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When influencers are not very influential: The negative effects of social media verification

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Abstract

As social media usage has grown over the recent past, so too has a new form of celebrity: social media influencers (SMIs). It can be difficult for consumers to know whether the influencers they are following are real. To combat this, social media sites introduced user verification. Verification, denoted by a blue checkmark badge visible in search and on one's profile, is ostensibly a way of confirming one's identity, yet only accounts with large followings are awarded verification status by the platform. In this paper, we investigate the perception of verification in the context of SMIs, a topic relatively absent from the literature despite the billions of dollars spent on partnerships. Specifically, we investigate if consumers perceive verification as more directly associated with credibility or celebrity. Further, we consider whether the fit of the influencer with the advertisement yields discrepancies in consumers' trust of the advertisement and endorser in paid partnerships on social media. Through two studies, we find that consumers associate verification most closely with celebrity, rather than authenticity and that when the influencer is advertising a product that does not fit with their brand, consumers are significantly less likely to trust verified accounts rather than unverified accounts. This study has theoretical implications for marketing researchers as well as practical implications for marketing managers. Verified influencers cost more; therefore, this research provides unique insights for brands to capitalize their ad return if they are made aware of the implications associated with verification.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The overwhelming growth and accessibility of social media in the past decade has transformed communication globally. As these sites are filled with everyday people, a new type of celebrity emerged: the social media "influencer" (Wiley, 2021). For years now, marketers have capitalized on the enormity of social media for advertisement purposes for example, through targeted ads (i.e., Summers et al., 2016), data mining (i.e., Shaw et al., 2001) and endorsement deals (i.e., Choi et al., 2005). Using celebrities to sell products and services is nothing new. In fact, celebrity endorsement, broadly defined as someone, typically a celebrity, with influence over others promoting a brand or product, has been a popular marketing tactic since the 1930s (Erdogan, 1999). Celebrity endorsements have been extensively studied within the marketing literature (see Bergkvist &

Zhou, 2016 for a review of literature). However, *social media influencers* (SMIs), a much more recent phenomenon, are unique in that they are not necessarily celebrities or well-known experts in a given field. De Veirman et al. (2017, p. 798) define SMIs as "people who built a large network of followers, and are considered as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches." Currently, any social media user can become an SMI by posting organic content and growing their following. To date, the importance and influence of SMIs on consumer behavior has been understudied.

Today, brands are doing less and less traditional celebrity advertising through television and print, while at the same time social media advertising is expected to top $49 billion in 2021 (Williamson, 2021). Influencer endorsements and partnerships provide marketers the ability to reach large, targeted audiences quickly and effectively, which has made them a key element of many firms' marketing strategies

(Phua et al., 2017). SMIs can also gain a significant source of income from endorsement deals (i.e., Scipioni, 2021) if they have enough of a following. The ability to make a lot of money quickly has led to many influencers using less than ethical means of gaining followers and influence (i.e., Tsapatsoulis et al., 2019). For example, by spoofing or stealing content from more popular profiles, social media users could trick followers who thought they were following legitimate accounts (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

To combat this potential unethical behavior, many social media platforms including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube have created verification status for accounts (Conger, 2021). These platforms describe verification as a way to "verify" that an account is the authentic presence of that person rather than, say, a fan account. Verification is typically enjoyed by the platform's largest celebrities and public figures, although no clear set of metrics for how accounts are verified is published. Having a verified account typically leads to higher profits from endorsement and partnership deals (Lorenz, 2018), thus there is an even greater external motivator to becoming "verified". However, little research so far has looked at the influence of verification on consumer behavior. Indeed, while verification leads to positive gains in terms of money and potentially followers for SMIs, the impact of verification on consumers may not be as positive. Understanding the potential downsides of how consumers view verification in relation to purchase likelihood as well as trust in both the brand and advertisements is important for marketers and consumers alike.

In this paper, we look at how verification is perceived by consumers, whether they view verification as a measure of celebrity or credibility. This work first contributes to the literature surrounding authenticity indicators in the context of social media. Second, we contribute to the literature on the distinction between celebrity and SMI endorsement Finally, we extend and contribute to research of the effects of verification. We demonstrate that consumers are more likely to associate verification with celebrity than credibility. Specifically, while previous work has shown a positive impact of celebrity endorsement on advertised products (i.e., Amos et al., 2008; Silvera & Austad, 2004; Spry et al., 2011), if verification is more closely associated with celebrity than credibility, we find a negative effect of verification on purchase intention. Further, we show that this negative effect of verification is due to lack of trust of the SMI when the SMI does not fit with the advertisement. Finally, this research provides insights to marketers on the importance of ensuring credibility of the SMIs they choose for endorsement.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 | Social media verification

Verification on social media was introduced on Twitter in June 2009 (Conger, 2021). Since then, all major social media platforms have some kind of verification on them. However, confusing the consumer, each platform defines verification and the process to be verified differently.

