

Social Media Influencer Marketing in an Emerging Market: The Case of Moroccan Millennial Consumers

Gelişmekte Olan Bir Pazar'da Sosyal Medya Etkileyici Pazarlaması: Faslı
Milenyum Kuşağı Tüketicileri Örneği

Abstract

Social media platforms assist and empower consumers throughout their consumer behavior journey allowing interaction, personalization and engagement. The platforms offer different tools for social media advertising with influencer marketing being one of the most popular that requires the collaboration of influencers and brands. Existing academic research on social media influencer research focuses mainly on western countries to explore the phenomenon. Given, the academic call for studying social media effectiveness in different cultural contexts, the present study employs qualitative research in Morocco to explore influencer-follower interactions and their effect on consumers' behavior by focusing on a specific age segment – the digital native millennials. The paper provides theoretical insights on how cultural dimensions can create differences in millennials' perceptions and consumption behaviors by offering also managerial implications for influencers and brands.

Öz

Sosyal medya platformları, tüketicilerin tüketici davranışı yolculukları boyunca etkileşim, kişiselleştirme ve katılım imkânı sağlayarak onları desteklemekte ve güçlendirmektedir. Bu platformlar, sosyal medya reklamcılığı için çeşitli araçlar sunmakta olup, bunlar arasında en popüler olanlardan biri influencer pazarlamasıdır. Influencer pazarlaması, influencer'lar ile markalar arasındaki iş birliğini gerektiren bir stratejidir. Mevcut akademik araştırmalar, sosyal medya influencer'ları üzerine yapılan çalışmalarda büyük ölçüde Batı ülkelerine odaklanarak bu olguyu incelemektedir. Ancak, sosyal medyanın etkinliğinin farklı kültürel bağlamlarda araştırılması yönündeki akademik çağrı doğrultusunda, bu çalışma, Fas bağlamında nitel araştırma yöntemlerini kullanarak influencer-takipçi etkileşimlerini ve bu etkileşimlerin tüketici davranışları üzerindeki etkisini incelemektedir. Araştırma, özellikle dijital yerli milenyum kuşağına odaklanarak belirli bir yaş segmentini ele almaktadır. Çalışma, kültürel boyutların milenyum kuşağının algı ve tüketim davranışlarında nasıl farklılıklar yaratabileceğine dair kuramsal içgörüler sunmanın yanı sıra influencer'lar ve markalar için yönetsel çıkarımlar da sağlamaktadır.

Introduction

Social media platforms assist and empower consumers throughout their consumer behavior journey by allowing interaction, personalization and engagement and thus, impact consumers' relationships with firms and brands (Bartoloni and Ancillai, 2023). Considered as one of the most popular online worldwide activities, in 2024 over five billion individuals were reported as using social media spending 151 minutes daily on social media and messaging apps (Dixon, 2024).

A social media strategy that has attracted the attention of practitioners and scholars is social media influencers (SMI). SMI are everyday people who transform into digital opinion leaders due to the digital content shared on their personal social media accounts (Joshi et al., 2023). Influencers

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Article Type / Makale Türü

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

Keywords

Social Media Influencers, Social Media,
Consumer Behavior, Millennials, Culture.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Sosyal Medya Etkileyicileri, Sosyal Medya,
Tüketici Davranışları, Milenyum Kuşağı,
Kültür.

Bilgilendirme

This paper is derived from the master thesis
conducted by the first author.

JEL Codes: M31, M37, M39

Submitted: 14 / 12 / 2024

Accepted: 02 / 05 / 2025

develop an online image by communicating a narrative of their personal lives to attract their followers' attention (Kay et al., 2020). Increasingly, brands identify and collaborate with SMI strategically, particularly those who are perceived as credible by the target audience and have a good fit with the sponsored brands (Joshi et al., 2023).

SMI academic research has significantly increased due to the powerful impact that influencers have on consumers' behavior. This academic interest has recently increased the number of review papers that discuss theoretical foundations and provide areas for future research in the SMI field (e.g. Aw and Agnihotri, 2024; Han and Balabanis, 2024; Joshi et al., 2023; Tanwar, et al., 2022, 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021). In terms of geographical context, research was predominately conducted in developed western countries necessitating the study of different cultural contexts' impact on SMI effectiveness (Han and Balanis, 2024; Hudders et al., 2021; Vrontis, et al., 2021). To address the call the present study will explore influencer-follower interactions and their effect on consumers' behavior in the Moroccan cultural context. By employing a qualitative methodology, research was undertaken on Moroccan millennials, a young and dynamic population that embraces new technologies and makes them an attractive age segment for SMI marketing strategies.

