

Why Did I Become a Social Media Follower? An Integrative Literature Review

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Abstract

Background: Social media drives marketing, with users turning into influencers, leading to influencer marketing. As human influencers (HIs) and virtual influencers (VIs) exist, understanding why individuals follow HIs or VIs is crucial. Methods: Literature on followers' motivations were found in Scopus and CNKI databases, and the sample was collected manually. Data extraction and summarization followed search, screen, select, critical appraisal, and thematic analysis, using the Modified PRISMA 2020 flow diagram and MMAT tool as guides. Findings: Twenty-one articles were reviewed, revealing seven motivations for following both HIs and VIs. The followers of HIs are primarily driven by meeting their own needs, while those following VIs are often motivated by curiosity about the identity of the VIs, their operators, and underlying technology. Conclusion: Current research explores followership motivation for HIs, with a limited focus on VIs. As the field of VIs is still relatively under-researched, future research could further expand the exploration of the impact of VIs and their relationship with followers.

Keywords: Social Media, Followers, HIs, VIs, Motivation

Introduction

Engaging with social media has become one of the predominant online activities. Globally, the number of social media users surpassed 4.59 billion in 2022. As of January 2023, approximately 59 percent of the world's population utilizes social media, dedicating an average of 151 minutes per day to online activities (Dixon, 2022). The use of social media has given rise to the social media market. According to the latest data from Forbes Advisor, 90 percent of social media users follow at least one brand, and 76 percent of consumers have made purchases based on social media marketing (Wong, 2023).

A social media influencer, according to Freberg et al (2011), is a third-party independent endorser who garners followers by consistently sharing content through online communication (Vrontis et al., 2021). Influencers frequently incorporate products into their lifestyles and provide reviews on their social media accounts, fostering a level of trust that may even surpass that of family or friends. This trust significantly influences customers' views, actions, and attitudes toward the promoted goods (Hermanda et al., 2019). Influencers leverage their existing trust and relationships to convey brand messages to their followers (Kim & Kim, 2021). The marketing value of influencers is recognized through this phenomenon. The process of discovering, investigating, interacting with, and endorsing individuals engaging in influential conversations with consumers about a company, product, or service is known as influencer marketing (Moustakas et al., 2020). Social media influencers have become highly effective advertising tools as their endorsements are increasingly accessible and appealing (Vrontis et al., 2021). Fifty percent of millennials trust product recommendations from social media influencers, and spending on influencer marketing reached 4.14 billion dollars in 2022, marking a significant advancement for the sector (Belle Wong, 2023).

Influencers with an elevated level of skill, popularity, and/or reputation are considered more trustworthy than typical advertisers. This increases the likelihood that customers will buy the products they endorse (Ye et al., 2021). The content these influencers share is perceived as a non-commercial dialogue that is immune to corporate manipulation (Zhang & Wei, 2021).

However, the synonym "influencer" was exclusively associated with humans until 2016. Avatars and characters, displaying lifelike forms and behaviors known as "virtual YouTubers" or "Vtubers," emerged in live streams and YouTube videos in 2016 (Jhawar et al., 2023). Through their posts and interactions with fans, they exhibit human traits. Alongside VIs that simulate real people, there are also influencers created as cartoons or avatars, representing a product that has emerged to compete for the market share of HIs (Liu & Lee, 2022).

VI is like HI in meeting users' entertainment, engagement, and information needs, developing contexts and stories, intimate communication, and brand collaboration. However, VIs have distinct differences and advantages: controlled behavior, authenticity in promotion, continuous two-way communication with followers, and the ability for followers to immerse themselves in virtual worlds and independently create advertisements for brand content (Jhawar et al., 2023).

Although VIs have a higher degree of control from the firm's perspective, according to (Li et al., 2023), they are not as effective as HIs in influencing brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This is attributed to VIs having a low level of perceived ability and credibility among consumers. Additionally, VIs may evoke consumer anxiety or contribute to increased social immorality due to their flawless skin, slim bodies, articulated glamorous lives, and sometimes unethical behavior (Mouritzen et al., 2023). Therefore, HIs and VIs each have their strengths when it comes to brand selection.

Meanwhile, in marketing, the consumer on the other end of a vital relationship is crucial. In computer-mediated environments, consumers express their opinions about products and services, influencing the decision-making process of the public. Consumers play a dual role,

both consuming and contributing to the brand (Vrontis et al., 2021). Consumer-to-consumer interactions and consumer-to-brand interactions can deliver value to companies (Cheung et al., 2021). The success of innovative techniques in sectors like food is significantly influenced by consumer feedback (Guin'e et al., 2020).

The role of influencers as a bridge between brands and consumers is widely acknowledged, but the foundational support that makes their strategies and influence effective originates from their followership. Followers play a pivotal role in propelling an influencer toward success. By offering their attention, engagement, advocacy, and support to influencers, followers amplify the reach and impact of the influencer's message and actively contribute to the evolution and validation of the influencer's online identity (Tafesse and Wood, 2021).