For example, Instagram and its parent company Facebook define verification as the platform's confirmation that the account "is the authentic page or profile for [the] public figure, company or brand" it represents (Facebook, 2021).

Verification seemingly arose to tackle credibility and authenticity issues. Platforms were receiving criticism from well-known figures whose accounts were being imitated. In 2009, Tony La Russa, then manager of the St. Louis Cardinals, filed a suit against Twitter because of their negligence in removing an imitation account (Marrone, 2009). Indeed, detecting fake accounts on social media is an area full of research (see Roy & Chahar, 2021 for a literature review) and verification may help with some aspects of this. Specifically, in some instances, verification grants the public reassurance that a profile is who it says it is; it does not solve the issue of unverified fake accounts, though. Further, the question remains, how is verification viewed between the different stakeholders: consumers, SMIs and marketers?

To answer this question, we first turn to looking at how consumers themselves view verification. Instagram lists four components necessary for verification: the account must be authentic, complete, unique, and notable (Instagram Help Center, 2021). However, in citing both notoriety and authenticity as requirements for verification, the definition is blurred in the eyes of the public. On one hand, it seems the authenticity indicator is a measure to help increase credibility. However, research has shown that verification does not increase credibility (Edgerly & Vraga, 2019; Vaidya et al., 2019). Vaidya et al. (2019) had participants rate a tweet from a verified (or unverified) account and found that the presence of verification did not increase perceived credibility at all. In the eyes of the consumer, verification may simply be proof of celebrity status, not credibility. For example, on YouTube, a channel cannot apply for verification until it reaches 100,000 subscribers (YouTube, 2021), providing further support for the consumers' view that popularity plays some role in the verification process.

For SMIs themselves, ostensibly, the badge is simply given to prevent impersonation, yet there are hundreds of articles written about the benefits of account verification (i.e., Grome, 2021; Leyes, 2021). Benefits include improved search footprint, more followers, and early access to new features (Linqia, 2021). These benefits have led to the rise of social media follower farms and black market pay for verification (Ferencik, 2018). Influencers then see verification as both a money-making opportunity and validation of their celebrity, as it were.

For marketers, verification can mean greater exposure, but at a greater cost, since verified endorsers are costlier. Further, research has shown that while verified endorsers charged more than their unverified counterparts, controlling for audience size, there is virtually no difference in engagement per post (AspireIQ, 2021). In fact, a 2021 report (Geyser, 2021a, 2021b) showed that lesser-known SMIs with a smaller following of 50,000–250,000 followers deliver a 30% better return on investment (ROI) per dollar spent in comparison to those with 250,000–1 million. Additionally, these SMIs are reported to have 20% better ROI than influencers with over 1 million followers. So,

while this data suggests that SMIs with larger followings are not as effective with endorsement as SMIs with smaller followings, to date, little research has explored the role that verification, often seen as a proxy for large followings, plays in consumers' trust and purchase intention of advertised products.

2.2 | Celebrity endorsements and fit

Early work into SMIs has assumed that the influence is similar to celebrity endorsements (i.e., Arora et al., 2019; Cocker et al., 2021; Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021). Celebrity endorsers have been a popular focus of researchers for years. The previously cited research on ROI and SMI verification is in line with previous celebrity endorsement literature that finds celebrities are less effective than a lesser-known opinion leader for their lack of fit and relatability (i.e., Erdogan, 1999; Saeed et al., 2014). For example, Saeed et al. (2014) found that non-celebrity endorsers have been shown to be more effective at endorsements than celebrity counterparts. The authors find that this is due to a lack of credibility of celebrities since there is no clear indication as to whether they are actually using the product advertised. Participants believed that non-celebrities were a better fit within the category, and thus would be more likely to give their actual opinion of the product.

Diving deeper into celebrity endorsement, research has been conducted surrounding the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement and how to best utilize it. An important aspect of celebrity endorsement lies in the product match-up hypothesis (Forkan, 1980; Kamins, 1990). It holds that effective celebrity endorsement must have congruence between the product message or perceived fit of the brand and the message conveyed by the celebrity's public appearance (Misra & Beatty, 1990). Proper match-up is considered very important; celebrities are an unnecessary risk unless they are logically related to products (Watkins, 1989). Bertrand and Todd (1992) postulated that if there is a combination of an appropriate tie-in between the brand's product and the endorser's image, advertisers can get both the fame and tie-in working for them. Many studies report that consumers have also come to expect good match-up (Ohanian, 1991). Proper match-up can positively impact consumer's perceptions of not just the endorser, but the ad and brand (Choi & Rifon, 2005). Absence of this connection can be detrimental and lead the consumer to conclude that the endorser has been bought (Erdogan, 1999).