The paper is structured as followed. Initially the literature review will be discussed to move readers to the identified gaps in the relevant literature. The next section will provide information about the research design by offering information about the data collection method, the research sample and the method of data analysis. The findings are discussed using the following themes Moroccan millennials' perceptions of influencers, Moroccan millennials' forming relationships with influencers, and influencers impact on Moroccan millennials' consumer behavior. The paper ends with a discussion of theoretical contributions, managerial implications and research limitations that create areas for future research.

1. Literature Review

The literature review will discuss the role of influencers on consumers' decision-making process and theoretical foundations on influencer-consumer relationships, followed by a review of millennials in the Moroccan digital and cultural context that will move readers to the gaps in the relevant literature.

1.1. The Role of Influencers in Consumer Decision-Making

SMI are digital opinion leaders that develop a persona on social media platforms by narrating their everyday lives (Kay, et al., 2020). The narration is constructed in such a way that aligns with the brands that they endorse affecting positively or negatively the way that their followers act (Joshi, et al., 2023). Through the developed narratives across several social media platforms, SMI form a sense of relatability that is more unique than the one formed by celebrities (Joshi et al., 2023; Liu and Lee, 2024). Whereas celebrities are generally known for their activities in their own profession, influencers are known for their activities in social media (Schouten, et al. 2020) focusing often on a respective field like fashion and sports. SMI have a significant impact on their followers' decision-making process that is attained by the influencers' intimacy and credibility that leads to an increase in follower counts (Hudders et al., 2021).

By offering free products or making a payment, several brands realize the benefits of using influencers to endorse and promote their products, a practice known as influencer marketing (Vrontis et al., 2021). The global influencer marketing market tripled in value since 2019 increasing to 21.1 billion U.S. dollars in 2023 (Statista, 2023). As the social media platforms develop new tools and the number of influencers continues to increase, it becomes inevitable for brands to collaborate with SMI.

Brands endorsed by SMI are often perceived more favorably than those endorsed by celebrities (Schouten et al., 2020). The authentic content allows the development of stronger personal connections with followers making influencers' endorsements influential (Bastrygina et al., 2024). SMI act as brand ambassadors by creating digital sponsored content with several positive outcomes for brands. The value of the created content and SMI's perceived trustworthiness, attractiveness and similarity with the audience enable brand awareness and create a purchase intention (Lou and Yuan,

2019). These strong parasocial relationships create a sense of feeling that extends to brands fostering brand loyalty and advocacy (Labrecque, 2014).

Several empirical and conceptual studies have contributed to the SMI literature. Early studies focused on SMI representation on social media and the characteristics of effective influencers (e.g. Freberg et al. 2011; Lee and Watkins 2016; Xiao et al., 2018).) While recent studies, explore parasocial relationships between SMI and consumers and their impact on consumers' perceptions and behaviors (e.g. Belanche et al. 2021; Koay and Lee, 2024; Koay and Lim, 2024). For example, Thomas et al. (2023) examine whether influencer-influencer collaborations and influencer-brand collaborations are perceived as self-serving (influencer motivated by a desire to obtain a reward) or altruistic (influencer motivated by a desire to benefit another), while Grgurić Čop et al. (2024) explore how SMI manage moral dilemmas created due to the dynamic relationships among influencers, brands, followers and the society. Next the paper will focus on the theoretical perspectives on influencer-consumer relationships.

1.2. Theoretical perspectives on influencer-consumer relationships

An analysis of empirical studies and reviews on the construct reveals that several theories are employed to understand SMI' impact on consumers (Han and Balabanis, 2024). The paper will shortly examine six complementary theories identified by Han and Balabanis's (2024) review paper on SMI, namely source credibility theory, parasocial interaction theory, similarity-attraction theory, two-step flow model, congruity theory, and persuasion knowledge model.

Source credibility theory argues that a source's credibility significantly shapes the persuasiveness and effectiveness of a message (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990). The theory provides three source characteristics that make this possible: credibility (accuracy and goodwill), expertise (knowledge, skills and experiences), and trustworthiness (honesty, fairness and integrity). In the literature of influencer marketing scholars have also proposed and tested alternatives characteristics as an extension of source credibility theory: similarity (Xiao et al., 2018), congruence (Breves et al., 2019) and parasocial relationships (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Irrespective of the characteristics that determine an influencer's credibility, the literature provides evidence that credible influencers can impact followers' attitudes and behaviors by increasing the confidence in the shared information and developing a sense of reliability and genuineness in the SMI (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Parasocial interaction theory refers to the unidirectional emotional bonds developed by consumers towards popular culture personalities (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956). Parasocial interactions in the social media landscape are transformed to multidirectional interactions allowing the formation of relationships between SMI and followers (for a review of parasocial relationships and interactions check Sheng et al., 2025). SMI are perceived as integral to the followers' social identity and thus, have a significant impact on consumers' attitudes and behaviors. The identification and emotional involvement with SMI motivate consumers to collect and internalize the shared information (Kassing and Sanderson, 2010).

