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# The Resourcefulness of Sponsored Contents on Social Media -A Netnographic Approach to Customer Inspiration Cues-

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## Abstract

Fashion marketing activity performed by social media influencers (SMIs) has grown exponentially in the past years. Research regarding their marketing power is often discussed in the context of sponsorship disclosure, in order to overcome obstacles of impending regulations that may endanger the authenticity SMIs are perceived to have compared to traditional marketing agents. Upon recent heterogeneous findings, a netnographic approach was taken to examine the actual sponsored posts of SMIs on Instagram. Based on two representative cases that received media coverage, a qualitative analysis of 1,058 comments on Instagram showed customer inspiration and informational social influence regardless of sponsorship disclosures present. Regarding customer inspiration, high frequency of comments including choice imitation intentions was observed. Under certain conditions, customer responses were focused on the SMI's expertise irrespective from the brand being endorsed. Findings show future implications from both an academic and industry-focused perspective for future potential of SMIs in fashion marketing.

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## I. Introduction

Social media has brought unprecedented change to the marketing landscape, and customers and brands have continuously evolved to cope with the fast-paced changes. Traditional marketing activities have been re-established, and signals on social media from influencers (SMI) of varying conditions have received immense attention from researchers. Previous literature has shown heterogeneous results regarding the marketing effects of influencer endorsement, with variables such as follower count, perceived authenticity, and credibility as variables that challenge message effectiveness and thus influence purchase behavior. However, these studies show different results depending on numerous conditions, such as product type, endorser type or brand awareness.

The fashion sector requires a differentiated approach due to the nature of fashion itself being conspicuous. Everything an influencer posts, whether it be a stated product purchase, or a simple self-disclosure of personal lifestyle, can be a form of purchase signals being sent, as the audience is likely to infer that products worn have either been bought by the SMI in person or have been sponsored by a brand, for the item to be in the SMI's possession. As the act of sharing on social media itself is an intentional elaboration on one's lifestyle (Valsesia & Diehl, 2021), it would also be intentional for a SMI whose expertise is fashion to post their outfit or purchases, even in the most casual of posts. A glimpse of a sleeve could have a follower asking the SMI for elaboration on where he or she purchased the product. Though conspicuous consumption is often discussed to give negative impressions to audience members, influencers have gained their popularity by exactly doing so—posting content and reaching an audience that proactively chose to “follow” their account to keep up with their lifestyle disclosure.

Extensive research has been formed regarding the cognitive process behind public figures and their followers, and compared to celebrity figures, influencers are often discussed as more persuasive as followers tend to perceive them as a role model but also a fellow

consumer (Croes & Bartels, 2021) with genuine, well-meant recommendations being provided. However, sponsorship disclosure is growingly becoming a threat to influencers' advantageous position as an authentic figure. Whether sponsorship disclosure will undermine the competitiveness of SMI has also been discussed, but results vary depending on factors such as demographics of followers to variables regarding influencer attributes. Though previous research has experimented the conditions in which followers feel aversion or inclination toward sponsored posts, the results vary amongst product categories and platforms as well. Recent research has shown that sponsored content can indeed maintain its competitiveness as a marketing method, based on SMIs roles as content creators (Ki et al., 2022).

In order to address the actual communication happening under sponsorship disclosure conditions, this research used a netnographic approach to analyze whether explicitly advertising contents posted by SMIs on social media can maintain their advantageous point regardless of their obvious advertising intentions based on *customer inspiration* and *informational social influence*. Though there is a preexisting body of research regarding this topic, the majority focuses on experimental methods that are further discussed in the literature review of influencer marketing. To explore the real-life interactions between users, a netnographic approach to comments posted on sponsored content from Instagram was analyzed to determine the presence of *customer inspiration* and *informational social influence* in interactions with SMIs.

## II. Theoretical Background

### 1. Influencer Marketing and Sponsorship Disclosure

Influencer marketing has received extensive attention in both research and practical marketing fields. Previous studies have compared marketing effectiveness regarding follower community scale by comparing celebrity endorsers (Schouten et al., 2020), perceived socio-economic status of the influencer (Shin & Lee,

2021), product characteristics, personal disclosure, and even sponsorship disclosure. As Ki et al. (2022) discussed, previous research focuses on the influencer as an advertising agent and have investigated whether sponsorship disclosure—the act of openly stating monetary gain in exchange for posted content—undermines the marketing efficacy of influencers, but lacks to address that social media influencers' popularity stems from their ability to "create content." Furthermore, a systematic review by Rundin & Colliander (2021) elaborated that influencers' roles can be expanded to a number of different titles depending on the level of creative power the SMI may possess. Among them is a "stylist", a proactive role compared to simply letting the brand rent space on their account for followers to be exposed to. This is further supported in research that showed that numerous attributes such as perceived authenticity and physical attractiveness can moderate the aversion that followers may feel toward sponsorship disclosure, as sponsorship disclosure was believed to have the hazard of followers questioning the intrinsic motivation of the influencers that were initially perceived to be authentic.