Celebrities have been found to produce positive attitudes toward marketing (Atkin & Block, 1983). However, Tom et al. (1992) identified weak linkage between celebrities and a product in comparison to non-celebrities. Non-celebrity advertising has been shown to score higher in some product categories such as the beauty industry, since there is no indication as to whether a celebrity is actually using the product or not (Saeed et al., 2014). Additionally, Gaied and Rached (2010) found that a non-celebrity has higher persuasion credibility and a higher impact on consumer perception. Participants were more likely to be persuaded to purchase a product from a non-celebrity than a celebrity with a bad fit with the advertised product. Further, Mehta (1994) found that when comparing advertisements

with celebrities and without them, participants paid more attention to the brand when there was no celebrity present because when there is a celebrity, they focus their attention on the celebrity.

Much research has looked at the disadvantages to using celebrity endorsers (i.e., Halonen-Knight & Humerinta, 2010; Thwaites et al., 2011; White et al., 2009). For example, Hung et al. (2011) found that because celebrities are famous, they may receive and accept more offers to partner with brands. Importantly, this "over-endorsement" leads to negative customer attitudes toward both the celebrity and the brands they are endorsing. Interestingly, Erdogan found that for consumers, association was much stronger between a created spokesperson (i.e., Flo from Progressive) than with popular endorsers (celebrities) (1999). Further, the author found that partnering with too many brands can also cause boredom and resistance to advertising through creation of a lack of trust in the ad and product (Erdogan, 1999). Additionally, Tripp et al. (1994), found that as number of products endorsed increased, perceptions of credibility, likeability, and attitude toward the ad became less favorable. One reason celebrities may not have a positive effect on purchase intent is because celebrity advertising seems to impact the cognitive and affective components of attitudes rather than the behavioral components (Fireworker & Friedman, 1977).

There are, of course, positives to celebrity endorsements. Celebrities are helpful in reaching large audiences and can create acceptance for a product (Saeed et al., 2014). Also, good fit between a celebrity and brand enhances the endorser's believability, attractiveness, credibility and helps to produce positive attitudes (Kamins & Gupta, 1994). Importantly, celebrity endorsement may not play as big of a role in fostering distrust as other studies have reported. Kapitan and Silvera (2016) used Tom Brady as an example. Even if consumers know that Tom Brady is paid to promote a product, it takes less cognitive effort to factor in the impact of Tom Brady being paid. This suggests room for further research into the role that celebrity endorsements play in advertising. Further, attributions might be facilitated by the fact that consumers tend to assume celebrities have a choice in the matter of what products they endorse. For example, Casaló et al. (2020) found that for consumers, higher perceptions of uniqueness and originality of an SMI led to higher purchase intentions and higher likelihood to recommend. Additionally, the authors found that audiences who have a high perceived fit with the SMI, were more likely to try the products the SMI suggested, through the process of psychological closeness.

The popularity of influencer marketing is growing substantially as celebrity advertisement is beginning to dwindle. A recent study in the Independent (Baker-Jordan, 2020) found that three out of five adults are "bored with celebrities and a further one in five [are] celebrity-resistant." Literature indicates there is more trust in influencers than other figures (Kiss & Bichler, 2008), since they are, in many ways, similar to their audience (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014), regarded as authentic (Petrescu et al., 2018) and they are highly accessible (De Veirman et al., 2017). With the influencer marketing industry becoming so large, it's necessary to study other factors present in these paid partnerships so that marketers can fully capitalize on their ad spend.

Few studies have been conducted surrounding verification and its perception. However, Edgerly and Vraga (2019) measured the extent to which verification affected tweet credibility and account credibility on Twitter. They collected 600 responses and found that verification did not influence evaluations of source credibility. In a similar study, researchers stated that verification, as an authenticity indicator, had no effect on source credibility.

Arguably, while celebrity endorsement provides an initial lens through which to study SMIs, this is clearly a different area of research. And indeed, the development of influencer marketing's own literature (i.e., De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) is gaining momentum but is not yet extensive. Previous research has focused on the defining characteristics of influencers (i.e., Lou & Yuan, 2019) and what makes them effective (Schouten et al., 2020). Some of the defining characteristics are: a considerable following (Jin et al., 2019), the ability to monetize their following (Abidin, 2016), and personal branding (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Enke and Borchers (2019) also cited influencer's relationship-building capabilities and interaction with followers.