To effectively connect with consumers through influencer marketing and enhance the influencer's own impact, it is crucial to delve into the reasons why followers choose to follow. This exploration aims to understand the psychology and habits of consumers who engage with social media influencer content, allowing for the optimization of influencer marketing in a manner most favored by the audience. Kim (2020) underscores the significance of social media followers, especially in boosting brand sales, emphasizing that this impact is particularly potent for niche brands.

First, understanding why consumers follow a brand or company is crucial for business success. Insights into follower motivations help companies comprehend their position in the market, allowing optimization of brand strategies to better align with consumer needs. The presence of followers not only expands brand awareness but also contributes to building a robust brand image, enhancing market appeal. Followers play a pivotal role in social media and word-of-mouth marketing, further amplifying the brand's social influence. By comprehending fans' needs and expectations, companies can target and enhance their products or services, increasing market adaptability. This profound understanding fosters stronger brand loyalty, cultivating followers as steadfast long-term supporters. Understanding why followers follow is a vital step in crafting effective marketing strategies, elevating brand competitiveness, and maintaining a positive brand image. As the brand and company develop, they are better equipped to meet consumer needs and provide improved services.

Secondly, examining consumers' following behavior offers an empirical foundation for both social influence theory and social identity theory. This exploration delves into how followers are influenced by the behaviors and opinions of others, how they construct an identity within a specific social group through social media, and how this identity influences their behaviors and decisions. The findings contribute to the enhancement and extension of both social influence theory and social identity theory, offering a better understanding of individuals' behavior in social environments.

Rationale

One of the goals of a literature review, according to Torraco (2016), is to utilize the review to address specific research questions related to a topic. A literature review employing this strategy will focus on resolving the concerns raised in the review's research questions. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of followership motivation and to cover a broader range of research areas, it is necessary to develop an overarching conceptual framework of followership through a literature review. This study aims to explore the factors influencing

followers' decisions to follow influencers. The study employs an integrative literature review, a research approach that yields fresh insights by comprehensively reviewing, critiquing, and synthesizing representative literature on a given topic, leading to the development of innovative frameworks and perspectives (Torraco, 2016). The stages of this integrated literature review will be conducted following Lubbe et al (2020) and will include the following five steps: 1) Formulating a review question; then, steps two through five involve 2a) searching, 2b) screening, and 2c) selection; 3) critical appraisal of the gathered material; 4a) data extraction; 4b) data synthesis and theme analysis; and 5) data presentation.

Review Question

PICOTS guides the formulation of focused review questions (Lubbe et al., 2020). This paper develops research questions within this framework as follows: Population of interest (P): Followers Intervention (I): Following social media influencers Comparison (C): N/A Outcome (O): Understanding what motivates followers to follow helps marketers or influencers to understand the characteristics of being followed from the consumer's point of view, thus broadening the path of influencer marketing. Time (T): Searches all literature since the creation of the term follower or influencer, therefore there is no time limit.

Then the review question is - What motivates social media users to become followers of influencers and what are the components and elements?

Methods

Searching

Firstly, to define the scope of the literature search, this paper selects Scopus and the Chinese academic website CNKI as the search databases. CNKI is a Chinese database encompassing academic publications, conference proceedings, newspapers, references, and patent filings. The objective of incorporating this database is to encompass empirical research from a broader range of countries, providing the final findings with a more diverse context and addressing fundamental motivations for following. The selection of keywords is based on PICOT, as shown below: "social media followers", "social media influencer", "influencer-follower", "customer", "influence", "effect", "affect", "motivation", "impact", "drive", "purchase", "behavior", "value", "culture", "influencer marketing".

Drawing on Lubbe et al (2020) for literature inclusion and exclusion criteria, the following criteria were set for this literature review: All literature that defines any/all components of following influencers' motivation; Literature that can define the components of following influencers' motivation; Literature abstract language in English or Chinese included in this study; Time was not used as a limitation; Literature that can define the reasons for following; Published literature, excluding reports, books, prefaces, afterwords, letters to the editor, editorials, and duplicate studies in languages other than English or Chinese as well as completed master's or doctoral dissertations; Excluding documents where the research question does not match the topic of this paper.

Use the PRISMA flowchart as a guide throughout the search and selection process. The PRISMA flowchart makes the search and selection process transparent and repeatable, which guarantees sufficient reporting (Lubbe et al., 2020).

Screening

A total of 2726 documents were searched, consisting of 2708 from Scopus and eighteen from CNKI, following the designated search strategy. Due to the difference in how China categorizes social media influencers compared to other countries Hu & Wakabayashi (2022), only works that precisely match the English term “influencer” in the English literature—meaning works that explicitly use the term “influencer” in the Chinese title—are included in the search of the Chinese literature for this article. An initial review of the literature resulted in the removal of 1153 duplicate files, leaving 1560 Scopus articles and 13 CNKI articles.

