MISIRLISOY
İAEK Başkan

B. SURVEY

Instagram Micro-Celebrity User Relationship

Dear Participant,

This survey is conducted by Business Administration Graduate student U. Sümeyye Yüksel. It is carried out within the scope of the master's thesis under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Özlem Özdemir.

Our aim is to understand the relationship between Instagram users and Instagram micro-celebrities (influencers.)

In the survey, you will be asked to think of an Instagram micro-celebrity (influencer) you follow and to answer various statements presented to you, keeping that micro-celebrity in mind.

The survey is expected to take about 5 mins and your participation is voluntary. No identity information is requested from you in the survey.


Thank you very much in advance for your participation.

For more information about the research, you can reach U.Sümeyye Yüksel (E-mail: sumeyye.yuksel@metu.edu.tr.)

NEXT

If your answer to one of these three questions is "No," you may leave without completing the survey. Thank you.

*I have read the information about the survey, and I voluntarily participate.

 Please select one answer

Yes

No

*Do you have an Instagram account?

 Please select one answer

Yes

No

*Do you follow any micro-celebrity (influencer) on Instagram?

("Microcelebrity is the state of being well known to a niche group of people, and a practice whereby people present themselves as public personas, create affective ties with audience members, and view followers as fans." **You can think of people with many followers, that you do not know in real life; but you follow on Instagram for their ideas, lifestyle, profession, etc.)**

 Please select one answer

Yes

No

*What is your age?

ⓘ Only numbers may be entered in this field.

*Gender: How do you identify?

ⓘ Please select one answer

Woman

Non-binary

Man

Prefer to self-describe:

*What is your current level of education? (if you are an irregular student, please select the year written in the administration system.)

ⓘ Please select one answer

1st year university student

2nd year university student

3rd year university student

4th year university student

Masters student

PhD student/candidate

*What is your approximate average monthly income? (please include all income sources; your salary, scholarships, money you are taking from your family etc.)

ⓘ Please select one answer

0-2000 TL

2001-4000 TL

4001-6000 TL

6001-8000 TL

8001 TL and up

*Do you use Instagram every day? (every time you open the app is count as using.)

ⓘ Please select one answer

Yes

No

*How many influencers do you follow on Instagram?

ⓘ Only numbers may be entered in this field.

From this section on, if you keep your phone in a horizontal position, it will be easier for you to view and answer the questions.

Please choose a micro-celebrity (influencer) you are currently following on Instagram and answer the questions below, while keeping this influencer in mind.

• Please rate each statement below while keeping your selected influencer in mind. My influencer ...

	1	2	3	4	5	
Doesn't think like me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Thinks like me
Doesn't behave like me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Behaves like me
Different from me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Similar to me
Unlike me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Like me

• Please rate each statement below while keeping your selected influencer in mind. My influencer ...

	1	2	3	4	5	
From social class different from mine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	From social class similar to mine
Economic situation different from mine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Economic situation like mine
Status different from mine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Status like mine
Background different from mine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Background similar to mine

• Please rate each statement below while keeping your selected influencer in mind. My influencer ...

	1	2	3	4	5	
Morals unlike mine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Morals like mine
Sexual attitudes unlike mine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Sexual attitudes like mine
Doesn't share my values	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Shares my values
Doesn't treat people like I do	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Treats people like I do

• Please rate each statement below while keeping your selected influencer in mind. My influencer ...

	1	2	3	4	5	
Looks different from me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Looks similar to me
Different size than I am	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Same size as I am
Appearance unlike mine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Appearance like mine
Doesn't resemble me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Resembles me

Please rate questions below by thinking an influencer you are currently following on Instagram.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My influencer is the sort of person I want to be like myself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sometimes I wish I could be more like my influencer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My influencer is someone I would like to emulate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'd like to do the kinds of things my influencer does on Instagram.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would NEVER want to act the way my influencer does on Instagram.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please rate each statement below while keeping your selected influencer in mind. My influencer...

	1	2	3	4	5	
Unattractive	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Attractive
Not Classy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Classy
Ugly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Beautiful/Handsome
Plain	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Elegant
Not sexy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Sexy

Please rate each statement below while keeping your selected influencer in mind. My influencer...

	1	2	3	4	5	
Undependable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Dependable
Dishonest	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Honest
Unreliable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Reliable
Insincere	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Sincere
Untrustworthy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Trustworthy

Please rate each statement below while keeping your selected influencer in mind. My influencer...

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not an expert	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Expert
Inexperienced	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Experienced
Unknowledgeable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Knowledgeable
Unqualified	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Qualified
Unskilled	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Skilled

• Please rate question below by thinking the influencer you've selected.

	Strongly Dis- agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I look forward to seeing my influencer's posts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I see my influencer as a natural, down-to-earth person.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If my influencer starts another social media channel, I will also follow.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My influencer seems to understand the kind of things I want to know.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I see a story about my influencer in other places, I would read it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would love to meet my influencer in person.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My influencer would fit in well with my group of friends.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If something happens to my influencer, I will feel sad.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would invite my influencer to my party.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If my influencer lived in my neighborhood, we would be friends.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

• Please rate questions below by thinking the influencer you've selected.