More directly comparing celebrity endorsement to *influencer* endorsement studies have found that in certain circumstances, influencers can top celebrities in terms of overall effectiveness. For example, Schouten et al. (2020), in two studies, compared SMIs with celebrities looking at endorsed products. The authors found that consumers trust and identified more with the influencer rather than the celebrity, which improved ad effectiveness. Jin et al. (2019) showed audiences rely more on Instagram influencers than traditional celebrities for product endorsements, which produced an overall better attitude toward the brand. Also, Trivedi and Sama (2020) showed expert influencers were more persuasive than their celebrity counterparts. This relationship was mediated by brand admiration, brand attitude, and purchase intention.

2.3 | Theoretical and hypothesis development

Since there is no clear set of guidelines on what it takes to be verified, consumers are left to interpret verification on their own. Previous research has shown that humans search for external cues with which they can quickly categorize unfamiliar visual stimuli (i.e., Neumann & Strack, 2000; Tanner & Maeng, 2012). This categorization appears to occur prior to judgment about the stimuli. Specifically, Tanner and Maeng (2012) found that participants were more likely to associate an unfamiliar face that had been morphed with a celebrity's with more positive attributes. However, the authors also found that after said celebrity had a scandal, participants were less likely to purchase a product from a morphed face.

Additionally, previous research has shown a distinction between celebrity and credibility in influencer marketing (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021). Specifically, the authors found that credibility may be at odds with celebrity for SMIs. The more celebrity that they gain, the more likely they are to act in accordance with traditional "profit-maximizing strategies (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021, p. 95)." Consumers then, when faced with an unknown SMI may use verification as a way to categorize them. We argue that since initial verifications

were given to celebrities as a way to deal with fake pages, consumers will be more likely to first associate verification with celebrity rather than credibility. Formally:

> **Hypothesis 1.** *Consumers will more strongly associate verification with celebrity status over the characteristic of credibility.*

One of the major themes that most social media sites use in their verification information is authenticity. Indeed, if verification is a sign of authenticity, then previous literature (i.e., Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014) would suggest that consumers will be more likely to trust the advertising appeal. Further, previous research (i.e., Kim et al., 2014; Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018) has shown that consumers use endorsers' fit and authenticity as a means to trust the appeal. However, if verification is seen as celebrity more than credibility, consumers may not assume credibility simply from the verification. Because celebrity endorsers who do not fit with the product category have been shown to actually hurt the appeal (i.e., Albert et al., 2018; Erfgen et al., 2015), being verified and endorsing a product which does not appear to be a fit, could potentially hurt the brand appeal. This would occur through the consumer having less trust in the brand appeal. From this we hypothesize that consumers will use verification as a substitute for celebrity status and that this will negatively impact their trust in the brand being advertised if the brand does not "fit" with the SMI. Formally:

> **Hypothesis 2a.** *Trust of a brand appeal will mediate the effect of verification on consumer's likelihood to purchase a product when there is a perceived lack of fit with the SMI and the product.*

> **Hypothesis 2b.** *When there is a perceived fit between the SMI and the product being advertised, there will be no effect of verification.*

3 | STUDIES

3.1 | Study 1

The aim of study 1 was to test Hypothesis 1 that consumers more closely associate verification with celebrity than they associate it with credibility.

3.1.1 | Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (verification: present vs. absent) in a between subject design. Participants were instructed to open the link to the survey on their personal device and were told that they would be looking at a series of pictures from the popular social media site Instagram and they were to read the captions as they would be asked questions about them later in the survey. They were then presented with a series of five posts,

ostensibly from Instagram. Each post was on the screen for 30 s to ensure the participants had enough time to read through the captions. The graphics utilized faux names and accounts. Names were created through a random name generator and images were taken from a free stock photo website (Pexels.com, 2020). The use of faux characters ensured there would not be recall bias since, to reduce cognitive strain, people tend to believe information that stems from familiar sources (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999). Thus, participants were likely to have no familiarity with the SMIs regardless of verification status. The third picture they saw was the manipulation, a "sponsored" post for a fake product, a shirt from a fake brand. The picture was either from a verified account or not (see Appendix A for the manipulation). After seeing the pictures, participants were asked to respond to the dependent variable questions. Then, participants answered our manipulation check, and finally, they responded to demographic questions.

3.1.2 | Participants

Two hundred and twenty-three participants (46% female) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and participated in the study for a nominal fee. Sample size was determined based on a priori power analyses. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 57 ($M = 27.43$, SD = 5.39). This demographic was chosen since it matches closely with the current user demographics of Instagram (Sehl, 2021). Only participants who were native English speakers from the United States were used in this study.

3.1.3 | Measures

Instagram usage and verification check
Instagram usage was measured by asking participants how often they used Instagram on a 1–7 scale (1 = never; 7 = multiple times a day). The participants answered the extent to which they agreed that they were able to define what social media verification is on a 1–7 scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Next, participants responded how familiar they were on a 1–7 scale (1 = extremely unfamiliar; 7 = extremely familiar) with Instagram verifications.