How consumers react to sponsorship disclosure in influencer posts has also been discussed in previous literature. In South Korea, the Fair Trade Commission (2020) revised regulations that made it law to state whether any form of compensation was provided for recommendation to online users (e.g., influencers) have in exchange for product recommendation. Previous contents posted by influencers were no exception, thus influencers had to add sponsorship disclosures to all posted content. Many celebrities and social media influencers received criticism and backlash due to this event, as they perceived it as a form of deception—as the recommendations were declared 'genuine' but were in fact contents created for monetary gain. Though regulations regarding social media posts vary across regions, the exponential growth of the influencer market size implies that regulations will continuously be revised to keep up with potential issues and will require attention from researchers as well (Campbell & Grimm,

2019).

Current research shows heterogeneous results regarding whether sponsorship disclosure hinders purchase intentions for SMI's followers. Often discussed as framework for advertising fields, the persuasion knowledge model (PKM) theorizes that when persuasion targets (e.g., consumers or followers) become aware of the persuasion agent (e.g., brands or others attempting to endorse products on behalf of the brand) attempting persuasion behavior, persuasion knowledge is activated (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Targets may doubt whether the SMIs are being honest and genuine in product evaluations. This may lead to re-evaluation of the product recommendation and even the SMI oneself, and thus adopt a skeptical, even negative attitude. In the case of sponsorship disclosure, persuasion attempts become noticeable as the intention to persuade the target to purchase an endorsed product is explicitly stated, for example through hashtags saying "#ad" or "#sponsored". However, previous research identified that factors such as interaction with followers which strengthens perceived authenticity (Lee & Johnson, 2021) can alleviate the hazards of losing authenticity through sponsorship disclosure. Ozuem et al. (2021) also showed that sponsorship disclosure can be a strategy of increasing authenticity and credibility, as the act of openly stating an extrinsic motivation of monetary gain can be interpreted as honest and thus positively affect customer perception. Thus, as extensive research conducted from an advertising perspective shows heterogeneous results in the case of social media influencers, the effect influencers have upon consumers may need an alternative approach. Research in sponsorship disclosure context has also been narrowed down to consideration of follower count. In this process, micro influencers have potential to create a counter-effect (Kay et al., 2019; Park et al., 2020) against explicit advertising motives. However, previous research as used experimental methods with non-existent SMI profiles as stimuli and have limitations in considering relationships of followers and SMIs.

Commenting on social media has been researched as well. The role of comments can be seen as twofold, the

comment poster can interact with the influencer, and other users on social media can observe these openly posted comments as well. In terms of interactivity, the interaction rate has often been used to research sponsored contents on social media. Wang et al. (2022) used comments as a means of measuring interaction rate, and as micro influencers have a smaller community of follower numbers, they often show high rates of interaction. Consumers can reach various social media through search of hashtags, search of users, or by recommendation through algorithms designed by social media platforms. This interactivity has been explored as a mediating factor on sponsored content as an antecedent of perceived authenticity (Park et al., 2020). The presence of others' comments in social media has been shown to influence others (Valesia & Diehl, 2022) as cues which customers gather information to construct their perception regarding SMI posted content or the SMI himself/herself.

As Valesia & Diehl (2022) built their research upon, social media itself has an ambiguous stance when it comes to signaling, as the images, text, and many other factors of the SMI's profile serve as cues from which customers infer how to process information. Their research showed that material purchase signals' tendency to be perceived as inauthentic can be lessened by experiential purchase signals rather than material purchase signals. However, this can be even more ambiguous to apply in fashion marketing, as clothing items that SMIs wear in their posts are the category of interest for both the influencers and their followers. Though material purchases do indeed have previous implications of conveying materialistic—thus not genuine—attributes, it is inevitable for SMIs who are considered experts in fashion to avoid material purchases, as their fashion taste is what the followers expect from them.

Based on this extensive body of literature, it can be theorized that addressing sponsorship disclosure is imperative in a fashion marketing context, which relies greatly on SMIs' visual endorsement of products.

## 2. Customer Inspiration Theory

Böttger et al. (2017) showed the implications of customer inspiration to be a motivation towards the state of being *inspired-by* to *inspired-to*, which means there is the stage of intentions being activated to actual purchase behavior. Authors pointed in limitations that preexisting scales held a “parsimonious” stance, while exploring categories ranging from utilitarian needs to hedonic purchases. Previous literature showed that influencers are largely persuasive in hedonic purchases compared to utilitarian purchases (Lin et al., 2018). Thus, it can be theorized that fashion consumption is affected by customer inspiration from marketing content.