	Strongly Dis- agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am interested in buying products that my influencer showed through Instagram.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I expect to buy products similar to my influencer's fashion on Instagram.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I plan to buy products similar to that my influencer showed through Instagram.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would like to buy products similar to my influencer's fashion on Instagram.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would purchase the products promoted by my influencer in the future.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would encourage people close to me to buy the products promoted by my influencer.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

SUBMIT

C. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKÇE ÖZET

İnternet ve akıllı telefonlar son 20 yılda hayatımızın ayrılmaz bir parçası haline geldi ve alışkanlıklarımızı değiştirdi. Akıllı telefonların yaygınlaşmasıyla birlikte birincil medya mecrası sosyal medya uygulamalarına kaydı. Facebook, Instagram ve Twitter gibi sosyal medya platformları topluluklar yarattı ve insanların iletişim kurma şeklini değiştirdi. Facebook'un 2,9 Milyar, Instagram'ın 1,5 Milyar ve Twitter'ın 436 Milyon aylık aktif kullanıcısı var (Statista.com, 2022b). Kullanıcı eğilimlerindeki değişimin ardından şirketler de sosyal medya varlığını oluşturmuş ve sosyal medyayı bir reklam aracı olarak kullanmaya başlamıştır. (Statista.com, 2022c)'ye göre, ABD'deki şirketlerin pazarlama bütçesinin %14,9'u sosyal medyaya ayrılıyor. Bu yüzde 2015'ten beri yükseliyor ve COVID-19 pandemisinde zirve yaptı (Statista.com, 2022a). Michaelidou ve diğerleri (2011) tarafından yapılan bir araştırmaya göre, şirketler sosyal medyayı çeşitli nedenlerle kullanmaktadır: müşterileri çekmek, müşterilerle ilişkiler geliştirmek, marka bilinirliğini artırmak ve markayı çevrimiçi olarak iletmek. Ayrıca, sosyal medya platformları şirketler tarafından satış gelirlerini artırmak için kullanılmaktadır (Kumar ve Mirchandani, 2012). Reklam ortamındaki değişimin bir işareti olarak, 2020'de Instagram reklam gelirleri yalnızca Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde 17 Milyar Doların üzerindeydi (Statista.com, 2022c).

Teknoloji, dijitalleşme, yeni medya ve pazarlama yöntemleri ortaya çıksa da izleyiciler ve ünlüler arasındaki ilişki devam ediyor. Ünlü desteğinin etkili olup olmadığı, ünlüleri inandırıcı kılan unsurlar, ünlüler ve izleyiciler arasında ne tür ilişkiler var ve literatürde neden bazı izleyicilerin bazı ünlüleri diğerlerinden daha çok sevdiği gibi sorular, kitle iletişim araçları ve film yıldızları gibi geleneksel ünlüler göz önünde bulundurularak cevaplanmaktadır. sporcu insanlar. Sosyal medyanın karşılıklı etkileşim gücü, pazarlama literatüründe yeni bir sayfa açtı ve şimdi daha önce bahsedilen sorular sosyal medya ve influencerlar bağlamında cevaplanıyor.

Bir medya figürü ile izleyici arasındaki parasosyal özdeşleşme, izleyicinin medya figürü veya bir gösteri karakteri ile arkadaşmış gibi gerçek bir ilişkiye sahip olduğunu

hayal ettiđi bir kavramdır. İlk olarak, TV ve Filmler gibi tek yönlü iletişim kanalları dikkate alınarak literatürde parasosyal özdeşleşme incelenmiştir. Sosyal medyada durum hızlandı. Sosyal medya kullanıcısı, influencer'ları ilgi alanlarına göre takip ediyor; gönderiler hakkında yorum yapabilir, hatta doğrudan mesajlaşma yoluyla influencer ile etkileşime girebilirler. Bu iki yönlü iletişim olanakları, influencer ile daha yüksek derecede bir parasosyal özdeşleşme yaratır.

Algılanan benzerlik, bir izleyicinin kendilerini görünüm, arka plan, değerler ve tutum açısından bir medya kişiliğine benzer olarak görme derecesidir (McCroskey, Richmond ve Daly, 1975).

İnsanlar, kendilerine benzer karakterlerin veya influencerlerin ilgili bilgileri paylaşımlarını bekler. Ayrıca algılanan benzerlik, iletişimin etkinliğini etkileyebilir (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). Algılanan benzerlik, literatürde izleyici-önlü ilişkisini araştırmak için yaygın olarak kullanılmaktadır ve artık sosyal medya bağlamında kullanılmaktadır.

Özdeşim, izleyici-medya karakter ilişkisinin bir başka yönüdür ve izleyicinin medya karakteri gibi olma özlemi olarak açıklanabilir. Kullanıcı, film, kitap gibi bir medya ürününü tüketirken dünyayı karakterlerin gözünden görür ve karaktere vurgu yapar. Giles (2002), özdeşimin parasosyal özdeşleşmenin gelişim aşamalarından biri olduğunu öne sürmüştür.