Similarity-attraction theory argues that individuals will form relationships with others who share something in common, an act defined as homophily (Byrne, 1971). Consumers perceive influencers as similar to their own selves on several dimensions like background, values, physical appearance and attitudes and consequently perceive them as providing more achievable standards for comparison than more heterophilic individuals (Piehler et al., 2022). For this reason, the more homophilic influencers are perceived, consumers will experience lower self-discrepancy on exposure to the influencers' content (Jasiwal et al., 2024). Perceiving similarities with others and in this case with influencers, can stimulate familiarity and likeability, consequently reinforcing parasocial relationships and influencing attitudes and behaviors.

The two-step flow model focuses on how opinion leaders act as role models and influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1964). Social media influencers meet the criteria of opinion leaders as they represent certain values ("who one is"), display knowledge of specific topic ("what one knows"), and have many followers ("who one knows") (Dekoninck and Schmuck, 2024). Social media influencers transform to opinion leaders by demonstrating products

and describing personal experiences to capture the followers' attention and shape favorably consumer engagement and behavioral intentions (Casalo et al., 2020). Dekoninck and Schmuck (2024) in a longitudinal research reveal that individuals who follow influencers about issues related to the environment showed a higher engagement on political and cause oriented participation over time.

Congruity theory argues that individuals attempt to pursue a cognitive consistency (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955). The theory proposed that a message from a source will be perceived as more persuasive when it supports the receivers' attitudes and beliefs (congruency) (and the other way around for incongruency). For example, perceived influencer-consumer congruity influences favorably consumers' attitudes toward the endorsed product and may lead to purchase intentions. In the context of SMI influencer research, the theory can be used to explain three forms of congruency: influencer-consumer, consumer-product and influencer-product congruence respectively. In a recent study, Koay and Lim (2024) show that the congruence interplay between influencers, consumers and brands result in positive attitudes towards the influencers and the endorsed brands, and even drive online impulse buying intentions in the presence of wishful identification.

The persuasion knowledge model states that consumers are knowledgeable about persuasion strategies and use this information to analyze critically messages (Friestad and Wright, 1994). This intensive interpretation often leads to negative attitudes toward the message, the source, and/or the brand. In the realm of SMI research, the theory is used to explore how awareness of SMI strategies influence consumer attitudes and behaviors toward influencers and sponsored content. For example, De Veirman et al. (2017) show that consumers attitudes and behaviors are affected negatively when SMI content is perceived as too commercial. In a more recent study Pan et al. (2024) using the persuasion knowledge theory, show that follower and influencer characteristics are key antecedents that impact both transactional and non-transactional marketing outcomes. While a sense of belonging within the influencer community (follower characteristic) has a stronger effect on non-transactional outcomes such as attitudes and behavioral engagement, influencer communication (influencer characteristics) has a stronger effect on transactional outcomes such as purchase behavior. This means that higher perceived interactivity between consumers and influencers will increase consumers' processing of influencers' information and consequently increase behavioral engagement and sales (Beichert et al., 2023).

Based on the review, it is evident that there are similarities between the theories discussed and specifically their applicability in the SMI context. As Han and Balabanis (2024) argue despite the individual shortcomings of the discussed theories, SMI effectiveness centers on the intersection of these theories.

1.3. Millennials in the Moroccan digital and cultural context

The total population in Morocco is expected to increase significantly between 2024 and 2029 by 1.7 million (+4.55 percent) to 39.02 million individuals (Statista, 2024a). While globally the world population is aging, Morocco has a median age of 29, compared to 43 in Europe, 39 in the U.S., and 49 in Japan (Ipsos, 2024). Like other millennials, Morocco's young and dynamic population embraces new technologies making Moroccan millennials an attractive age segment for influencer marketing.

According to a study conducted by Ipsos (2024), 78% of Moroccans believe that they cannot imagine their lives without technology, which is seven points higher than the world average. With respect to millennials, many are grown as digital natives, and they represent a well-connected generation happy to be always online. This online presence also has a significant impact on millennials as consumers in the marketplace. A study performed by Ipsos (2018) in MENA countries, reports that millennials use online platforms to collect information and search for the best option before making a purchase. Although many consumers still shop in physical retail stores, millennials increasingly shop online and 1 out of 4 consumers shop using social media platforms.