Selection

The titles of the remaining documents underwent meticulous review, resulting in the identification of 1,166 irrelevant articles. Subsequently, 407 documents were retained for further analysis. In the subsequent phase, the abstracts of these retained documents underwent scrutiny, leading to the exclusion of 318 irrelevant articles from Scopus and one from CNKI. After this two-step refinement process, only 88 Scopus documents remained. To ensure the utmost relevance to the current review, a comprehensive reading of the full text was conducted. During this phase, sixty-nine documents were excluded as their research questions did not align with the focus of the review. Finally, a total of nineteen documents were deemed suitable for critical appraisal. To expand the scope and depth of the literature review, an extensive exploration of the citations within the nineteen selected articles was undertaken. This additional step revealed two pertinent documents, bringing the final number of articles subjected to critical appraisal to twenty-one. The selection process is shown in Figure 1.

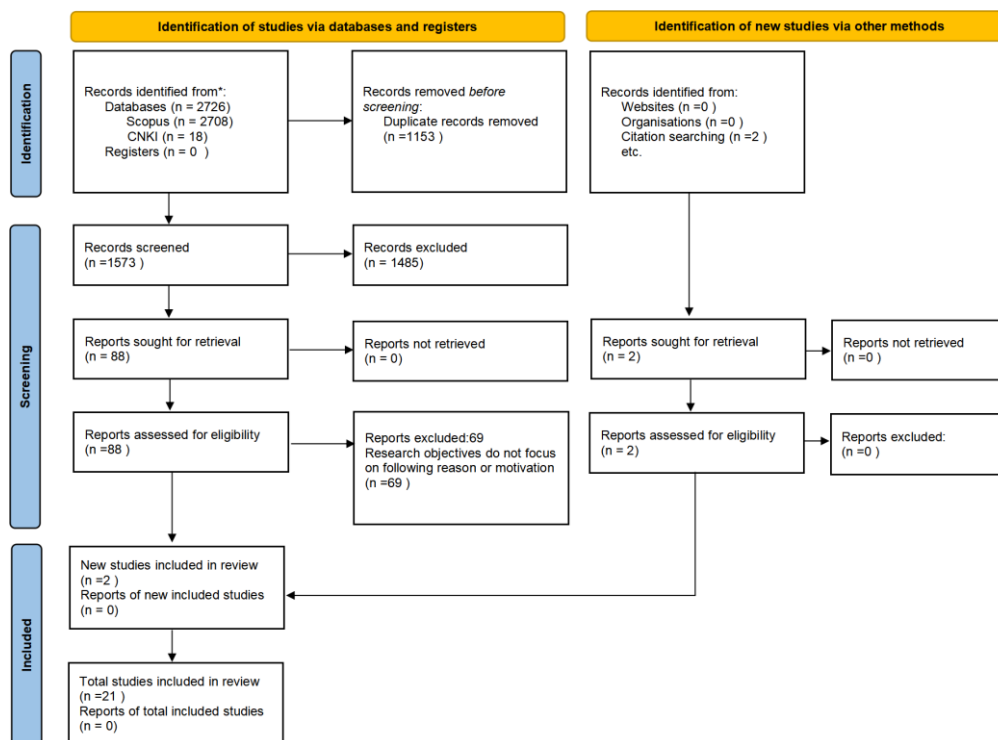


Figure 1: Modified PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews

Critical Appraisal

The chosen sample requires a critical assessment before data extraction. At this stage, the study utilized the Mixed Methods Assessment Tool (MMAT), developed by (Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT serves as a critical appraisal instrument specifically designed for systematic mixed studies reviews, covering quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research (Hong et al., 2018). It is well-suited for evaluating studies utilizing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (Chee et al., 2023). The assessment of each paper was conducted by the first author. According to Hong et al (2018), the exclusion of studies with poor methodological quality is discouraged. Therefore, subsequent analyses in this study will encompass all selected samples.

Data Extraction

Sample content was then extracted, including authors and regions, research objectives or questions, research methods, and results. Finally, followers’ motivations for following were extracted based on the results of each article.

Data Synthesizing and Theme Analysis

While analyzing the themes, many similar features were identified and could be integrated. Initially, all the factors extracted from the study were coded, and then some of these similar factors were amalgamated to form a larger group of concepts based on the meaning of the codes. Finally, conceptual combinations that were similar or shared the same attributes were extracted to create the final category.

A review of the literature reveals that current research on influencers is typically categorized into HIs and VIs based on whether they are real or not. Through the theme extraction process described above, a total of seventy-six identified themes, twenty-four concepts, and seven new categories were extracted for the motives of HIs. For VIs, there are twenty-four identified themes, thirteen concepts, and seven new categories.