Dependent variables
To measure the extent to which the participants viewed verification as more closely associated with celebrity, authenticity or credibility, we asked participants to rate on a 1–7 scale the extent to which they agreed the social media user they saw was: a celebrity, authentic and credible (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

3.1.4 | Results

Manipulation check
To ensure that participants accurately read the post, we asked them to select which brand they saw an ad for from a list of three made up

brands. Two hundred and eleven participants (94.6%) were able to correctly identify the brand of the product they saw an ad for. Additionally, to ensure that they were paying attention, we asked participants if any of the posts they saw were from a verified account. Two hundred and fourteen (95.9%) were able to correctly identify whether they saw a verified account or not. We ran the following analyses with and without the participants who failed the manipulation check and there were no differences in the statistical significance. The following results only include participants who passed the manipulation check.

Instagram usage and verification check
All participants in this study responded that they used Instagram somewhat frequently ($M_{\text{Instagramusage}} = 4.61$, SD = 1.23). No participants responded that they never used Instagram. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no difference in Instagram usage between conditions ($M_{\text{verification}} = 4.57$ vs. $M_{\text{notverification}} = 4.66$, $F[1213] = 0.53$, $p > .1$). To test for the possibility that Instagram usage would influence the perception of the dependent variables, a series of regressions were run. The regressions revealed no significant effect of Instagram usage on celebrity, authenticity or credibility (all p's > .1). Further, there was no difference between conditions for familiarity with Instagram verification ($M_{\text{verification}} = 6.42$ vs. $M_{\text{notverification}} = 6.45$, $F[1213] = 0.23$, $p > .1$) or ability to define Instagram verification ($M_{\text{verification}} = 2.31$ vs. $M_{\text{notverification}} = 2.24$, $F[1213] = 1.03$, $p > .1$).

Dependent variables
We expected that participants who saw a verified account would be more likely to associate the SMI with celebrity than participants who saw the exact same account without the verification. An ANOVA revealed the effect. Participants who saw a verified account were significantly more likely to believe the SMI was a celebrity than participants who saw the same account without any verification ($M_{\text{verification}} = 5.99$ vs. $M_{\text{notverification}} = 5.28$, $F[1213] = 6.39$, $p < .05$).

We expected that there would be no difference between conditions for either authenticity or credibility. A series of ANOVAs revealed this to be the case (authenticity: $M_{\text{verification}} = 4.68$ vs. $M_{\text{notverification}} = 4.55$, $p > .1$; credibility: $M_{\text{verification}} = 5.52$, vs. $M_{\text{notverification}} = 5.17$, $p > .1$).

3.1.5 | Discussion

Study 1 provided initial support for Hypothesis 1: consumers associate verification more with celebrity than authenticity or credibility. This study provides additional support for prior research (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2021) that shows a difference between celebrity and credibility or authenticity, specifically providing evidence for how consumers categorize verified SMIs. When participants were shown an Instagram post from an unknown SMI, they were more likely to associate the SMI with celebrity when the account was verified than when it was not. Further, participants did not believe that the verified account was either more credible or authentic.

3.2 | Study 2

The aim of study 2 was twofold. First, to replicate the findings of study 1 showing that consumers are more likely to associate verification with celebrity. Second, study 2 aimed to test Hypothesis 2a and 2b, that the fit of the SMI with the ad will influence consumers' likelihood to purchase the advertised product. Further, in study 2, we provide process support for the theoretical contribution by looking at the role that trust plays.

3.2.1 | Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (fit: fit vs. no fit) × 2 (verification symbol: present vs. not) between subject design. The fitness and beauty industries were chosen for a few different reasons. First, for generalizability, fitness and beauty SMIs are very popular. A recent report found that 47% of the health/fitness industry uses influencers and 52% of the beauty industry uses influencers (Gohri, 2019). The second reason that we chose beauty and fitness is that they are distinct from each other in terms of SMI. It is easy to recognize that a fitness SMI is a fitness SMI; they tend to post things about the gym, food they are eating or pictures of their bodies (Schouten et al., 2020). Beauty SMIs, on the other hand, have much more diverse posts, making it more difficult to discern their area of influence. Using these two disparate types of SMIs allows us to test for fit with the advertisement without needing the participants to know the SMI. The pictures we used were pretested to ensure that the SMIs either fit with the ad or not (see Appendix B).

The four conditions were created similar to study 1 to look like Instagram (see Appendix C). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. The set up was similar to study 1 in that the participants completed the survey on their own devices. The participants read a brief introduction welcoming them to the study, followed by seeing one of the Instagram posts from the condition they were assigned to. In the fitness condition, participants saw a fitness SMI in a push-up position. In the beauty SMI condition, participants saw a beauty SMI smiling. After viewing the post, the participants were subsequently asked our dependent variables questions, followed by the manipulation check and the control measures. Finally, they responded to demographic questions. They were not allowed to return to the original post (visual) they were shown.