Statista's (2024a) report on "Consumers in Morocco" provides important insights for the Moroccan digital context. According to findings of the research, 49% of consumers declare that is important to have mobile access in any place at any time and 55% state that could not live without

a smartphone. In terms of the most important channels for product information Moroccans use several sources: search engines (56%), video websites and apps (43%), friends and acquaintances (39%), online stores (35%), customer reviews (34%), social media and apps (%33) depict the largest frequencies respectively. Another important finding is that 97% of the sample uses social media and have performed several activities in the past four weeks prior to the collection of data: sent private messages (56%), commented on posts (49%), posted content or status update (34%), liked posts by influencers or followed influencers (29%), shared posts by other users (28%), liked posts by others users or followed people (28%), liked company posts or followed companies (22%), shared posts by influencers (19%), shared company posts (16%) and only 3% reported that they have used social media passively. The findings also report a positive attitude towards online shopping stating that they will do an online search before making a purchase (53%), and especially they find online customer reviews helpful (48%).

Ipsos (2024b) forecasts that the younger, tech-savvy population and Morocco's continued modernization, will drive demand for digital engagement. To meet this demand, brands will need to embrace new technologies and communication channels. Particularly, social media will play a critical role in how brands connect with consumers and influencers will become more influential on consumers' behavior. Consequently, the tech-savvy millennials become an attractive consumer segment to explore influencer-consumer relationships.

1.4. Consumer perspectives on influencers: Gaps in existing research

The literature of SMI marketing has shown an exponential growth since 2017 and recent literature reviews provide evidence for this academic interest (e.g. Aw and Agnihotri, 2024; Han and Balabanis, 2024; Tanwar, et al., 2024). Research on SMI is reported to be predominately conducted in western regions particularly in the United States (Fernandez-Prados et al., 2021). However, given the global influencer marketing market size (24 billion U.S. dollars) (Statista, 2024b), the impact of the strategy should be explored across different regions.

Abidin and Brown (2018) examine SMI strategies in different geographical contexts and argue that cultural, behavior and regulatory factors create differences in content creation and follower interpretation. Han and Balabanis (2024) discuss that Hofstede's (2021) classification of cultures into individualistic and collectivistic can provide a framework for the explanation of cultural differences. According to the authors, as western cultures are individualistic, SMI are valued for their authentic content and the personal connections that they form with followers. However, in eastern collectivistic cultures SMI are valued for their collective content that aims to foster group harmony and cohesion.

Given the call of scholars to evaluate the effectiveness of SMI marketing strategies in developed and emerging markets (Han and Balabanis, 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021), this study will explore influencer-follower interactions and their effect on consumers' behavior in the Moroccan cultural context.

2. Research Design

A phenomenological research design was employed to understand consumers' perceptions of influencers and influencer marketing, and influencers' role in shaping consumers' behavior in the selected cultural context. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Moroccan millennials who spent time in social media platforms and follow social media influencers.

Informants were selected using two purposeful sampling techniques: criterion and snowball. Initially, the selection of informants was based on individuals that fulfilled the following criterion: millennials with an interest in influencer marketing. In addition to criterion sampling technique, the study also employed the snowball sampling technique to locate potential informants that meet the identified criteria. The final sample size consists of 20 informants (see table 1).

Table 1. List of Informants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation
Y.B.	Female	33	Auto entrepreneur
I.B.	Female	29	Unemployed
A.B.	Male	30	Teacher
S.S.	Female	23	Student
A.E.	Male	40	Software engineer
I.H.	Male	30	Graphic designer
A.C.	Male	26	Student
C.O.	Female	28	Student
L.B.	Female	30	HR specialist
N.B.	Female	36	Engineer
B.Y.	Female	34	Artist
E.H.	Male	35	Engineer
S.D.	Female	27	Quality control officer
O.B.	Female	34	Stay at home mom
Y.K.	Male	26	Unemployed
D.B.	Female	28	Teacher
I.M.	Female	35	Doctor
I.E.	Female	33	Creative designer
K.L.	Male	31	Data analyst
B.W.	Male	28	Freelancer

An interview guide was developed to provide a framework within which the discussion could take place. The interview guide consisted of four main sections of open-ended questions: demographical information, social media use, influencers and influencer characteristics, and influencers and consumer behavior. To ensure ethical considerations before the data collection process, authors received an approval from the ethical committee of a university in Turkey.