Table 1
New categories for following HIs

New categories	Concepts	Identified themes	Supporting references	
Seeking information, following fashion trends, getting to know products and brands, and being inspired and motivated	Seeking information and opinions	Information seeking	Tan (2021)	
		News: day-to-day activities, lifestyles, content	Shoenberger and Kim (2023)	
		Sharing a reality	Morton (2020)	
		Opinions on topic	Ki et al. (2020)	
		Know different perspectives	Dekoninck et al. (2023)	
		Political opinion	Alves De Castro (2023)	
	Following fashion trends and getting information and	Following fashion trends and getting information and	Trendy following	Taillon et al. (2020)
			New fashion trends	Lee et al. (2022)
			Trends	
			The cool and new trend	

Table 1

New categories for following HIs

New categories	Concepts	Identified themes	Supporting references
	reviews on products and brands.	Latest ideas or suggestions for products or styles	Alhothali and Aljefree (2023) Croes and Bartels (2021) Barbe et al. (2020)
		Product/brand recommendations	
		New products in the marketplace	
		Recommendations of products and places	
		Reviews on products	
		Consumerism	
		Incentive seeking	
	Gaining inspiration, motivation and boosting positivity	Inspiration	
		Inspiration for success	
		Creative inspiration	
		Reinforcing inspiration	
		Motivation	
		Boosting positivity	
	Getting useful ideas, broadening knowledge, and realizing self-improvement	Fostering morale	
		Learn from them	
		Useful ideas	
		Searching for advice, tips, and learning	
		Broadening knowledge	
		Self-improvement	
Relaxation, entertainment, and passing time	Satisfying entertainment needs	Perceived usefulness	
		Interesting content	
		Enjoyability	
		Hedonic experience	
		Entertainment	
		Fun	
		Seeking for entertainment	
		Relaxing entertainment	
	Pass the time	Enjoyment	
		Perceived enjoyment	
		Passing time	
		Boredom/habitual pass time	
Social interaction needs and	Interaction, expression, and reciprocity	Information Sharing	Tan (2021)
		Communication (be part of the conversation with my friends)	Saldanha et al. (2023)

Table 1

New categories for following HIs

New categories	Concepts	Identified themes	Supporting references
psychological attachment		Expression motivation	Morton (2020)
		Interaction motivation	Dekoninck et al. (2023)
		Social Interaction	Heiss and Rudolph (2023)
		Potential for reciprocity	Zhang and Choi (2022)
	Companionship, belongingness, and attachment	Companionship	Croes and Bartels (2021)
		Belongingness	Barbe et al. (2020)
		Attachment	
		Emotional attachment	
Attracted to the personal characteristics of influencers	Perceived authenticity	Perceived authenticity	Tan (2021)
		Authenticity	Coelhoso et al. (2022)
	Expertise		Saldanha et al. (2023)
	Trust in influencers	Entrust	Ki et al. (2020)
		Credibility	Malik et al. (2023)
		Trust	Balaban et al. (2020)
		Trustworthiness	Lee et al. (2022)
	Attractiveness	Attractiveness (physical and non-physical aspects)	
		Visual aesthetics	
		Glamorous	
Searching for resonance	Finding Similar Selves	Similarity	Coelhoso et al. (2022)
		Connectivity (associated words included similar, speak out for me, sharing, interactive, same as me, etc.	Saldanha et al. (2023)
		Empathy	Ki et al. (2020)
		Perceived similarity	Dekoninck et al. (2023)
		Unique following	Malik et al. (2023)
	Relatedness	Balaban et al. (2020)	
	Super peer role		
Curiosity and envy about influencers and their lives	Curiosity about influencers	Interesting to see what they do	Tan (2021),
		Surveillance	Coelhoso et al. (2022)
		Interested in their lifestyle and/or demonstrating interest in mental health, motivation, healthy lifestyle, well-being, and positive thoughts	Morton (2020)
	Envy of the lives of influencers	Alves De Castro (2023)	
		Information quality	Lee et al. (2022)

Table 1

New categories for following HIs

New categories	Concepts	Identified themes	Supporting references
Attracted by the information characteristics of the influencers	Quality of information	Perceived quality of information: relevance, reliability, and enjoyability	Barta et al. (2023) Ki et al. (2020) Zhang and Choi (2022)
	Informativeness		
	Originality	Balaban et al. (2020)	

Table 2

New categories for following VIs

New categories	Concepts	Identified themes	Supporting references
Attracted to the personal characteristics of influencers	Business traits	Product-endorse fit	Lou et al. (2023) Xie-Carson et al. (2023)
	Personality trait	Perceived expertise	
		Trustworthiness (realness, functionality, and reputation)	
		Humor	
Aesthetic enjoyment	Esthetics Visual enjoyment		
Attracted by the information characteristics of the influencers	Emotional infusion	Post sentiment	Xie-Carson et al. (2023)
	Post dimension	Image-related: other entity; object; activity; background	
		Caption-related: narrative; hashtag; relatable content	
		Comment-related: influencer's reply; other users' comments Perceived authenticity of the post*	
Entertainment and enjoyment of surprising and interesting content	Entertainment	Self-indulgence Have fun with the phenomenon of having fans	Lou et al. (2023)
		Enjoy surprising and interesting content	
	Curiosity about VIs and their identities		
Curious about the identity			
Integration and social interaction and	Integration and social interaction	Integration and social interaction Interaction	Lou et al. (2023)