Böttger et al. (2017) defined inspiration in consumer behavior as a state of intrinsic pursuit to open options. As pointed out in the research, the plethora of information—especially in the current abundance of marketing and inspiration sources via online shopping—has made understanding of the consumer inspiration process imperative. Ki et al. (2022) further supported this statement, naming the state of consumers moving on to the *inspired-to* state as “choice imitation”. Yet in the fashion marketing sector, there remains much research to be done from this point of view.

To measure inspiration cues in the communication of influencers, previous literature on consumer inspiration was examined. Though the “level” of how customer inspiration can be defined varies among different research, there were some common factors examined. The Self-Transcendent Emotion Dictionary (STED) categories proposed by Ji and Raney (2020) provided a list of words classified into six categories of “self-transcendent emotions”. Specific categories were “awe,” “admiration,” “elevation,” “gratitude,” “hope,” and “general/inspiration.” In the customer inspiration scale proposed by Böttger et al. (2017), transcendent emotions were an independent antecedent of customer inspiration. Indeed, Ki et al. (2022) showed similar scales in their questionnaire, with measuring whether the subject answered “want(ing) to be as stylish” or “want(ing) to have a lifestyle like” the influencer, which is in line with

the STED's category of 'admiration', or reported to find the content "attractive" and "visually appealing", which are also antecedents of the category 'awe'. Aljukhadar et al. (2020) discussed that this inspiration from visually stimulating platforms can serve as customer inspiration, but also that several social media users find image-based social media to be resourceful is an information source as well. The literature aforementioned had the common factor of inspiration leading the customer to form an idea "sparked" by information provided by others, and this led to behavioral outputs (e.g., purchase behavior). Likewise, this study focused on grouping comments that indicate "awe" and "admiration" and thus show that SMIs can provide customer inspiration, even in the presence of sponsorship disclosure that was traditionally believed to cause consumers to adopt a defensive attitude toward persuasion attempts.

### 3. Social Influence Theory

Theories of social influence (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975) indicate that informational social influence—rather than normative social influence—is dominant in a consumption context. Subjects of the study especially showed tendency to conform to the social influence of those who they believed to have credibility (e.g., expertise) regarding the product, rather than merely conform to the majority's choice. Numerous studies have shown that micro influencers' potential lie in their followers' perceived credibility (Boerman, 2020), especially in the fashion sector where personal aesthetics and curation abilities are often perceived as cues of the expertise. Similarly, social media serving as a source of information was discussed in qualitative research conducted by Aljukhadar et al. (2020). They found that not only do images on social media provide consumer inspiration, they also perform a role of "resourcefulness" to customers. Though this research included platforms that were unrelated to marketing activities such as Pinterest, Pinterest and Instagram share the attributes of users being able to explore a visually curated feed of images.

Regarding imagery, Instagram is one of the most widely used platforms based on visual images. Fashion brands and influencers alike utilize Instagram as a platform to visually communicate with their followers, and can reach users universally. Therefore, research was also conducted to analyze whether social media influencers would serve as an informational social influence source via their posts.

As social media allows comments to be posted and SMIs can also reply and interact with users' comments, it can be quite frequently observed that individuals ask for information about the items worn when the brand is not explicitly mentioned. This can be performed through directly messaging the influencer—information to which the author was not accessible to—or commenting on the post, which is openly visible. Thus, cues for informative social influence were limited to comments openly visible on the post.

### III. Research Method

Based on the theoretical framework above, the empirical research was designed to explore the following questions regarding an alternative view on SMIs as advertising entities: (1) With sponsorship disclosures prominent within the post, would consumers express cues of customer inspiration? (2) With sponsorship disclosures prominent within the post, would consumers express cues of informational influence? As traditional advertising literature suggests the activation of persuasion knowledge by explicit sponsorship disclosures, this research sought to explore whether these conditions would deter the customers inspiration process as well.

#### 1. Pre-Study

To identify fashion-related events or products that gained considerable media attention, a pre-study was conducted of published news articles. After the COVID-19 pandemic, major issues that received much media attention and marketing activity were found to be brick-and-mortar stores evolving to provide customers

with new “experiential” retail experiences. To identify events or store openings that received much attention within the fashion industry, online newspaper articles were examined, with publication dates ranging from January to September 2022. Initial data collection was based on keywords “pop-up AND store” or “store AND open” to gather all articles ( $N_{articles}=2,805$ ) regarding recent consumer issues. Preceding studies have identified brick-and-mortar stores with experiential elements to have value in shaping brand experiences in numerous product categories (Brakus et al., 2009), including pop-up stores as opportunities to provide consumers brand experience (de Lassus & Freire, 2014), entertainment that serves as experiential value (Klein et al., 2016), and even added uniqueness triggered by temporary availability (Henkel et al., 2022). Extensive research showed that pop-up stores in particular are temporarily installed to spread WOM and e-WOM rather than gain immediate purchase behavior in the store (Wolny & Mueller, 2013; Klein et al., 2016). Thus, stores that were aimed to serve as a means of marketing were to be selected, rather than stores that aimed for fast turnaround.