The interviews were conducted by the first author primary in English. Sometimes the informants switched to Arabic and French as they are the two official languages of Morocco. Conducting the interviews in informants' preferred language assisted the flow of discussion for ensuring a complete understanding of the phenomenon. Each interview lasted approximately from 25 to 40 minutes. The data collection took place either in-person or via phone calls depending on the informants' availability. After asking for permission, all interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The transcripts were analyzed using the thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clark (2006). The data was initially coded in 28 broad categories that ranged from demographical information to social media usage, influencers followed, positive and negative perceptions towards influencers, influencers' impact on consumers' behavior and consumer-brand relationships. From the 28 initially identified codes, going back and forth the identified codes, the data and the theories three main themes were developed to explain the research question.

3. Research Findings

Research findings will be analyzed using the following themes: Moroccan millennials' perceptions of influencers, forming relationships with influencers, and their impact on consumers' behavior. A graphical representation of the themes and subcodes was developed to increase the comprehensibility of the findings (table 2).

Table 2. Themes and Subcodes

Themes	Subcodes
Moroccan millennials' perceptions of influencers	Altruism versus self-serving Online community – social media followers Influencers' characteristics Cultural congruity Self-discrepancy
Moroccan millennials forming relationships with influencers	Influencers' characteristics Altruism versus self-serving Entertainment FOMO Technology and social media platforms
Influencers' impact on Moroccan millennials' consumer behavior	Product categories Number of followers Engagement rates (likes, comments, shares) Confirmation (additional sources of external information) eWOM Financial experimentation Cultural congruity (influencers and endorsed brands) Brand switching

3.1. Moroccan millennials' perceptions of influencers

This theme will discuss how Moroccan millennials perceive influencers by focusing on how they are defined, and the intersection of influencers digital persona with the culture understudy and their real life. All informants communicate an awareness of SMI strategy particularly by stating the collaboration between influencers and brands pointing to the financial benefits received by influencers.

Influencer marketing consists of paying or giving some money to people who share content on social media to promote a product. It's basically an advertisement done via real people (Y.K., M., 26).

It is a form of advertisement for the benefit also of the brand (S.D., F, 27).

The prerequisite for being an influencer is depicted as the community of followers that trust influencers and their recommendations.

Influencers have a community of followers and subscribers that trust them and their recommendations (Y.K., M., 36).

It's when a famous person tries to promote something to their followers. Influencers, whether they have a small or large number of followers, promote brands and products and sometimes even create their own brand (C.O., F. 28).

As it can observed from the quotes, the ability of influencers to reach and persuade their followers make them an attractive marketing strategy. Even though, the literature discusses the differences between influencers and traditional celebrities, some of the informants defined influencers as “famous individuals”. This means that the exposure to SMI content creates a familiarity towards the accounts.

In terms of the characteristics that define the influencers, there was a plurality of traits positive, negative and neutral.

They're people who have other people following them, a lot of people are inspiring them and their choices, whether it was about products or their lifestyles (Y.K., M., 26).

I think that the common characteristics of influencers are knowledge, trustworthiness, creativity and the ability to persuade a large group of people (Y.B., F., 33).

Money hungry, attention seekers, but also kind of smart and know to convince people how to spend their money (I.B., F., 30).

In the quotes provided above differences in influencers' traits are evident. The first informant has a neutral stance stating a realistic definition by highlighting influencers' main function – having followers that trust their choices. The second informant values influencers' expertise, trustworthiness and creativity. Especially the creativity trait is important given the age segment under investigation. The last informant using negative connotations discusses that influencers can

use generally aggressive marketing strategies and tactics to get what they want. As one informant states consumers should aspire but not in such a way that can harm consumers' well-being.

Comparing your results to influencers can take a toll on your mental health especially after doing the same steps and not achieving the same results...it is important to find a balance between getting inspired, but also setting up realistic expectations that work for your health and body (A.B., M., 30).

Informants also point to the significance of cultural congruity. Influencers' digital narrative should align with Moroccan traditional values and societal expectations. Many Moroccans form their identities by combining elements from the deeply rooted traditions as well as from the emerging modernity (Ipsos, 2024). Consequently, digital native Millennials can develop negative attitudes towards influencers whose contents are perceived as culturally inappropriate.

I consider myself a religious person...especially when their ads are too much or they also sell things that are haram (A.E., M., 40).

I remember boycotting a brand...just because they were kind of disrespectful towards our country so that also matters to me when buying thing (N.B., M., 26).

Moroccan millennials were also skeptical about the discrepancies between influencers' online personas and real-life authenticity. Informants offer accounts about the differences between influencers' online and actual self. Influencers' content presents a filtered, flawless life.