Kaynak güvenilirliği, bir önlünün tüketiciler tarafından güvenilir olarak algılanabilmesi için gerekli nitelikleri gösteren literatürdeki bir diđer önemli konudur. Ohanian (1990) tarafından geliştirilen çekicilik, güvenilirlik ve uzmanlık boyutlarına sahip inandırıcılık ölçeđi literatürde yaygın olarak kullanılmaktadır. Araştırmalar, izleyiciler tarafından güvenilir bulunan önlülerin, tanıtımını yaptıkları markanın veya ürünün güvenilirliğini yansıttığını gösteriyor. Ayrıca literatürde inandırıcılık parasosyal özdeşleşmenin yordayıcısı olarak görölmektedir (Bond, 2018). Parasosyal özdeşleşme ile her üçü olan güvenilirlik, çekicilik ve uzmanlık arasındaki ilişki araştırıldığında, literatürde inandırıcılıđın boyutları nispeten azdır.

Satın alma niyeti, literatürde satın alma davranışının ana yordayıcısı olarak görülmektedir (Fishbein ve Ajzen, 1977). Reklam faaliyetlerinin birincil amaçlarından biri satın alma davranışını tetiklemektir. Ünlü desteğinin satın alma niyeti üzerindeki etkisi ve bunun parasosyal ve özdeşim, güvenilirlik ve benzerlik ile ilişkisi literatürde incelenmiştir. Bunu sosyal medya bağlamında ele almak, literatürde nispeten yenisidir. Kitle iletişim araçlarının aksine sosyal medya ve influencerlerin literatürde nispeten yeni kavramlar olduğu düşünüldüğünde, sosyal medya araştırmalarında hala keşfedilmemiş birçok alan bulunmaktadır. Bu tez, influencerlerin sosyal medya kullanıcıları üzerindeki etkilerini parasosyal özdeşleşme, algılanan benzerlik, özdeşim ve güvenilirlik perspektiflerinden araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Seçilen değişkenler arasındaki ilişkinin incelenmesi kavramların daha iyi anlaşılmasını sağlayacak, Türk ve dünya literatürüne katkı sağlayacaktır.

Sosyal medya platformları iletişimi kolaylaştırdı ve insanların çevrimiçi etkileşime girmesine izin verdi (Gruzd, 2011). Bu platformlar insanlara profillerini oluşturma ve deneyimlerini paylaşma fırsatı verir. Bazı insanlar yüksek sayıda takipçi kazanmaya başladı ve belli gruplar tarafından tanınır hale geldi. Bu kişilere literatürde mikro ünlüler ya da influencerler denilmektedir. Başka bir deyişle, influencerler, sosyal medyada dikkatli ve stratejik bir şekilde çevrimiçi bir varlık oluşturan, kişisel yaşamlarını bu stratejik çerçeve içinde sunan ve bunu yaparak takipçilere ulaşan kişilerdir (Marwick, 2015). Geleneksel ünlülerden farkı, sıradan insanlar olmaları, ürünler veya hizmetler hakkında kişisel görüşleri paylaşmaları ve genellikle yemek, teknoloji, yaşam tarzı, moda veya eğitim gibi belirli bir konuya odaklanmalarıdır.

Dijitalleşme ile birlikte pazarlama yöntemleri de dijital çağa ayak uydurmuştur. Medya ve reklam karşılıklı olarak birbirine bağımlıdır. Medyanın ticari olarak geçerli olabilmesi için reklam gelirine ve pazarlamacıların da izleyicilerine ulaşmak için medyaya ihtiyacı vardır (Khamis ve diğerleri, 2016). Medyanın temel amacı, izleyicileri için ilgi çekici içerik oluşturmaktır ve ünlüler geleneksel olarak izleyiciler arasında önemli ölçüde popülerdir (Khamis ve diğerleri, 2016). Ünlülerin reklam için kullanılması, başka bir deyişle ünlülerin desteklenmesi, reklamın etkinliğini artırmanın kanıtlanmış bir yoludur (Schouten ve diğerleri, 2020). Sosyal medyanın yükselişiyle birlikte markalar, “geleneksel” ünlülerin yanı sıra influencerları da

kullanmaya başladı (Marwick 2015). Sosyal medyaya ayrılan pazarlama bütçesi göz ardı edilemeyecek bir meblağ haline geliyor. Statista'ya (2022) göre ABD'deki şirketlerin pazarlama bütçesinin %14,9'u sosyal medyaya ayrılmıştır. Bu yüzde 2015'ten beri yükseliyor ve COVID-19 pandemisinde zirve yaptı (Statista, 2022).

Kitle iletişim araçlarının aksine, influencerler bir ürünü tanıtırken niş kitlelere hitap edebilir ve benzersiz ve kişisel anlatılar oluşturabilir. Bu, şirketlerin gözünde influencer pazarlamanın en çekici yönlerinden biridir. Sıradan insanlar olduklarından ve genellikle izleyicileriyle sık sık etkileşime girdiklerinden, influencerlar takipçilerinin güvenini kazanır ve onların alışveriş seçimlerini etkileyebilir (Beldad ve diğerleri, 2010). Tafesse'ye (2016) göre, influencer pazarlama konsepti, gerçek akran tüketici incelemesi ve marka etkileşimi fikri üzerine kuruludur. İnsanlar çevrimiçi kaynağın da insan olduğunu bilirlerse, çevrimiçi kaynakla işlem yaparken kendilerini daha rahat hissederler (Shen, 2012). Sosyal medyadaki influencerlar, “gerçek benlikleri ve kişisel yaşamları” ile etkileşimleri ve promosyonları gerçek gibi göstermekte (Jin vd., 2018) ve takipçilerin güvenini kazanmaktadır. Markalar, ürünlerini iyi tanımlanmış ve çeşitli kitlelere tanıtmak için bu güveni kullanır.