Published news articles from South Korea were collected as data for the pre-study. Market reports supported the publicity focus on brick-and-mortar stores. A survey conducted on Korean consumers by McKinsey & Company (2022) showed that respondents were recovering from the tendency to stay indoors and venturing towards “out-of-home activities”, such as visiting brick-and-mortar stores. Furthermore, respondents showed an increase in social media engagement compared to that in March, 2022. Thus, the current prevalence of social media marketing activity and publicity of brick-and-mortar stores could be supported. Academic research also showed the pandemic coping behavior of some customers as “optimal” consumer behavior based on purchase behavior for high-quality goods and open-minded purchases (Sit et al., 2022).

Titles and keywords of these articles were used to identify brands names or retailers that were related to the fashion market. To begin, text data of the articles

were collected and cleaned to identify names of either brands or retail channels. Two main categories identified were online retailers extending their coverage to brick-and-mortar stores, and pop-up stores. These categories were highlighted in the market trend reports of Korean consumers (McKinsey & Company, 2022). As previous literature suggests (Klein et al., 2016), pop-stores are installed temporarily and thus brick-and-mortar retail stores (e.g., department stores) were included to gather insight on temporary pop-up stores than were installed in the preexisting spaces. Initially, fashion brands were exclusively selected, however beauty products licensed from fashion brands (e.g., Chanel) were observed as well. Next, articles that were focused on the selected brands were manually scanned to identify the event(s) that may have caused marketing activity. Though department stores were initially included in the list to consider the possibility of pop-up or experiential stores opening on their venues, articles that were found to be addressing overall market reports were excluded as they did not include any specific indication of an event that caused media coverage. The remaining articles were manually scanned to identify the main topics of each brand. The initial list of brands and retailers can be found in Table 1.

Based on the collected data, two cases were identified and a brand was selected for each. The first was an experiential pop-up store that utilized SMI marketing to attract customers. Next was the case of an online retailer’s brick-and-mortar store, based on revival of brick-and-mortar store visits as reported by McKinsey & Company (2022).

As Kozinets (2015) mentioned regarding netnography, for research to remain as objective as possible the first consideration for selecting research subjects, relevancy to the research question must be a priority criterion. In the case of fashion, Instagram was selected as it is a visually engaging platform and widely used for fashion brand marketing. Among the brands in Table 1, four fashion brands or retailers that had opened physical stores (29CM, New Balance, Golden Goose and Chanel) were finally manually searched via Instagram for SMI

**Table 1.** List of brands identified in articles

Category	Brand name	Fashion brand/retailer	Description of issue featured in articles
Online retailer	29CM	Yes	Brick-and-mortar store opening in Seongsu-dong, Seoul
	Musinsa	Yes	Co-occurred with brand names
Brick-and-mortar retailer	Lotte Department Store	Yes	Co-occurred with brand names
	Hyundai Department Store	Yes	Co-occurred with brand names
	The Hyundai Seoul	Yes	Co-occurred with brand names
Pop-up store	Chanel	Yes	Pop-up experiential store in Seongsu-dong, Seoul
	Golden Goose	Yes	Pop-up experiential store in The Hyundai Seoul
	New Balance	Yes	Pop-up store in Shinsegae Department Store
Others	Gucci	Yes	Food & beverage (Gucci Osteria)
	Louis Vuitton	Yes	Food & beverage (Pop-up café)

marketing activity. As brands often provide influencers with guidelines for posting sponsored material (Rundin & Colliander, 2021), initial search began with manually searching the brand's name and identifying posts that were posted near the date of the event listed in the publicity coverage. Several sponsored posts were compared to identify co-occurring hashtags. Once the hashtags were selected, each was manually searched to detect the scale of influencer marketing activity. Golden Goose, which focused on celebrity marketing and had under 20 posts with the key hashtags posted by influencers. New Balance's main event, the opening of a pop-up store in a department store venue, also did not show major influencer marketing. Chanel and 29CM showed the most use of influencers' sponsored posts on Instagram and were selected as the key cases used for analysis.

These two brands differ in characteristics, with Chanel as a luxury brand, and 29CM a multi-brand online retailer with differing product price ranges. Traditionally, luxury retail experiences are intended to demonstrate emotional value that differentiates them from other brands (Dion & Arnould, 2011). However, a growing

body of research (de Lassus & Freire, 2014; Klein et al., 2016), and market trends (Maguire, 2021) support the continuous attempts of luxury brands to change their images by using pop-up stores that are perceived as friendlier, rich in sensory experiences, and approachable (de Lassus & Freire, 2014).