3.2.2 | Participants

Four hundred and fifty participants (47.53% female) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk for a nominal fee. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 42 ($M = 25.21$, $SD = 6.39$). Like study 1, this age range was recruited to be consistent with the current demographics of Instagram users. This sample size was determined based on a priori power analyses utilizing effect sizes from study 1.

3.2.3 | Measures

Control measures
We measured how often the participants used each of the following types of social media on a 1–7 scale: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (1 = never; 7 = multiple times a day). Additionally, we measured how familiar the participants were with verification on a 1–7 scale (1 = very unfamiliar; 7 = very familiar).

Credibility and authenticity
For this study, we measured credibility in two ways. First, like study 1, we asked participants to rate the SMI on how credible they thought they were on a 1–7 scale. Second, Ohanian's (1991) source credibility scale was adapted to evaluate endorser attractiveness, credibility and trustworthiness. Participants rated the SMI on a 1–7 scale (1 = far below average; 7 = far above average) on the following dimensions: attractiveness, class, beauty, elegance, sexiness, dependability, honesty, reliability, trustworthiness, expertise, experience, knowledge, qualification, skill. A factor analysis revealed that the items loaded on three factors. Attractiveness, class, beauty, elegance and sexiness all loaded on one factor and were collapsed into one factor for attractiveness (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). Dependability, honesty, reliability and trustworthiness were collapsed into one factor for trustworthiness (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$). Expertise, experience, knowledge, qualification and skill along with the credibility individual measure were collapsed into one factor for credibility (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$).

Finally, we measured authenticity the same way we did in study 1.

Trust
Delgado-Ballester's brand trust scale (2003) was used to measure trust in the brand being advertised. Participants responded how much they agreed with each of the statements from the scale on a 1–7 scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). The scores were collapsed to form a trust index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

Fit
To measure fit between the SMI and the advertised product by asking participants to rate how well the SMI "fit" with the advertised brand on a scale of 1–7 (1 = Does not fit at all; 7 = Perfectly fits).

Celebrity
To measure the extent to which the participants viewed verification as more closely associated with celebrity, we asked participants to rate on a 1–7 scale the extent to which they agreed that the social media user they saw was a celebrity (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Dependent variables
To measure likelihood to purchase the advertised product, participants responded on a 1–7 scale how likely they were to purchase the advertised product (1 = extremely unlikely; 7 = extremely likely). Additionally, there was an option for the participants to select that

they do not use the advertised product. Sixteen participants indicated that they did not use the advertised product, so they were removed from the data analysis.

3.2.4 | Results

Manipulation check

To test whether our manipulation was successful, we asked participants whether the SMI they saw was verified or not. 93.2% of the participants were able to correctly identify the verification (or not) of the SMI they saw. We ran the following analysis with and without those who failed the manipulation check and there was no difference in statistical significance, only those who passed the manipulation check are reported.

Control measures

We expected there to be no difference in social media use or knowledge of verification between conditions. A series of ANOVAs revealed this to be the case: there were no differences between conditions on social media usage or familiarity with verification between conditions (all p's > .5; $M_{\text{instagramusageverification}} = 6.39$ vs. $M_{\text{instagramusagenotverification}} = 6.45$; $M_{\text{familiarityverification}} = 4.32$ vs. $M_{\text{familiaritynotverification}} = 4.27$).

Fit

We expected that the participants who saw the fitness SMI would rate the SMI as being more of a fit with the protein powder ad than the beauty SMI and an ANOVA revealed this main effect ($M_{\text{Fitness}} = 6.12$ vs. $M_{\text{Beauty}} = 4.83$, $F[1418] = 12.48$, $p < .01$).

Credibility and authenticity

Because of study 1, we expected that there would be no difference between verification for either credibility or authenticity. An ANOVA revealed no effect of verification on either the credibility measure ($M_{\text{Verified}} = 4.43$ vs. $M_{\text{Unverified}} = 4.39$, $p > .5$) or the authenticity measure ($M_{\text{Verified}} = 4.65$ vs. $M_{\text{Unverified}} = 4.73$, $p > .3$).

Trust

Because of Hypothesis 2a, we expected that participants would trust an ad less when the appeal comes from an SMI that does not fit with the advertising. An ANOVA revealed this main effect: participants who saw the beauty SMI had significantly lower trust in the brand than those who saw a fitness SMI ($M_{\text{Fit}} = 5.72$ vs. $M_{\text{Nofit}} = 5.04$, $F[1418] = 4.21$, $p < .05$).