Tüm sosyal medya platformlarının influencerları vardır. Instagram bir fotoğraf paylaşım uygulaması olarak başladı ve zamanla video ve hikaye paylaşımı gibi yeni özellikler kazandı. Instagram fenomenleri günlük hayatlarını, ne yediklerini, ne giydiklerini, nereye gittiklerini ve hangi markaları kullandıklarını paylaşıyorlar. Bir noktada, influencerlar ürünlerini veya hizmetlerini önermeye başladılar ve Instagram bir reklam mecrası haline geldi (Marwick, 2015). Bu değişikliğin ardından Instagram kurallar getirdi ve artık herhangi bir Influencer'ın yaptığı herhangi bir ücretli öneri için "#reklam" belirtmek zorunludur. Daha önce bahsedilen özelliklerinden dolayı Instagram, literatürde influencer marketing için en çok alıntı yapılan sosyal medya platformudur (Ki & Kim, 2019) ve bu tez kapsamında sosyal medya platformu olarak Instagram seçilmiştir.

Bir süre bir film veya dizi izledikten sonra seyirci, karakterleri gerçek hayattaki arkadaşları kadar tanıdığını hisseder (Hoffner, 1996). Seyirci karakteri vurgulayabilir ve karakterler sanki bir ilişkileri varmış gibi tanıdık hale gelir. Parasosyal özdeşleşme (PSI), Horton ve Wohl (1956) tarafından bir izleyicinin bir medya sanatçısı ile hissettiği bu sahte ilişkiyi açıklamak için oluşturulmuş bir terimdir.

Algılanan benzerlik, bir kişinin bir hedefi, kişilik özelliklerine veya tutumlarına kıyasla kendisine benzer olduğuna inanma veya algılama derecesi olarak açıklanabilir (Montoya vd., 2008). İnsanlar, kendilerine benzeyen bireylerin kişisel olarak ilgili bilgileri paylaşacağını ve ödüllendirici etkileşimler sağlayacaklarını umarlar. Ayrıca araştırmaya göre, algılanan benzerlik, diğer bireyin özelliklerini ve davranışlarını taklit etme isteği ile ilişkilidir (Hoffner ve Cantor, 1991). Bireyin belirli davranış ve özellikleri olumlu ve ödüllendirici olarak algılanıyorsa, bu durumda o birey gibi olma arzusu algılanan benzerlik tarafından desteklenebilir (Hoffner ve Buchanan, 2005). Bandura (1969) çalışmasında, medyadaki kişilerle belirli bir ölçüde benzerliğin onlar gibi olma özlemine artırdığını belirtmiştir. Muhtemeldir ki, bazı benzerlikler izleyiciye başka şekillerde medya personası gibi olmanın uygun ve mümkün olduğunu göstermektedir.

Bir filmin, televizyon dizisinin, kitabın veya YouTube videosunun izleyicileri; genellikle hikayenin içine girer ve gösterilen karakterlerle özdeşleşir. Bu olgu olay örgüsünde yaşanan olayları seyirciye sanki kendi başlarına geliyormuş gibi hissettiren bir mekanizma olarak açıklanmaktadır (Cohen, 2001). İzleyici, program boyunca bakış açılarını paylaşarak karakterlerin deneyimlerine katılır (Maccoby ve Wilson, 1957). Özdeşim, izleyicinin benzer şekilde davranmaya başladığı ya da tasvir edilen karakter gibi olmayı arzuladığı “özdeşleşme”nin genişletilmiş versiyonudur (Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner ve Buchanan, 2005).

Araştırmalar, özdeşimin, sembolik modellemenin (Bandura, 2001) ve sosyal öğrenmenin (Bandura, 1969) önemli bir öncülü olarak algılanabileceğini öne sürüyor. Özdeşimdeki benzersiz şey, izleyicinin kurgusal karakteri taklit etme ve taklit etme arzusudur (Cohen, 2001; Tolbert & Drogos, 2019).

Kaynak güvenilirliđi, ünlülerin izleyiciler üzerindeki ikna edici gücünü anlamayı amaçlayan medya, psikoloji ve pazarlama arařtırmalarında bir konudur. Ohanian (1990), "Kaynak inanılrlıđı"ndan "iletiřimcinin alıcının bir mesajı kabulünü etkileyen olumlu özellikleri" olarak bahseder (s.41). Onayın güvenilirliđi üzerine sonradan yapılan arařtırmalar Ohanian'ın 1990'daki tanımını desteklemektedir. Bulgular, tüketicilerin bakıř açılarında güvenilir olarak algılanan kiřiler tarafından tanıtılan markaların müřteriler tarafından olumlu olarak deđerlendirilmesinin daha olası olduđunu göstermektedir (Schouten ve diđerleri, 2020). Ayrıca, güvenilirlik üzerine onlarca yıllık arařtırmaların ardındaki ortak bulgu, yüksek derecede güvenilir bir kaynađın, düşük güvenilirliđe kıyasla daha fazla etki sađlamasıdır (Pornpitakpan, 2004).