They just portray themselves as perfect individuals, living a perfect life. But a lot of them were exposed that their whole content is just an act, and they just show what they want to show to their communities (O.B., F., 24)

Despite the discrepancies informants also acknowledge that this curated version of influencers is necessary to meet their professional goals and their followers' expectations.

Although I prefer not to generalize, it is obvious that they are just doing their job and want to gain money, power and a somewhat good reputation. Do we all act the same as we do in our houses that we do in our jobs for example? For most people no (I.B., F., 29).

They just present themselves in a more elevated way to who they really are. Humans in general are not perfect and commit mistakes constantly (S.S., F., 23).

Influencers like ordinary individuals have several roles that require the development of multiple selves (Belk, 2013). Thus, informants normalize this discrepancy by perceiving influencers as digital professionals or regular individuals that intentionally manage their social image to attain career and/or personal goals.

3.2. Moroccan millennials forming relationships with influencers

Millennials follow influencers to form different emotional and social connections, positive or negative and the nature of connections accordingly also impacts consumer trust. Dimensions such as expertise, authenticity, openness, and relatability are observed on the informants' accounts. For example, Y.B (F, 33) discusses the credibility towards the influencer that helps in her business operations.

I do trust him because he shares a lot of key studies, and his methods to make a small website successful and gain traffic. He also promotes some course and promotes some products, but I mainly follow him for the free content (Y.B., F., 33).

The focus placed by the informant on adhering to free material implies a recognition of the influencers' desire to help others that are in need for the disseminated information. Some informants also communicate the social values embraced and communicated by some influencers. Referring to a sports influencer A.B. (M, 30) notes:

He seems disciplined when it comes to fitness and body building. I think that he is a good influencer for young people who want to focus on their fitness journey. He inspires them to avoid all the distractions and the bad stuff that can happen during teenage years.

The influencer's content and the communicated image encourage positive behaviors. Even in the presence of sponsored content consumers trust that the influencers will not collaborate with firms that can harm the well-being of followers. L.B. (F, 29) discusses the reasons for the development of trust.

Just because he looks decent, never get into dramas and chooses his ads carefully.

Some millennials reported that they follow influencers just for the sole reason of entertainment. This is also the reason why consumer trust is not important for them. For these consumers influencers' digital content can be considered like zapping in TV, but in this context, they need to form a connection with the account by pushing the follow button.

I wouldn't say I trust her because the type of content she provides is mainly food reviews. But I think she has that peaceful aura that you entertained and busy watching a 20-minute video on YouTube...I do not trust her really. I don't need to do that for me to enjoy her content (I.B., F., 29).

Some millennials also report the fear of missing out (FOMO) as reason for getting into a connection with the influencers. While social media brings individuals closer to each other, it also extends comparisons with other individuals' lives. The impact of FOMO is more visible in the digital native millennials (Lamba, 2021).

I started following people for entertainment and fun but as long as the network expanded, I started following people out of curiosity. It becomes more of a fear of missing out on stuff even non-important things. You just have to know everything (S.S., F., 22).

This urge to stay tuned show how influencers get connected emotionally with influencers. FOMO is an emotion that does not necessitate the formation of trust between influencers and consumers. L.B. (F., 29) elaborates on this:

Even if I catch myself watching influencer videos, I don't necessarily trust them or what they or what they promote. I just consumer the content for the sake of doing it.

Advances in technology has also created new social media platforms and new tools to attract and engage consumers. Millennials also discuss how the evolution of the platforms has enabled SMI marketing. For example, Y.B. (F, 33) explains how she was not interest in internet marketing up to the point that she joined Facebook. The social media platform allowed her to connect with influencers that helped her in the development of her online business. Another informant I.B. (F, 29) states the algorithms used assist her to discover new influencers.

You don't even have to follow people to get to know what's going on. You just trust the algorithm to bring you back. It always does. Sometimes the recommended content by the social media platforms appears more than the one of those you follow (Y.B., F., 33).

3.3. Influencers' impact on Moroccan millennials' consumer behavior

This theme will discuss the impact of influencers on Moroccan consumers' purchasing journey by focusing on how influencer recommendations shape purchase intentions and behaviors, and consumers' relationships with brands.

Informants accounts show that different internal and external factors impact their consumption behavior based on influencers' recommendations. Although, there are mixed results informants agree that as an external factor influencers create an intention to purchase sponsored brands.

I remember travelling to a new city and I went and visited some places recommended by a TikTok content creator. I incorporated a lot of new skincare products into my routine thanks to that (S.S., F., 23).

I go with the product that influencer recommended because I trust his expertise. I'm talking about this (business) field not the other fields when people compare their physical appearances and lifestyles to the influencers they follow. Because people generally are so easily influenced when it comes to appearances. The way of talking and acting and so does the brands and the products they are promoting. So yes, the purchase intention can be influenced by the marketing of influencers (Y.B., F., 33).