Celebrity

Similar to study 1 we expected a main effect of verification on celebrity. An ANOVA revealed this: participants rated verified accounts as higher on celebrity than their non-verified counterparts ($M_{\text{Verified}} = 6.13$ vs. $M_{\text{Unverified}} = 5.64$, $F[1418] = 4.62$, $p < .05$).

Dependent variables

We expected an interaction with verification and fit with the ad. A two-way ANOVA revealed this interaction ($F[2417] = 3.83$,

$p < .05$). Planned contrasts revealed that participants who saw a verified beauty SMI were significantly less likely to purchase the protein powder than participants who saw a non-verified beauty SMI ($M_{\text{Verifiedbeauty}} = 4.92$ vs. $M_{\text{Unverifiedbeauty}} = 5.34$, $F[1418] = 3.98$, $p < .05$). Further, planned contrasts revealed no difference between a verified fitness account and a non-verified fitness account on likelihood to purchase the protein powder ($M_{\text{Verifiedfitness}} = 5.56$ vs. $M_{\text{Unverifiedfitness}} = 5.49$, $p > .1$).

We ran a moderated mediation analysis with verification as our IV, the fit of the ad and SMI as our moderator between the IV and the mediator, the trust index as the mediator, and likelihood to purchase as our DV (see Figure 1; PROCESS Model 7; Hayes, 2012).

The moderated mediation model revealed expected differences across the values of likelihood to purchase, as evidenced by the index of moderated mediation ($\beta = .05$, SE $= 0.006$, 95% CI: 0.001–0.019). Among participants who saw the beauty SMI, those who saw the verification were less likely to purchase the protein powder than those who did not see a verification, and this was driven by the participant's trust in the brand ($\beta = -.67$, SE $= 0.012$, 95% CI: 0.016–0.142). There was no mediation effect for participants who saw the fitness SMI (95% CI: −0.016 to 0.142).

4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

4.1 | Conclusions

The results from the two studies confirm the effects of verification on consumer's beliefs and purchase intentions. Consumers associate verification with celebrity rather than credibility or authenticity. Further, because consumers associate verification with celebrity, they are less likely to trust the brand appeal when a verified account did not fit with the brand messaging. When there is a fit between the SMI and the brand, there is no difference in trust dependent on the verification.

4.2 | Theoretical contributions

This study makes three main theoretical contributions. First, it contributes to the literature surrounding authenticity indicators in the context of social media. Previous research in marketing has looked at whether verification increases credibility (i.e., Edgerly & Vraga, 2019); this current research provides empirical evidence for how consumers view verification, and the downstream effects of verification.

Second, previous research has looked at the distinction between celebrity and SMI endorsement and found that SMIs largely are more effective (i.e., Saeed et al., 2014). In this paper, we provide evidence for why this might be. We show that when the SMI does not fit with the product they are advertising, consumers trust the brand appeal significantly less when the SMI is verified. Additionally, when there is a fit between the SMI and the ad, regardless of verification status, consumers are more likely to trust the ad.
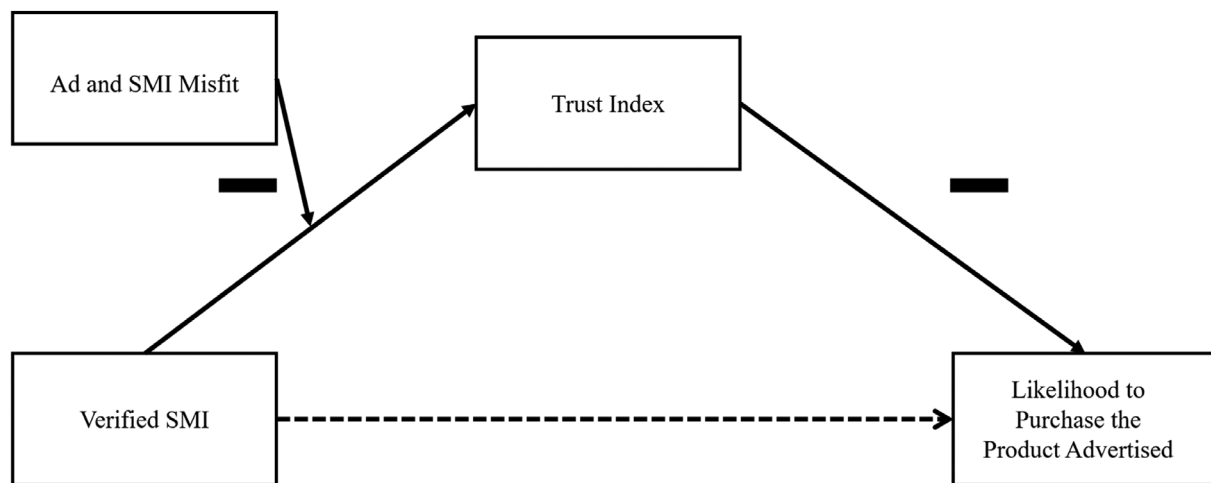
FIGURE 1 Proposed theoretical framework

Finally, previous research has looked at some of the effects of verification on Twitter. We extend this research to look at verification on Instagram. Instagram has greater engagement with ads than Twitter, particularly with the 18–34 year-old demographic (Sehl, 2021). Further, since Instagram is a visual medium, consumers interact with and process it differently than the textual information from Twitter (Itti et al., 2005).