Bu çalıřma, Instagram kullanıcısı ile influencer arasındaki algılanan benzerliđin, Instagram kullanıcılarının influencer ile özdeřleşmesinin ve influencer'ın güvenilirliđinin etkilerini arařtırıyor; Influencer ile parasosyal özdeřleşme ve Instagram kullanıcılarının satın alma niyeti üzerine. Algılanan benzerlik, özdeřim, inanılrlık ve parasosyal özdeřleşme arasındaki iliřki önceki literatürde ayrı ayrı ve farklı bađlamlarda analiz edilmiřtir. Tüm kavramlar bir araya getirilmiř, çalıřma Instagram bađlamıyla sınırlandırılmıř ve aralarındaki iliřkiler incelenmiřtir.

Bu modelde özdeřleşme, algılanan benzerlik (tutum, arka plan, deđer ve görünüm benzerliđi boyutları) ve inanılrlık (çekicilik, güvenilirlik ve uzmanlık) bađımsız deđerliřkenler olarak kullanılırken, parasosyal özdeřleşme bađımlı deđerliřkendir.

Özdeřleşme, algılanan benzerlik, güvenilirlik, parasosyal özdeřleşme ve satın alma niyeti arasında herhangi bir iliřki olup olmadıđını görmek için hipotezlere satın alma niyeti eklenmiřtir.

Algılanan benzerlik-parasosyal özdeřleşme iliřkisi literatürde diđer arařtırmacılar tarafından arařtırılmıř ve algılanan benzerlik parasosyal özdeřleşmenin bir yordayıcısı olarak bulunmuřtur. Bu nedenle, ařađıdakiler varsayılmaktadır:

H1: Bir influencer ile algılanan benzerlik, o influencer ile parasosyal özdeřleşme üzerinde olumlu bir etkiye sahiptir.

Diğer arařtırmacılar, özdeşim ile parasosyal özdeşim arasındaki ilişkiyi farklı bağlamlarda arařtırmışlardır. Özdeşim ile parasosyal özdeşim arasındaki ilişki bir önceki bölümde açıklanmıştır. Hipotezlere, bu ilişki hakkında daha önce yapılmış literatür sentezlenerek ulaşılır.

H2: Influencer ile özdeşme, söz konusu kişiyle parasosyal özdeşleşme üzerinde olumlu bir etkiye sahiptir.

Kaynak çekiciliği, kaynak güvenilirliği ve kaynak uzmanlığı ile güvenilirlik, daha önceki literatürde kaynakla parasosyal özdeşleşmenin bir yordayıcısı olarak kullanılmıştır. Influencer-Instagram kullanıcı ilişkileri üzerine önceki literatür, aşağıdaki hipotezlere ulaşmak için benimsenmiştir:

H3: Influencer'ın güvenilirliği, o influencer ile parasosyal özdeşleşme üzerinde olumlu bir etkiye sahiptir.

H3A: Influencer'ın çekiciliği, o influencer ile parasosyal özdeşleşme üzerinde olumlu bir etkiye sahiptir.

H3B: Influencer'ın güvenilirliği, o influencer ile parasosyal özdeşleşme üzerinde olumlu bir etkiye sahiptir.

H3C: Influencer'ın uzmanlığı, sosyal medya takipçisi ile parasosyal özdeşleşmesi üzerinde olumlu bir etkiye sahiptir.

Influencer pazarlama ve ürün promosyonları, güçlü pazarlama araçları haline geliyor. Böylece, arařtırmacılar özdeşme, güvenilirlik, parasosyal özdeşleşme ve satın alma niyeti arasındaki ilişkileri incelediler. İstekli özdeşim, inanılrlık, parasosyal özdeşim ve satın alma niyeti arasında pozitif bir ilişki olup olmadığını görmek için hipotezlere satın alma niyeti eklenmiştir.

H4: Özdeşme, o influencer tarafından tanıtılan ürünleri satın alma niyeti ile pozitif bir korelasyona sahiptir.

H5: Güvenilirlik, o influencer tarafından tanıtılan ürünleri satın alma niyeti ile pozitif bir korelasyona sahiptir.

H6: Influencer ile parasosyal özdeşleşme, o influencer tarafından tanıtılan ürünleri satın alma niyeti ile pozitif bir korelasyona sahiptir.