Y.B particularly offers an account that the impact may differ based on the product categories sponsored. Apart from the influencers themselves, informants also discuss the number of followers and the resulting engagement (views, likes, shares) impact their trust in the recommendations provided. But this impact is not always positive.

When I see an influencer having millions of followers or views, you are automatically influenced by the numbers. You just say in your mind that a lot of people are following this person so that means that they have a good reputation and that the product they are recommending is good (Y.K., M., 26).

The follower count is not always perceived as credible. Informants are aware that there are micro-influencers that offer more unique and creative content.

Some influencers get followed just for their drama. So, numbers do not necessarily mean a trustworthy person (L.B., F., 30).

I used to get influenced easily just because someone has a huge number of followers. But nowadays I notice that there are so many underrated influencers who provide you with innovative content and information. But they have a really small number of followers. It does not matter for me anymore (E.H., M., 26).

Another interesting finding is that consumers often use alternative resources of information to confirm influencers' recommendations, a finding that was also reported by Statista (2024a).

While I come across product recommendations on social media. But I tend to rely more on my own research and preferences when making purchase decisions. I'm often skeptical about whether influencers genuinely like a product or if they are just promoting it for financial gain. I prefer to read reviews, compare options and consider my personal needs and budget before making a decision (E.H., M., 35).

I personally can't purchase something without checking some reviews even when it's recommended by an influencer (Y.K., Male, 26).

Apart from these sources of information, the global influencer market has also intensified digital word of mouth communication. Consumers often received content shared by their significant others.

It was my cousin who bought some skin care products because of an influencer and then she recommended it and sent me the video of the influencer talking about it (S.S., F., 23).

When asked about the impact of influencers on Moroccan millennials relationships with sponsored brands the findings indicate a concern for product quality, financial distress and cultural congruity. The perception of quality differs. While some informants refer to functional benefits and product innovations, others refer to the ethical values embraced by brands.

When there is some innovation in the products they sell. Good quality and a visually appealing aesthetic (A.B., F., 28).

Brands that offer good quality products. When they are vegan and cruelty free and when they also care about the environment and do not involve themselves in scandals such as child labor or funding genocides. I prefer more ethical brands (I.B., F., 30).

According to the findings of Ipsos (2024), inflation continues to impact daily life in Morocco, and thus, reshaping consumption behaviors. The rising costs of essentials has forced many households to adjust spending, including reducing quantities, switching to cheaper brands, or even engaging in bartering. This financial distress is reflected in the relationships that they form with brands sponsored by influencers.

Having financial stability is an important issue... my capacity to make correct decisions is facilitated by having financial security (B.W., M., 28).

Budget and economic factors play a role too. I don't want to spend money just to try something new (Y.K., M., 26).

Congruence of influencers with consumers' cultural factors were already discussed before. Congruency also extends to the brands promoted by influencers. I.B. (F., 29) emphasizes the importance of values, whereas S.S. (F., 23) discusses her tendency to purchase local brands instead of their global counterparts.

Mainly my values, if their content does not align with what I stand for...I would not trust or even check anything they say (I.B., F., 29).

I also try to support local Moroccan brands rather than international brands. Although it can be sometimes hard especially if the quality is not the same. But I just give it a try (S.S., F., 23).

Even though the informants interact with brands sponsored by influencers, the accounts do not show the development of a strong loyalty. On the contrary, experimenting with different offerings, financial reasons and offerings that meet better current needs are some of the reasons pointed to switch to alternative brands.

I remain loyal if the quality of the products is consistent, and they do not end up raising the prices. So, I can be loyal when all my conditions are met (Y.K., M., 26).

I am not super loyal to these brands to be honest. If a brand works for me and I like it, sure. I will stick with it for a bit. But if something else catches my eye or if I find a better option, I am not afraid to switch things up. It's more about what works for me right now rather than sticking with one brand forever (I.B., F., 29).

Discussion and Conclusion

The study focused on Moroccan millennials' perceptions and relationships with influencers and influencers' impact on their consumption behavior. The paper offers valuable insights in the SMI literature by addressing the academic call for research in emerging markets (Han and Balabanis, 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021). The findings support the theories on source credibility, parasocial interaction theory, similarity-attraction theory, two-step flow model, congruity theory and persuasion knowledge model. Influencers' perceived credibility, expertise, trustworthiness and authenticity increase consumers' confidence in the shared information (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019). In line with congruity theory and similarity-attraction theory influencers and influencers' content are perceived as more persuasive when it aligns with the consumers' cultural values and beliefs (Koay and Lim, 2024). Especially, the findings show the centrality of cultural identity in Moroccan millennials' choices. This is also reflected in the report of Ipsos (2024) that with the rise of digital platforms and social media, Moroccan consumers are increasingly informed and selective and expect global brands to connect with the local culture. Consequently, influencers and brands that fail to align with cultural values or that appear disconnected from local realities risk losing consumer trust.