Table 2

New categories for following VIs

New categories	Concepts	Identified themes	Supporting references
recognition of social identity	Social identity	The ideas presented or advice advocated are consistent with the philosophy of the follower.	Xie-Carson et al. (2023)
Seeking information about technical topics or marketing strategies	Technical topics or marketing strategies	Understanding of relevant technical topics or marketing strategies Novelty	Lou et al. (2023)
Emotional escape from daily life	Emotional escape from daily life	Seeking escape from everyday problems and experiences, especially for people who are high on emotional contagion, high on cognitive empathy, and low on emotional disassociation	Mirowska and Arsenyam (2023)

Findings

The final sample size for this review was twenty-one, comprising eight studies from the United States (Barbe et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2023; Shoenberger & Kim, 2023; Mirowska & Arsenyan, 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023). Two of these are from the Netherlands, one focused on Dutch individuals only Croes & Bartels (2021) and one based on sample data from Belgium and the Netherlands (Dekoninck et al., 2023). The other 10 studies are from Singapore Lou et al (2023); Japan Tan et al (2021), the United Arab Emirates Coelho et al (2022), Spain (Barta et al., 2023), Mexico (Morton, 2020), Germany Heiss & Rudolph (2023), Korea Zhang & Choi (2022), Ireland Alves De Castro (2023), Romania Balaban et al (2020), and Saudi Arabia (Alhothali & Aljefree, 2023). Additionally, there is a study sample from Australia Xie-Carson et al (2023) based on 1,112 user comments on 52 Instagram posts from six VIs, thus defined as borderless.

Motivations for following HIs fall into seven categories, including seeking information, following fashion trends, getting to know products and brands, and being inspired and motivated; relaxation, entertainment, and passing time; social interaction needs and psychological attachment; attracted to the personal characteristics of influencers; searching for resonance; curiosity and envy about influencers and their lives, and attracted by the information characteristics of the influencers. Similarly, for VIs, the motivation to follow is divided into 7 categories (attracted to the personal characteristics of influencers; attracted by the information characteristics of the influencers; entertainment and enjoyment of surprising and interesting content; curiosity about VIs and their identities; integration and social interaction and recognition of social identity; seeking information about technical topics or marketing strategies and emotional escape from daily life), but there are some unique factors compared to humans.

Themes on HIs

Theme 1: Seeking Information, Following Fashion Trends, Getting to Know Products and Brands, and Being Inspired and Motivated

This theme represents the most prevalent motivation in the literature sample of this study. Followers, driven by self-satisfaction, seek to stay well-informed and receive advice on daily events, news, commentary, and various perspectives on events or politics. Individuals with this purpose rely on influencers' content on social media to be real-time, and current, and to interpret and evaluate events. For many young people, particularly those with higher education, the search for information ranks as the most significant motivation after entertainment and passing time (Croes & Bartels, 2021). Influencers followed for this purpose do not necessarily need to align with their followers in terms of personal characteristics, as the focus is primarily on information acquisition (Tan et al., 2021). Simultaneously, influencers must consider the relevance of the content they share. Content focused on a specific domain is more likely to attract followers dedicated to that domain (Taillon et al., 2020). However, influencers are advised to verify the accuracy of information before expressing attitudes and opinions to prevent potential misinformation among followers (De Castro, 2023).

Second, followers want to get the latest trend advice, product and brand recommendations, lifestyle advice, and product reviews from influencers. For this purpose, influencers need to focus on the novelty of the content they provide, providing followers with the latest trends, brand information, and location recommendations (e.g., food and clothing) Morton (2020); Tan et al (2021), and followers judge influencers' hipness based on similarities to themselves (Shoenberger & Kim, 2023). However, not all followers blindly choose to buy products promoted by influencers; sensible followers will check reviews on other websites after receiving advice Tan et al (2021), while irrational followers will increase the frequency of purchases due to jealousy and consumerism (Lee et al., 2022).

The third aspect is that the followers want to be inspired and motivated by the content, and the followers can get spiritual pleasure and inspiration for their future lives, constantly feel motivated to do anything, learn from the failures of others, face failures and grow from failures, and become a better version of themselves, so that they can realize their ideal selves and have an ideal life (Morton, 2020; Ki et al., 2020; Alhothali & Aljefree, 2023). With this motivation, the influencer is seen as a role model and the output in ethics and values enhances the influencer's literacy (Alhothali & Aljefree, 2023).

The last point is that followers want to see useful knowledge and skills in influencers' videos, including life tips, work-related skills, and even beliefs and attitudes, with the goal that they can broaden the boundaries of their knowledge and improve themselves (Tan et al., 2021; Morton, 2020; Alves De Castro, 2023; Alhothali & Aljefree, 2023; Barbe et al., 2020). With this goal followers are more utilitarian, focusing on the breadth and depth of the content and its utility, and do not accept or reject the content based on influencer characteristics (Tan et al. 2021; Barbe et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Relaxation, Entertainment, and Passing Time

Many studies have identified the motivation for relaxation, entertainment, and passing time. Studies have indicated that most respondents are motivated to follow for entertainment and to pass the time (Alhothali & Aljefree, 2023; Croes & Bartels, 2021). This phenomenon is even more pronounced in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, where people are increasingly

turning to social media for entertaining experiences, and the intake of interesting content depends on individual interests and needs (Alves De Castro, 2023). Humorous influencer personalities or content can promote hedonic experiences (Barta et al., 2023; Morton, 2020; Malik et al., 2023), however not more content and more frequent content is better, and many posts can reduce hedonic experiences (Barta et al., 2023). This motivation could also mean that followers want to escape reality by accessing the online world (Croes & Bartels, 2021).