Araştırmanın veri toplama aracı olarak METU Survey kullanılmıştır. Anket yedi soru grubu ile yapılandırılmıştır. İlk grup, katılımcıların ankete gönüllü olarak katılmalarını ve anketi tamamlamak için tüm gereklilikleri yerine getirmelerini sağlamak için onay ve ön koşul sorularından oluşuyordu. İkinci bölüm demografik bilgi sorularından oluşmaktadır. Üçüncü soru grubu, algılanan benzerliği Likert tipi bir anlamsal farklılık ölçeği ile ölçmüştür. Dördüncü grup, bir Likert ölçeği ile özdeşmeyi ölçmüştür. Beşinci soru grubu, Likert tipi bir anlamsal farklılık ölçeği ile güvenilirliği ölçmüştür. Altıncı soru grubunda parasosyal özdeşleşme Likert ölçeği kullanılarak ölçülmektedir. Son olarak yedinci grup satın alma niyetini Likert ölçeği ile ölçmüştür. Ankette, her soru grubunun başında, katılımcılardan şu anda Instagram'da takip ettikleri bir influencer hakkında düşünceleri ve bu influencer'ı akıllarında tutarak soruları cevaplamaları istendi. Anket İngilizce olarak yapılmaktadır. Anketin tüm soru listesini içeren bir kopyası Appandix'te verilmiştir. Verilerin toplanmasından önce, anketin bir kopyası değerlendirilmek üzere İnsan Denekleri Etik Kurulu'na gönderilmiştir. Anket etik onay alındıktan sonra yapılmıştır. Ankete katılım tamamen gönüllülük esasına dayalı olup, ankete başlamadan önce katılımcıların onamları alınmıştır. Ayrıca tüm cevaplar isimsiz olarak toplanmış ve katılımcılara anketin başında bilgi verilmiştir. Appendix bölümünde etik onay formunun bir kopyası yer almaktadır.

Veriler, bu tez için anonim bir çevrimiçi anket aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Çevrimiçi yöntem, küresel COVID-19 salgını nedeniyle seçilmiştir. Anket Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi Öğrencilerine e-posta ile gönderilmiştir. Çalışmanın amacı, anketi tamamlamak için gereken süre ve anketin bağlantısı e-postanın gövdesinde verilmiştir. Veriler 24 Mayıs 2022 ve 17 Temmuz 2022 tarihleri arasında toplanmıştır.

Anket 242 kişi tarafından açılmış ve 242 kişiden 105'i anketi tamamlamıştır. Tamamlanan cevaplarda, kısmi cevaplar analizden çıkarılmıştır. Tamamlanan 105

cevaptan 5'i de tüm sorulara aynı cevabın tekrarlanması nedeniyle analizden çıkarılmıştır. Anketin ilk bölümünde, gönüllü katılım onayının yanı sıra, katılımcılara Instagram hesaplarının olup olmadığı ve en az bir influencer'ı takip edip etmedikleri sorulmuştur. Bir etkileyiciyi neyin oluşturduğuna dair bir açıklama da soruyla birlikte verilmiştir. Katılımcılara, bu koşullardan birini karşılamadıkları takdirde ankete devam etmemeleri söylenmiştir. Geçersiz ve kısmi yanıtlar çıkarıldıktan sonra kalan 100 geçerli anket analiz edilmiştir.

Sonuçlar, katılımcıların %68'inin kadın, %30'unun erkek ve %2'sinin non-binary olduğunu göstermiştir. Katılımcıların yaş ortalaması 23.26, standart sapma 3.53 idi. Katılımcıların %51'i 18-22, %36'sı 23-26 yaş aralığındadır. Ankete katılan en genç 18, en yaşlı 35 yaşındaydı. Katılımcıların %22'si birinci sınıf, %14'ü ikinci sınıf, %10'u üçüncü sınıf ve %28'i dördüncü sınıf öğrencisiydi. Katılımcıların %20'si yüksek lisans ve %6'sı doktora öğrencisiydi.

Gelir düzeyi ile ilgili olarak, katılımcılardan maaşları, bursları ve ailelerinden aldıkları para dahil tüm gelir kaynaklarını göz önünde bulundurmaları istenmiştir. Sonuçlar, yaklaşık gelir düzeyinin %32'si için 0-2000 TL, %31'i 2001-4000 TL, %15'i 4001-6000 TL, %7'si 6001-8000 TL ve %15'i için 8001 TL ve üzeri olduğunu göstermiştir. Üniversite öğrencileri arasında yaptığımız örnekleme dikkate alındığında gelir seviyeleri beklenen düzeydedir.

Katılımcıların Instagram'ı ne sıklıkta kullandıklarını ölçmek için, uygulamayı günlük olarak yaklaşık kaç kez kullandıkları sorulmuştur. Ortalama günlük Instagram kullanım sayısı 17.25 iken, örneklemin %78'i günde 1-20 kez Instagram kullandığı görülmüştür. Ortalama olarak, kullanıcıların takip ettiği Instagram fenomeni sayısı 10,42 iken, katılımcıların %76'sı Instagram'da 1-14 influencer'ı takip etmektedir.

Veri toplama periyodunu takiben istatistiksel analiz yapmak için IBM SPSS v28 kullanılmıştır. Örnekleme anlamak için analizin ilk adımı olarak açıklayıcı istatistikler hesaplanmıştır. Açıklayıcı istatistiklerden sonra anketteki ölçekler üzerinde faktör analizi yapılmıştır. Ölçeklerin güvenilirliği Cronbach's alpha kullanılarak değerlendirilmiştir. Değişkenler arasındaki ilişkileri görmek için değişkenler arası korelasyonlar analiz edilmiştir.