To identify the final posts used for analysis, co-occurring hashtags were searched, and the final data collection was composed by using hashtags that had the greatest number of posts published (Case 1: #N1CHANELGARDEN, Case 2: #29Seongsu[이구성수]). To minimize selection bias, which is a notable hazard cautioned by Kozinets (2015) regarding collection of social media data, the list of cases and posts were cross-examined by fellow researchers—masters students in similar research fields of fashion marketing and retail—to examine the reliability of brand and post selection. The two brands for Case 1 (experiential pop-up stores) and Case 2 (an online retailer's brick-and-mortar store opening) and the final number of posts and comments, and SMI post authors that were included in the research are listed below in Table 2.

**Table 2.** List of brands and social media data included in the analysis

Brand name	Chanel	29CM	Total
SMI IG Accounts ( $N_{accounts}$ )			
IG Posts ( $N_{posts}$ )	65	40	105
Average Follower Count ( $M_{brand}$ )	51,683	38,523	46,670
IG Comments ( $N_{comments}$ )	735	323	1058

## 2. Main Study

Once the brands and hashtags were selected, Python 3.11.0 software using the Selenium library was used to identify the posts that mentioned these brands via hashtags. Next, authors' accounts were manually sorted to identify whether they met the criteria of (1) being a human individual influencer, and not representing a non-human media source (e.g., official magazine accounts) (2) status as a micro influencer, based on follower count ranging from 10,000 to less than 100,000 (3) regularly posted contents of fashion and beauty products, and (4) included sponsorship disclosure in their text, which as of the point of research is mandatory by law. Profiles of influencers were all stated in Korean.

A netnographic approach was used to perform qualitative text analysis. Auto-ethnography, also known as netnography, is discussed as a qualitative research method based wholly on online data, such as social media data (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets, 2015). This methodological category was first coined in the beginning of the Web 2.0 era, and Kozinets (2015) later proposed research method guidelines of netnography that acknowledged the exponential growth of social media. The potential of this topic in consumer research was further highlighted by Coombes and Jones (2020). To observe the phenomenon of social media communication regarding consumer behavior, data was collected from visible posts of openly public accounts on Instagram. Kozinets (2015) also cautioned against ethical concerns regarding collection of data online when discussing future

implications for this relatively recent and emerging methodology. In line with such guidelines, the posts were selected by the inclusion of hashtags which can be interpreted as intentional behavior on social media, and explicitly relevant and "on-topic" to the research question. Using a netnographic approach for comment analysis, as Kozinets (2015) mentioned, rather than analyzing the comments based on word choice, the present study took a "holistic" approach to "maintain its content", and to identify the intentions of followers' comments.

To observe followers' reactions, comments on each post were collected and analyzed for the cues of *consumer inspiration* and *informative social influence*. First, cues of consumer inspiration were observed and coded based on the research conducted by Ki et al. (2022), which adopted the scale proposed by Böttger et al. (2017). Language cues that included expressions of 'awe' (e.g., commenting on the influencer's physical attractiveness or styling), or 'admiration' (e.g., expressing choice imitation intentions or actual choice imitation behavior). To examine informative social influence, expressions that openly asked for information (e.g., the brand of clothing that the influencer was wearing, or the products that the influencer bought at the experiential store) were determined.

Initially, inductive coding was based on the criteria of previous studies mentioned above. However, the comments that were coded showed a tendency to fall into two sub-categories depending on the relevancy of the brand. The inquiry for information regarding the



influencer's fashion expertise could be divided into cases either when the inquiry was related to the posted content, and asked for elaboration on the brand being sponsored, or the inquiry was unrelated to the sponsored content and showed interest in the influencer him or herself—such as what the influencer was wearing in the image of the store. The same sub-categorization was observed in comments about physical attraction and choice imitation intentions as well. The same was observed for consumer inspiration—some comments directly addressed the brand (e.g., “The exhibition is very

beautiful!”) or others only addressed the influencer's physical attractiveness (e.g., “I love your makeup today, it suits you very well.”) As brands use influencer marketing as a strategy to raise awareness regarding their brand, product, or stores, whether brand acknowledgement was noticeable was considered an important aspect to investigate as well. As qualitative research coding often adopts a hybrid approach for depth in research, the analysis for informative social influence was segmented into whether the comment was directly related to the post content and brand being