Theme 3: Social Interaction Needs and Psychological Attachment

Following an influencer not only allows for inward input to satisfy the needs of the self but also allows for outward exploration to satisfy the need to socialize. Some followers, to gain satisfaction, take in the latest information by following influencers and then export it to their peers so that they can show off their own identity (Tan et al., 2021). However, some followers are pressured to follow influencers passively due to social pressures, as evidenced by not being able to fit into peer conversations Morton (2020) or managing to fit into an influencer's social group (Croes & Bartels, 2021).

Influencers can also function as social objects to compensate for loneliness as well as to obtain companionship. In addition to socialization and companionship, followers gain a sense of belonging and attachment by paying attention to their followers. This is particularly evident during special times (Saldanha et al., 2023). This desire is advantageous for influencers; users' emotional connection to influencers can enhance their inclination to follow or endorse influencers to others, thereby amplifying influencers' visibility and follower count (Zhang & Choi, 2022).

Theme 4: Attracted To the Personal Characteristics of Influencers

Followers' motivation to follow can also be influenced by the influencer's traits such as authenticity, expertise, credibility, and attractiveness. Authenticity can influence as well as attract followers (Balaban et al., 2020). Influencers are particularly attractive to followers because of their expertise in a particular area, such as makeup techniques, video editing, songwriting, etc. (Ki et al., 2020). For some followers, content generated to sell a product can be a significant detriment to trust (Tan et al., 2021). While trust is less important for some content influencers who primarily push content to provide information, trust affects the following relationship and an elevated level of trust prolongs the following relationship (Balaban et al., 2020). Attractiveness is reflected in content attraction and personal attraction, picture style, design style, and the influencer's healthy body shape, as well as beautiful appearance, will attract followers to follow (Ki et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2023).

Theme 5: Searching for Resonance

Feeling like self, relatedness, and finding super peer roles is the fifth motivation for following. The similarity in background culture, values, beliefs, perspectives, and age can attract followers by giving them the idea that the influencer is like me (Shoenberger & Kim, 2023; Coelho et al., 2022). Relatedness and similarity are important motivations for following and are not disturbed by unexpected social situations (Saldanha et al., 2023). Super peers are not

only like the follower in their pursuits but also inspire the follower to act and generate motivation to persist (Dekoninck et al., 2023).

Theme 6: Curiosity and Envy About Influencers and Their Lives

Curiosity about the influencers and their lives can motivate some followers to pay attention. This motivation stems from curiosity about someone who has different values or a different lifestyle than one's own and is not about imitation or voyeurism (Tan et al., 2021; Barta et al., 2023; De Castro, 2023). Some followers envy or are jealous of the influencer's life because they have many things they do not have, but this is not a bad thing for the influencer who is marketing, and to compensate for this mentality this motivation stimulates the follower to buy the product they recommend or the product they have Coelho et al (2022), followers do not know much about the product or the brand but only wants to distance themselves from the influencer by making a purchase (Lee et al., 2022), thus realizing their fantasies in reality.

Theme 7: Attracted By the Information Characteristics of The Influencers

Content is an important means for influencers to reach users and affects their popularity, while message quality stimulates or guides users to become followers, so followers prefer to see excellent quality content, and good message quality helps build trust (Zhang & Choi, 2022; Balaban et al., 2020). Comprehensibility of the message has the greatest impact on message quality, followed by detail, conciseness, usefulness, and insightfulness of the content affecting the follower relationship (Zhang & Choi, 2022; Ki et al., 2020). In addition, the originality of the content is an important driver of user following (Barta et al., 2023).

Themes on VIs

Theme 1: Attracted To the Personal Characteristics of Influencers

More followers are interested in the VI's traits, including personality traits, aesthetics, and fit with the products. In terms of personality traits, expertise, and humor are easily achieved through the manipulation of the controller behind the scenes to achieve the desired effect, arousing users' interest and following, such as Barbie's fashionable ensembles and the sense of humor in Sofia's tweets (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). However, trust has not always been successful in engaging followers compared to HIs, with some anthropomorphic comments receiving some positive feedback along with skepticism, with users sensing that it is merely for attention or a game to deceive the public and not immediately empathizing (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). However, with non-humanoid influencers, such as cartoon images, followers are more likely to be less psychologically defensive and prone to engage in their interactions to express recognition of their professionalism and appeal (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Yet some followers are attracted to this interesting phenomenon and follow VIs to find out more. Human-like VIs make it easier to build a perfect profile because they are created, and the aesthetics, style, and overall presentation of the posts attract followers (Lou et al., 2023; Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Whereas VIs themselves portray an image that attracts opposition if it does not match the product being promoted (Xie-Carson et al., 2023), so brand influencer consistency does not only apply to HIs, and virtual images are not a panacea.