Son olarak, bağımsız değişkenlerin bağımlı değişken parasosyal özdeşleşme üzerindeki etkisini hesaplamak için doğrusal regresyon analizi yapılmıştır.

Tablo 2'de gösterildiği gibi, parasosyal özdeşleşme algılanan benzerlik ($r=0.515$, $p<0.01$), özdeşim ($r=0.398$, $p<0.01$), güven ($r=0.499$, $p<0.01$) ve uzmanlık ($r=0.499$, $p<0.01$) ile pozitif yönde ilişkilidir ($r=0.409$, $p<0.01$). Sonuçlar önceki literatürle uyumludur. Analize göre, parasosyal özdeşleşme, satın alma niyeti ve çekiciliği ile önemli ölçüde ilişkili görünmemektedir. Algılanan benzerlik, özdeşim ($r=0.203$, $p<0.05$) ve güven ($r=0.264$, $p<0.01$) ile pozitif yönde ilişkilidir. Uzmanlık, özdeşim ($r=0.203$, $p<0.05$), güven ($r=0.291$, $p<0.01$) ve güvenilirlik ($r=0.518$, $p<0.01$) ile anlamlı şekilde pozitif ilişkili görünmektedir. Satın alma niyeti, özdeşim ($r=0.235$, $p<0.05$) ve çekicilik ($r=0.209$, $p<0.05$) değişkenleri ile yalnızca pozitif yönde ilişkili görünmektedir; kullanıcının satın alma niyetiyle ilgili olmalıdır. Bu bulgular H4 ve kısmen H5 hipotezlerini desteklemektedir.

Algılanan benzerlik, özdeşim ve inanılırlığın (çekicilik, güvenilirlik ve uzmanlık boyutları) bir Instagram etkileyicisiyle parasosyal özdeşleşmeyi ne kadar iyi yordadığını incelemek için çok değişkenli regresyon analizi yapılmıştır. Tüm değişkenler için 5'li Likert ölçeği ile ölçüm yapılmıştır. Daha sonra, ilgili değişken için puanları oluşturmak için cevapların ortalamaları alınmıştır. Regresyon modeli, parasosyal özdeşleşmenin yordayıcıları olarak beş bağımsız değişkeni (algılanan benzerlik, arzulu özdeşleşme ve çekicilikle inanılırlık, güvenilirlik ve uzmanlık boyutları) içermektedir.

Regresyon analizi, parasosyal özdeşleşmeyi etkileyen faktörlerin denklemdaki varyansın yaklaşık %50'sini ($R^2=0.495$) açıkladığını göstermiştir. Algılanan benzerlik ($\beta = 0.313$, $p<0.001$) ve özdeşimin ($\beta = 0.287$, $p <0.001$) parasosyal özdeşleşmenin istatistiksel olarak anlamlı yordayıcıları olduğunu göstermiştir. Bulgular literatürle uyumlu olup H1 ve H2 hipotezlerini desteklemektedir.

Güvenilirlik ($\beta=0.199$, $p=0.002$) ve Uzmanlık ($\beta=0.141$, $p<0.05$), parasosyal özdeşleşmenin istatistiksel olarak anlamlı yordayıcıları buldu. Bu bulgular H3B ve H3C hipotezlerini desteklemektedir.

Öte yandan güvenilirlik ölçeğinin çekicilik boyutu parasosyal özdeşleşmeyi yordamada anlamlı bir faktör olarak bulunmamıştır ($\beta = -0.50$, $p < 0.446$).

Tezin modeli, algılanan benzerlik, özdeşim, çekicilikle birlikte inanılabilirlik, güvenilirlik ve uzmanlık boyutlarının parasosyal özdeşleşmeyi olumlu etkileyeceğini öngörmüştür. Regresyon analizi, önerilen modelin güvenilirliğin çekicilik boyutu dışında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Sonuçlar, bir influencer ile tutumlar, değerler, arka plan ve görünüm açısından algılanan benzerliğin, influencer'a karşı tek taraflı arkadaş gibi bir duyguya sahip olmanın bir yordayıcısı olduğunu göstermektedir. Influencer gibi olmayı istemek aynı zamanda parasosyal özdeşleşmeyi de öngörür. Bu sonuca yorum yapmak için, sosyal medya kullanıcıları takip ettikleri influencer olmayı arzuluyor; bu arada kendilerini kendilerine benzetiyorlar. Bu, kişinin kendi değerlerine, karakterine, görünümüne ve geçmişine yönelik bir pohpohlama biçimidir ve daha çok baktıkları ünlü gibi olmayı ister. Bu değişkenler daha önce ayrı ayrı incelenmiştir ve çalışmanın bulguları literatürle uyumludur. Sonuçlar, üniversite öğrencilerinin algılanan benzerliğin ve etkileyici kişilerle özdeşimin, Türkiye'de sosyal medya etkileyicileriyle parasosyal ilişkilerin istatistiksel olarak anlamlı yordayıcıları olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu sonuçlar H1, H2, H3B ve H3C hipotezlerini desteklemektedir.