**Table 3.** Framework of coding categories

Major code	Sub-category	Description	Keywords/Examples
A. Attractiveness (awe)	Aa. Physical attractiveness (irrelevant to the post/posted brand)	Mentioning physical attractiveness of the influencer Mentioning physical attractiveness of the influencers' styling	"You look pretty/beautiful/cool/elegant!" "I love your outfit."
	Ab. Physical attractiveness (relevant to the post/posted brand)	Mentioning attractiveness of the store environment Mentioning attractiveness of the products	"The brand's store looks pretty/beautiful/cool/elegant!" "I love the products that are in this store!"
B. Choice imitation intentions (admiration)	Ba. Choice imitation intentions (irrelevant to the post/posted brand)	Sharing intentions to follow the exemplar of the influencer's physical appearance Sharing intentions follow the exemplar of the influencer's items worn	"I want to buy the skirt you are wearing." "I want to try your makeup look."
	Bb. Choice imitation intentions (relevant to the post/posted brand)	Sharing intentions to follow the exemplar of the influencer's purchase at the store Sharing intentions to follow the exemplar of the influencer's store visit	"I am going to get that product too!" "I must take a look for this myself."
C. Informational social influence	Ca. Informational social influence (irrelevant to the post/posted brand)	Inquiry for information on the influencer's personal styling Inquiry for information unrelated to the post	"Can I ask where you bought your skirt?" "Please let me know where you got your lipstick."
	Cb. Informational social influence (relevant to the post/posted brand)	Inquiry for additional information regarding the brand Inquiry for information related to the post Commenting on the information in the post	"Which item did you get from this store?" "What time are the events held?" "Thanks for letting me know about this event!"

endorsed or did not mention the brand-related content and focused on the influencer in separate. Thus, the analysis of comments was divided into sub-categories that differentiated whether the comment was relevant to the posted content or focused on the SMI. The final thematic categories used for analysis can be found in Table 3.

#### IV. Results

Based on the framework above, comments were manually inspected to explore whether sponsored contents of micro influencers sparked comments that had showed cues for *consumer inspiration*—comments on physical attractiveness (“awe”) or “admiration (“choice imitation”, Böttger et al., 2017; Ki et al., 2022)—and *informational social influence*. As Böttger et al. (2017) discuss in their scale of customer inspiration, customers’ searches for desired options to fulfill their needs of consumption is what differentiates customer inspiration from other traditional states of inspiration. Categorization was based on these previous studies.

Numerous single comments contained simultaneous cues (e.g., “You look beautiful, and the store atmosphere suits you so well!” in results of Case 1). Frequency of cues listed in the tables below was based on independent counts, and the total number of comments was less than cues gathered.

##### 1. Characteristics of sponsored posts

All posts included mentions of sponsorship disclosure, with hashtags #ad(vertisement) or #sponsored at the beginning of the post text. This was conspicuous to recognize as the Fair Trade Commission had passed regulations to make it imperative by law to state sponsorships. As brands often provide a guideline for content creation to ensure the SMI’s paid post fulfills needs for advertisement (Rundin & Colliander, 2021), information about the experiential store (e.g., the location, opening hours, basic information of the products and exclusive offers available only at the store)

were all present in posts examined. Regarding categories for analysis, in the case of *Bb* the posts openly stated the location of the store—the district ‘Seongsu-dong’ in South Korea—comments that conveyed the message of intention to visit the district were also interpreted as choice imitation.

##### 2. Case 1: Experiential pop-up store

###### 1) Case Description

As mentioned in the pre-study, the brand selected for Case 1 was Chanel. Chanel opened an experiential pop-up store that contained exhibition-like facilities and various photograph locations (Bazaar, 2022). The event was held August 2022 with eleven products including the brand’s newly launched Revitalizing Essence Lotion being the main product. The pop-up store included experiential offers such as a skin examination service and product recommendation based on results, a beverage bar that offered drinks that were “inspired by the Camellia line”, free gifts when customers made a purchase, and various photo booths where consumers were encouraged to take photos and share their experience on social media. The location was in the Seongsu-dong district (identical to Case 2), in Seoul, South Korea.

Traditionally, luxury brands and their retail methods have focused on creating an atmosphere of “reverence” that differentiates them from other brands (Dion & Arnould, 2011; Klein et al., 2016). However, in the current retail environment, this strategy is being continuously revised. Pop-up stores are used to create sensory experiences, generate WOM (Klein et al., 2016) and the effects of these events are difficult to predict in the short-term.

In the sponsored posts, most posts included opening hours and a brief introduction of the event that was being held, a commonly recurring phrase being “sensory” regarding the store. “Revitalizing” and “senses” were continuously mentioned in the post, and the backgrounds of SMI photos varied by post. Numerous influencers chose to elaborate on details compared to others, such as sharing their experience of an activity they

**Table 4.** Case 1- List of categories by frequency of cues

Major code	Sub-category	Frequency
A. Attractiveness ( <i>awe</i> )	Aa. Physical attractiveness (irrelevant to the post/posted brand)	390
	Ab. Physical attractiveness (relevant to the post/posted brand)	198
B. Choice imitation intentions ( <i>admiration</i> )	Ba. Choice imitation intentions (irrelevant to the post/posted brand)	7
	Bb. Choice imitation intentions (relevant to the post/posted brand)	87
C. Informational social influence	Ca. Informational social influence (irrelevant to the post/posted brand)	10
	Cb. Informational social influence (relevant to the post/posted brand)	10
D. Other	D. Other	165
Total		867

participated in while at the store (e.g., participating in an experiential activity of making a flower bouquet). The list of categories by cue frequency can be found in Table 4.