4.3 | Practical implications

In addition to the theoretical, there are some practical implications for this research. First, for marketers, it may not make sense to pay extra money for verified SMIs to endorse their products. In fact, this research suggests that spending time finding accounts that fit with their particular brand may be a much more efficient use of their advertising budget. This research shows that when the accounts have a fit with the advertisement there is no difference in consumer purchase likelihood between verified and unverified accounts, so it may make more sense for marketers to spend less on the unverified account than paying for a verified account.

Second, for SMIs, while there are plenty of benefits to being verified, if their goal is to be an influencer as a career, a focus on brand partnerships that specifically fit with their own brand is key. Authenticity is important to gain the trust of followers, so SMIs may benefit from adhering to a particular theme and advertising products they truly endorse. Additionally, it is important that SMIs be cognizant of how consumers are perceiving them. The more advertisements that SMIs do, the less likely their followers will trust the ad appeals.

Finally, for social media platforms, previous literature, as well as this study, showed that verification did not help credibility. If the intention of verification is to increase credibility of the accounts, social media sites need to be more explicit about the criteria that they use to verify accounts. Further, because each platform has different standards for verification, additional information is needed for

consumers to understand what verification means. Right now, because of the ambiguity of the requirements, consumers are making assumptions and defining it for themselves. Standardizing verification across platforms, including but not limited to standardizing the verification symbol, could help alleviate some of the ambiguity for consumers. SMIs are also able to buy verification through what many writers have called the "black market" of social media verification (Flynn, 2017). Therefore, social media companies should consider strengthening the value of the verified badge. It is important to note, however, that further replication of these studies should be completed before making significant changes to marketing practices.

4.4 | Limitations and future research

While this research provides an initial look into the role that social media verification plays in consumer trust and purchase intentions, there are still questions left open. First, for the context of this study, we exclusively used Instagram. We did this to generalize previous work on verification on Twitter; however, there are many different social media platforms available to the general public. Looking at the effects of verification on sites that are much more specialized, such as specific hobby sites, may yield different results. Future research should look to study the effects of verification in different environments. For example, for younger consumers, TikTok is the preferred social media platform, with over 50% of users being under 30 (Geyser, 2021a, 2021b). Replicating these current studies with SMIs on TikTok could provide a unique platform to study the effects of verification on younger consumers.

Additionally, consumers have been shown to use the various social media sites for different purposes (i.e., Hughes et al., 2012; Jeri-Yabar et al., 2019). Future research should consider the role of credibility across platforms. For example, while a consumer may be more likely to trust a fashion SMI on Instagram when it comes to which clothing brands to buy, that credibility may not translate as well on

Twitter if the SMI is advertising earbuds. Further, consumers may be seeking out verification when making decisions about what to purchase. For example, a cosmetics consumer may explicitly be searching for verified beauty SMIs when deciding what to buy. Future research should include specifically screening for consumers who are actively seeking out verified accounts.

In this work we looked only at how consumers perceived verification. However, future work could manipulate verification meaning. Specifically, by priming participants to focus on verification as a measure of authenticity, rather than notoriety, may influence how they view verified accounts and the downstream effects. In this study we did not consider the reasons for consumers would look for verified accounts, simply the effects of verification and how consumers perceive it. Future research should consider the consumer's motivation for seeking out verified accounts.

The content of the ads we used in the study was not overly opinionated. Often ads on social media will include some additional thoughts from the SMI. Further, we only used positive ratings from the SMIs. Future research could look at the impact of verification on product disendoresements, when the SMI would not recommend a certain product. Theoretically, consumers may be more likely to believe accounts that are saying negative things about the product because they may believe that the SMI is being genuine.

It is also important to note that the studies presented in this paper used intent to purchase as the dependent variable. While this provides some initial support for the theory, there is a known behavior-intention gap (i.e., East et al., 2008; Sheeran & Webb, 2016). What participants say that they intend to do may not actually be what they would do. Future studies should account for this gap by including specific purchases that the participants actually had to make as the dependent variable. Additionally, this would allow for further replication of the studies which would provide marketers with additional information for decision making.

Finally, the effect of verification may have also produced different results if the participants were familiar with the endorser or product/brand. In using fictional accounts, participants did not have any familiarity, and literature shows that familiar sources are viewed as more credible (Erdogan, 1999).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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