Theme 2: Attracted By the Information Characteristics of The Influencers

Posts by VIs and emotional indoctrination will attract users. The information conveyed in the post, including the background of the image, the content, and the comments, encourages

active user participation, especially when the VI is portrayed in a human-like setting, engages in human activities, wears human clothing, and conveys a sense of fashion, making it more appealing (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). At the same time, some strategies applicable to HIs, such as soliciting questions, remain relevant between VIs and followers (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Comments from VIs may increase the distance from followers, yet they also prompt questions about authenticity, fostering the belief that everything the VI communicates is fake, and generating the perception that such behavior is excessive, and the human image is a deception to the user, among other concerns (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Therefore, in the marketing of VIs, the challenge lies in attracting followers and avoiding causing discomfort to users in the future of humanoid VIs.

Theme 3: Entertainment and Enjoyment of Surprising and Interesting Content

Consistent with the hedonistic motivation of following HIs, users also follow VIs for self-entertainment or to pass the time and enjoy messages from non-VIs because of the surprise plot and elements (Lou et al., 2023). However, in addition to the entertaining nature of VIs' posts, followers are amused by the fact that bots can attract human followers or even become more popular than HIs and want to continue to observe this phenomenon (Lou et al., 2023).

Theme 4: Curiosity About VIs and Their Identities

Given the rise of this emerging technology, it has attracted many followers who are curious about VIs and their identities. By tracking follower posts and preferences, one can gain an insider's perspective and an inquisitive glimpse into the VI's preferences and how followers blur the lines through their posts (Lou et al., 2023). Additionally, the curiosity surrounding the genuine identities of content creators and VIs is a distinct motivation for following, setting it apart from motivations for following HIs (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Through following, followers aim to unravel the operator behind the scenes, discern who is engaging with comments, determine whether the influencer is virtual or a bot, and explore other intriguing aspects (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Followers are keen on understanding the workings of this phenomenon.

Theme 5: Integration and Social Interaction and Recognition of Social Identity

There are no inhuman boundaries to followers' motivations for interaction. For VIs, if the values they convey are consistent with those of HIs and make users feel that they are like-minded and can resonate, they will also attract followers (Lou et al., 2023). The interactive atmosphere created by a VI's unsolicited reply not only creates a connection with the person being replied to, but other users who see the comment are also infected by its interactivity, which is conducive to relationship building (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). At the same time, the social attitudes conveyed by VIs can be freer and are not constrained by identity as HIs are. However, the regulation of their statements requires further consideration.

Theme 6: Seeking Information About Technical Topics or Marketing Strategies

Searching for information is also one of the motivations of followers, but unlike following HIs, followers do not search for information in the hope of learning about news, trends, or products, but rather they want to learn about the technology behind VIs, how it is used in marketing, and how it works (Lou et al., 2023). It is not so much about how new or appealing the VI is, but the technology and mechanism behind it.

Theme 7: Emotional Escape from Daily Life

Emotional escapism is also a motivation for following HIs; however, the distinction lies in the fact that following VIs can serve as an escape from human influence. This is particularly true for users who seek emotional relief and perceive VIs as more relaxed, capable of entering predefined scenarios and providing an escape from the complexities of human existence (Mirowska & Arsenyan, 2023). Therefore, VIs that exhibit less human-like characteristics have the advantage of resonating with users seeking strong emotional experiences. While highly realistic VIs may blur the boundaries with humans, appearing more authentic, they may also hinder followers' ability to make judgments, prompting them to seek an escape.

Discussion and Implication

Motivations For Following HIs

Seeking information, expanding knowledge, seeking inspiration, and motivating oneself are the most common motivational themes, and combining these aspects reflects the fact that individuals are primarily driven by self-needs in their subsequent behaviors, rather than merely being passively influenced by influencers. Individuals' appeals for information and knowledge, inspiration, and motivation are all aimed at improving themselves. The overriding motivation is relaxation, recreation, and passing time, which may allow the follower to find a moment of peace and pleasure in their busy lives. In addition to information and hedonism, social needs are also one of the motivations for actively seeking out Netflix, whether it is to satisfy the satisfaction of Netflix communication or to satisfy social needs by interacting with Netflix and thus joining the community. In addition, followers are more inclined to follow influencers who resonate with them and seek out people who are like them and perceived similarity helps build relationships between followers and influencers. However, excessive similarity can also lack novelty and lead to alienation (Tan et al., 2021). In addition to the motivation of the followers themselves, users choose whether to follow an influencer based on the personal qualities of the influencer and the quality of the message as they receive the content. Authenticity, professionalism, credibility, attractiveness, and aesthetics all influence followers' judgment of influencers. Finally, during content presentation, Netflix invariably inspires curiosity and jealousy about the scenario or product, stimulating users to peek into Netflix's life by following or even purchasing the same product as Netflix or others. The results of this study have important implications for understanding what individuals want from social media. Social media companies can improve their algorithms and interface design to better serve people seeking different following purposes. Creators should take responsibility for communicating good messages and designing content that better matches the social needs of their followers and looks for parallels. Social media platforms could consider optimizing social interaction features to provide followers with more opportunities to interact with the community and promote a more meaningful social experience. This can help to increase the social value of the platform and user satisfaction.