## 2) Analysis

Frequency of cues in comments on physical attractiveness were both observed. Frequency of cues that expressed physical attractiveness excluding mention of the posted brand ( $F_{Aa}=390$ , e.g., “You look stunning!”) was higher than the frequency of cues that expressed awe over the brand ( $F_{Ab}=198$ , e.g., “The new product looks amazing.”). However, a considerable number of posts ( $F_{Aa&Ab}=96$ ) included both simultaneously (e.g., “You look beautiful, and the store atmosphere suits you so well!”).

Despite the sponsorship disclosure included in all posts, the frequency of choice imitation intentions were highly focused on the brand being endorsed. As can be observed in Table 4, choice imitation relevant to the posted content showed a much higher frequency ( $F_{Bb}=87$ , e.g., “I would love to see the Chanel store for myself.”) than choice imitation intentions that did not mention the

posted content ( $F_{Bb}=7$ , e.g., “I would love to have that skirt you are wearing!”). Informational social influence that could be observed from the comments was quite even between the comments that asked about posted brand ( $F_{Ca}=10$ ) or asked for information unrelated to the brand sponsoring the post ( $F_{Cb}=10$ ). As the posts showed high congruency in text, there were little inquiry overall compared to Case 2, as the SMI posts elaborated deeply on the information needed to visit the store.

## 2. Case 2: Opening of an online retailer’s brick-and-mortar store

### 1) Case Description

As mentioned in the pre-study, 29CM was selected as the representative brand for Case 2. 29CM, an online multi-brand retailer opened their first brick-and-mortar store in September, 2022 (Shin, 2022). The store included fashion and lifestyle products that consumers could try on or see in person. As online retailers are based wholly on websites or mobile device applications, the purpose of the store was to physically show products that the

retailer sold. Customers could visit and see physical products displayed in the store, try on apparel, and use a QR code to view the product via 29CM mobile application. One interesting aspect was that purchases themselves could not be made, a customer could try on the product and explore the items. However, purchase behavior could not be made on the premises and required for the customer to use the QR code to buy the product from the retailer-owned mobile phone application.

Sponsored posts included details of the store's location, and also stated that the store was the first brick-and-mortar store to be launched nationally. Numerous SMI posts were of the influencer posing in front of a mirror in the fitting rooms, or showed a full picture of the SMI's outfit on the day of visiting the store. Likewise, to Case 1, several SMIs chose to add their own opinion in the post (e.g., "I had to try this sweatshirt on!") and provided images to support their statements. The final list of categories by comment frequency can be found in Table 5.

## 2) Analysis

Compared to Case 1, Case 2 showed lower frequency of the brand being directly mentioned in terms of consumer

inspiration. One interesting note was that among total comments, there was a higher rate of informational social influence not including the brand ( $F_{Ci}=47$ ). This was even higher than Case 1, despite the total number of posts and comments being comparatively less.

Choice imitation intentions regarding the brand were observed in this case as well. Despite the post conspicuously elaborating store details and having a distinct sponsorship disclosure statement, SMIs' audience showed interest in the sponsored brand as well. Choice imitation intentions included phrases that directly expressed their intention to attend the event the SMI had, or mirroring purchases that the SMI had stated were made in the store. This included statements such as "I would like to purchase that product" or "I must go see this for myself" in response to the post. Though longitudinal results may be that curiosity evoked by the post may cause intrinsic intentions to pursue in the future, the immediate responses observed in the comments showed comparatively less prominent informational social influence regarding the store than the SMI as an individual. In fact, compared to Case 1, though there was higher frequency of informational influence-seeking comments, they did not seek information regarding the brand. Instead, the comments

**Table 5.** Case 2- List of categories by frequency of cues

Major code	Sub-category	Frequency
A. Attractiveness ( <i>awe</i> )	Aa. Physical attractiveness (irrelevant to the post/posted brand)	142
	Ab. Physical attractiveness (relevant to the post/posted brand)	17
B. Choice imitation intentions ( <i>admiration</i> )	Ba. Choice imitation intentions (irrelevant to the post/posted brand)	5
	Bb. Choice imitation intentions (relevant to the post/posted brand)	13
C. Informational social influence	Ca. Informational social influence (irrelevant to the post/posted brand)	47
	Cb. Informational social influence (relevant to the post/posted brand)	1
D. Other	D. Other	120
Total		345

asked for elaboration on other attributes noticeable in the post, such as what the SMI was wearing in the image.