Güvenilirlik ölçeğinin çekicilik boyutu, parasosyal özdeşleşmenin istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir yordayıcısı olarak bulunmamıştır. Literatür taramasında da belirtildiği gibi, güvenilirlik ölçeğinin çekicilik boyutu, Ohanian (1990) tarafından güvenilirlik ve uzmanlık boyutlarına yapılan bir eklemidir. Güvenilirlik ve uzmanlık boyutlarının hala inanılabilirliği ölçtüğünü ve inanılabilirliğin yine de parasosyal özdeşleşmenin istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir yordayıcısı olduğunu söylemek mümkündür.

Satın alma niyeti, arzulu tanımlama ve güvenilirliğin çekicilik boyutu ile pozitif olarak ilişkilidir. Bu durum, influencer'ın algılanan çekiciliği ve influencer'a daha çok benzeme isteği arttıkça, influencer tarafından tanıtılan mallara yönelik satın alma niyetinin de arttığını göstermektedir. Literatüre göre parasosyal özdeşleşmenin satın alma niyeti ile de pozitif yönde ilişkili olmasını bekliyoruz. Ancak, çalışmanın sonuçları, ilgili bir tartışma konusu olan böyle bir korelasyon göstermemektedir.

Parasosyal özdeşleşme; özdeşim, algılanan benzerlik, güvenilirlik ve uzmanlık değişkenleri ile pozitif olarak ilişkilidir. Bu bulgular literatürle uyumludur ve kullanıcılar influencer'ı değerler, geçmiş, tutumlar ve görünüm açısından kendilerine daha çok benzer olarak algıladıklarında, onların hayali ilişkilerine olan inançlarının da arttığını göstermektedir. Kullanıcılar influencer gibi olmak istedikleri kadar parasosyal ilişkilerine olan inançları da artıyor. Bu bize kitle iletişim araçları ve geleneksel ünlüler hakkındaki literatürün sosyal medya "ünlüleri" için de doğru olduğunu gösteriyor.

Güvenilirliğin uzmanlık ve güven boyutları kendi aralarında pozitif yönde ilişkilidir ve bu mantıklı bir bulgu olarak yorumlanabilir. Sosyal medya kullanıcısının influencer algısı arttıkça, influencer'a olan güveni de artıyor.

Bu çalışmanın bulguları, sosyal medya kullanıcı-etkileyici ilişkisinin nispeten keşfedilmemiş konusunun yüzeyini aydınlatmaya yardımcı oluyor. Çalışma, konuyu Türkiye ve üniversite öğrencilerinin bağlamlarına genişletiyor ve daha fazla tartışma konusu sunuyor.

Bu çalışmanın sonuçları incelenirken bazı sınırlılıkların olduğu akılda tutulmalıdır. Covid pandemisi söz konusu olduğundan kolayda örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Veri toplama sırasında maksimum katılımcı sayısına ulaşmak istenmesine rağmen ulaşılabilen katılımcıların sadece yarısı anketi tamamlamıştır. Tüm ölçekler güvenilir olmakla birlikte literatüre göre tahmin edilen bazı korelasyon ve regresyon sonuçlarının analiz sonuçlarına yansımaması örneklem büyüklüğünün görece küçük olmasından kaynaklanabilir.

Anket tarihlerinin üniversitenin final sınavlarına denk gelmesi anketi cevaplama veya tamamlama oranını olumsuz etkilemiş olabilir. İleride yapılacak çalışmalarda daha fazla katılımcı ile daha uzun aralıklarla örnekleme yapılması daha anlamlı sonuçlar sağlayabilir.

Kline (2011)'a göre, Yapısal Eşitlik Modellemesi (SEM) için örneklem büyüklüğü en az 200 olmalıdır. Bu çalışma yeterli örneklem büyüklüğüne ulaşamadığı için yapısal eşitlik modellemesi uygulanamamıştır. SEM ve path analizi yapılabilirse değişkenler arasındaki ilişkiler de incelenebilir ve daha verimli sonuçlar alınabilir.

Ayrıca satın alma davranışı belirli bir gelir gerektirir. Türkiye'deki ekonomik koşullar ve yüksek enflasyon, satın alma niyetini ve satın alma davranışını etkilemiş olabilir. Özellikle araştırma bir devlet üniversitesinde yapıldığı için öğrencilerin temel ihtiyaçları dışındaki satın alma niyetleri azalmış olabilir.

Ayrıca bazı kullanıcılar, anket yapılırken "influencer"ı takip edip etmediklerinden emin olmadıklarını belirtmişlerdir. Bu, mikro ünlü veya influencer tanımının hala insanların kafasında tam olarak yerleşmediğini gösteriyor. Influencer'ı takip edip etmediklerini soran sorunun yanına influencer tanımı eklense bile bazı kişilerin orada anketi yanıtlamayı bırakmasının nedeni influencer'ı takip ettiğinin farkında olmamaları olabilir. İleride yapılacak çalışmalarda bu konuya açıklık getirmek için tanımın yanına fotoğrafik örnekler veya influencer isimleri eklenebilir.

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TEZİN ADI / TITLE OF THE THESIS (İngilizce / English): INVESTIGATING THE INDIVIDUALS' PERCEPTION ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS: A SURVEY STUDY ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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