However, Moroccan millennials are more skeptical about SMI and their marketing strategies. Informants accounts show that they use alternative sources for information search such as consumer reviews and significant others to the test the reliability of the digital content shared by influencers. This practice is deemed important given consumers' awareness of the financial gains received by influencers that affects whether influencers and their sponsored brands are perceived as self-serving or altruistic (Thomas et al., 2023). In line with the persuasion knowledge model, consumers can develop negative attitudes and behaviors towards the message, the source and/or the brand when perceived as too commercial (De Veirman, et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, informants also employ normalization strategies to explain the impact of influencers on their consumption choices. Influencers use social media platforms as a stage to develop and communicate their professional identity. Accordingly, it is normal for them to be compensated from the sponsored content that they create. Like ordinary individuals, influencers have multiple selves given the different roles that they undertake (Belk, 2013). The existence of multiple selves also require the adoption of a different digital persona often creating self-discrepancy concerns (Jaiswal et al., 2024).

Economic considerations are also reported as an important consideration for the Moroccan millennials. Inflation creates a pressure over spending power (Ipsos, 2024); thus, consumers question whether products' communicated quality warrant the requested price. Moreover, while family and religion are still central for the Moroccan identity, younger generations increasingly prioritize personal identity and the satisfaction of individuals goals (Ipsos, 2024). This finding is also reflected in the informants' accounts. If influencers' content assists consumers to fulfill their personal goals and provide innovative and authentic solutions for the construction of their identity, they will keep on their connections with the influencers and consider the recommended products. This finding is different from the proposition formed by Han and Balabanis (2024). Even though Morocco is a collectivistic culture, SMI are valued both for their collective content that enables to foster group cohesion, as well as the authentic content that enables the development of more personal connections. This also reflected in the fact that the number of followers does not necessarily allow the perception of influencers as opinion leaders (Dekoninck and Schmuck, 2024).

The study offers also implications for influencers and brands that collaborate with influencers. To remain relevant, influencers and brands must engage with consumers in meaningful ways, showing a deep understanding of local issues, cultural nuances, and social trends. This means investing in localized marketing strategies, fostering transparency, and ensuring that influencer and brand actions are aligned with consumer expectations. These actions will enable the development of trust and loyalty towards influencers and brands. As in the case of Moroccan millennials, cultural dimensions should not be taken for granted. With the globalization of markets, local identity often coexists with a desire for a global identity. Consumers develop their identities by mixing dimensions

of the local and the global. This requires influencers and brands to embrace a unique blend of tradition and modernity to meet consumers' needs in the highly competitive market. Especially, this should become even more difficult in the presence of strong local brands.

Influencer marketing is no longer a short-term digital promotional strategy. Rather it has evolved into a strategic tool to build and manage brands and especially influencers as individual brands. Consumers' rising power due to social media platforms and the younger generations' scrutiny on social media content necessitate continuous control of consumers' perceptions of authenticity and credibility. The findings provide evidence that follower numbers and engagement rates are not always prerequisite for authenticity and credibility. This means that brands should search for identifying new strategies for ensuring authenticity and credibility. Micro-influencers can be a potential strategy to enable niche engagement. It should be noted that authenticity and credibility are significant factors that can enable the formation of loyalty not only towards the influencers but also the formation of loyalty towards the influencer-brand collaborations.

The study also has some limitations that create new venues for research. As the study focused only on millennials in an emerging market future studies can explore consumer-influencer interactions across age groups and across cultures. Particularly, collecting data from different collectivist and individualistic cultures will allow a better understanding of how cultural dimensions impact SMI. Moreover, the study collected data only using in-depth interviews. A netnography of consumers' daily interactions with influencers can increase the depth of experiences regarding the digital actions performed and a better understanding of the relationships between consumers, influencers and brands. The research also focused on consumers' general perceptions towards SMI and their impact on consumers' behavior without focusing on a specific product category. Future research can also investigate how cultural dimensions affect different product categories. The findings also report consumers' strategies for normalizing influencers' received compensations due to influencer-brand collaborations. Future studies can delve into this issue by focusing on alternative strategies that can be employed and whether culture creates differences in the normalization strategies.

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