Motivations For Following Vis

The results of this study suggest that the incentives to focus on VIs are different from the incentives to focus on HIs. Many people are fascinated by the qualities and characteristics of VIs, their controllers, usage patterns, and strategies. The main reason for this may be that the number of VIs is limited, and they are still in the initial stages of development. Secondly, followers demand VI attributes like HI characteristics such as professionalism, credibility, humor, and artistic sensitivity. However, VIs have a lower level of authenticity than HIs and

are not trusted when recommending products (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). VI images are not suitable for all brands. Third, followers prefer behaviors and statements that are consistent with those of humans; however, whether this is since followers are satisfied with similarity requires further investigation. Fourth, like HI, followers follow VI to enjoy life or pass the time. its content may be fresh and interesting. The difference is that in addition to enjoying material things, people are attracted to and like the visual forms provided by VI. Finally, some VI followers are not interested in the VI itself, but rather in the phenomenon of VI attracting and sustaining human attention or in the identity of the organizers behind it, the organization's goals, and the influencers. Understanding what motivates followers can help companies and VIs develop more appropriate social media strategies. Content that emphasizes the uniqueness, creativity, and experimentation of VI may be more appealing. Companies using VI to promote their business must examine the consistency of their brand image. VIs can inspire followers by showcasing the operations team and the stories behind them. At the same time, VI can emphasize followers' recognition of their social identity and strengthen connections by showcasing unique social images. This may include things like unique image features that shape the VI. Finally, VIs can increase followers' trust and interest in them by publishing knowledge about technology, mechanisms, and future strategies.

Limitations

The identification of the following motives during literature data collecting was quite simple, and while it summarized the reasons presented in the literature, it did not explain the antecedents and consequences between them, which would need to be refined in future searches. Second, because the field of VI is still in its initial stages, just three documents are accessible as samples for this study, making it impossible to reach more definitive findings. The third point is that VI has not yet been adopted universally. Currently, the majority of the more popular VI colors are concentrated in the United States, and the qualitative VI research samples obtained in the study were from Singapore, so there is a lack of broader demographic data to corroborate this claim.

Conclusion

This study investigates the motivations of social media followers, categorizing them into two dimensions based on influencer characteristics: VI and HI. This study uses an Integrative literature review and research analysis to determine the features and motivations of these two types of influencers. Findings reveal that followers of HIs are primarily motivated by seeking information, following fashion trends, getting to know products and brands, and being inspired and motivated; relaxation, entertainment, and passing time; social interaction needs and psychological attachment; attracted to the personal characteristics of influencers; searching for resonance; curiosity and envy about influencers and their lives, and attracted by the information characteristics of the influencers. Conversely, followers of VIs are motivated by their personal and information characteristics, the enjoyment of surprising and interesting content, curiosity about VIs and their identities, integration and social interaction and recognition of social identity, seeking information on technical topics or marketing strategies, and emotional escape from daily life. The significance of this study is to get insight into the effects of VI and HI on followers. This implies that technology should be customized for certain influencer types in both study and practice. To fulfill the interests of VI followers, focus on information about technology developments, new techniques, and future-proof tactics. To effectively engage HI followers, provide material that encourages self-

improvement, enjoyment, and social fulfillment. As a result, distinct marketing techniques should be created for each kind of influencer. Emphasize future trends and product features for VI. Stress social ties and personal interests for HI. Additionally, practitioners must adapt their involvement techniques to the psychological responses of their followers. Make advantage of technology-driven and forward-thinking strategies for VI. Adopt community building and personal development initiatives for HI. Through in-depth research on VI and HI, this study more completely highlights the following causes for social media followers, serving as a valuable reference for future research and practice.

Recommendations for Future Research

These findings provide an opportunity to delve deeper into individuals' motivations for following HI on social media. Future research could explore more about the specific mechanisms behind individual motivations; the role of influencers, the attributes of message content, and the level of engagement of followers; delve deeper into the types of different social needs, the impact of social interactions, and the possible negative effects of excessive similarity; how users compensate for psychological imbalances by purchasing similar products, and the impact of this behavior on individual mental health. As the field of VIs is still relatively under-researched, future research could further expand the exploration of the impact of VIs and their relationship with followers. For example, exploring how VIs can create a stronger connection with followers in terms of demonstrating authenticity; the curiosity of followers about the teams and identities that run VIs; the need for followers to demand information about VIs and the impact of the VI look and feel on follower motivation.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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