Results showed that comments showed higher frequency of comments showing choice imitation intention and informational social influence irrespective of the sponsored brand. Compared to Case 1, Case 2 showed higher frequency of comments that indicated informative social influence that did not include the brand. In fact, most of the informative influence observed was focused on the influencer's personal styling (e.g., "What brand is your skirt from?") rather than the actual contents being advertised. These results support the views of SMIs as "content generators" (Lou & Yuan, 2019) by core, as followers expressed interest and asked for elaboration on the SMI's personal style featured in the posted image.

## V. General Discussion

It was observed that despite sponsorship disclosure being investigated with negative connotations in the past, analysis of real social media posts and audience responses showed that SMIs nonetheless transferred customer inspiration and informational social influence with contents that openly stated to have advertising motives. As consumer responses to sponsorship disclosure in social media posts have shown heterogeneous results over past research, these findings support an alternative view of SMIs positioned as sources of inspiration and, thus, choice imitation. This is a view that has been explored seldom in previous fashion marketing literature. These findings provide additional support to previous experimental research with anonymous individuals presented as SMIs. With non-existing SMIs as stimuli, it may be difficult to address the relationships that are formed on social media platforms between follower and SMI (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). Preceding studies have shown heterogeneous results regarding the factors of such relations, such as perceived authenticity that is moderated by interaction rate (Park et al., 2020). In addition, Kay et al. (2019) proposed that sponsorship disclosure itself

would escalate the credibility of the influencer despite the visibility of advertising intentions.

These results can be explained by the customer inspiration approach, in which levels of perceived authenticity and credibility (e.g., expertise, honesty) can differ, but the core of SMIs' curation skills depend on the perception of the customer. This is the basis for SMIs building their power as an effective marketing agent, which is thus their "influence". As this research was conducted as a netnographic approach to existing SMIs, we could observe the actual responses of social media post receivers, which can be differentiated from previous studies in that the audience's "bond" to a SMI (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Schouten et al., 2020) can be considered.

In Case 1, despite the attempts to convey a relatable atmosphere compared to traditional luxury retail (Klein et al., 2016), "reverence" remained to be observed as the brand itself was used as a comparison to the SMI's physical attractiveness (e.g., "You look like a Chanel model!"). Previously, luxury brands have shown concern about trying novel retail methods that may dilute high-quality, well-managed store experiences (Klein et al. 2016). As social media may demonstrate ambiguity in meaning (Valesia & Diehl, 2022), this also can be an issue in SMI marketing as well. However, contents created by SMIs can provide cues of customer inspiration, imparting an advantage compared to traditional boundaries of luxury marketing, while maintaining the brand image and aesthetic that differentiates them from other brands.

Some results that were particularly of interest were that in Case 2, much of the informational social influence shown focused on the SMI's personal styling and tastes rather than the factual content in the post itself. This provides support to the SMI marketing literature that focuses on SMIs as individuals who established their public awareness based on social media content generation (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Rundin & Colliander, 2021). The scale of customer inspiration proposed by Böttger et al. (2017) defined customer inspiration as a state to actively seek information and

open-minded attitudinal consequences to fulfill their consumption needs. The scale was built upon the framework that customers in the *inspired-to* state showed behavioral, emotional, and attitudinal consequences. The scale also includes visual stimulation as an antecedent of the *inspired-by* state. As Instagram and YouTube are visually engaging platforms, though this may seem that the focus of the post was deterred from the original objective of the post—advertising the event itself—we postulate that such tendencies can be further implemented in both academic research and practical areas. As fashion SMIs have built their popularity by posting their fashion curation skills, brands can use this audience tendency of focusing on the SMI's personal taste to strengthen messages conveyed in their sponsored material. Specifically, brands can provide guidelines for SMIs to specifically endorse their products by trying them on and putting together a look with the products harmonized with advertising information in the post. As Rundin and Colliander (2021) discussed, brands can adjust the amount of creative control of SMIs regarding sponsored products. The tendency for informational social influence to be focused on the SMI can be a positive signal for brands that would like to use SMI marketing to promote their products, while also encouraging the SMI to be creative and proactively create a look via the products from the sponsored brand.

As social media is constantly evolving, the research is not without limitations. As this paper discusses language in Instagram posts' comments, nonverbal cues were excluded from the interpretation. Thus, emojis posted as comments were not counted as they can have certain connotations but are ambiguous in nature to accurately analyze. Furthermore, as research was conducted upon two representative cases, further research could enlighten cognitive processes of customer inspiration and informational social influence even in the face of sponsorship disclosures that can be applied to a broader scope of brands and product categories. Finally, as brand images can differ by brand and consumers groups, the implications of these findings should be addressed while also meticulously taking brand characteristics into

account.

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