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管理學院經營管理碩士班

(主修：行銷)

碩 士 論 文

YouTube 與 Instagram 網紅可信度及擬社會關係之前

因研究：以越南生活型態影音部落客為例

Influencers on YouTube and Instagram:

The antecedents of credibility and para-social interaction.

A study of Vietnamese lifestyle vloggers

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中 華 民 國 一 一 〇 年 一 月

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摘要

現今，社群媒體已成為社群溝通、行銷活動等生活中不可或缺之一部分。如此趨勢，不僅為新的一群在網路上發揮影響力之新族群——網紅奠定基礎，也帶動網紅行銷之風潮。本研究目的為探討網紅可信度及擬社會關係之前因，並以越南生活型態影音部落客作為研究脈絡。本研究之研究數據收集，以線上問卷調查方式進行，以至少關注一位 YouTube、Instagram 上越南生活型態影音部落客之社群網路使用者為對象，採滾雪球抽樣。本研究實證結果發現，態度同質性、外貌吸引力與社群吸引力，對擬社會關係與可信度有積極影響，其中覺察之專業、信賴為可信度的決定因素。其中，尤以擬社會關係受前述三個獨立變相之影響最大。

關鍵詞：擬社會關係，可信度，影響力行銷，社群媒體

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## ABSTRACT

Nowadays, social media has become a vital part of daily life both in terms of communication and marketing activities. This trend has laid the foundation for a new group of Internet-famous individuals who can be termed as online influencers as well as a new form of marketing called influencer marketing. This study sets out to answer the question of the antecedents of credibility and para-social interaction (PSI) in the context of Vietnamese lifestyle vloggers. An administered online survey was distributed among media users who followed lifestyle influencers on Instagram and YouTube at a high frequency via the snowballing method. The empirical results show that attitude homophily, physical attractiveness and social attractiveness positively impact PSI and perceived expertise and trustworthiness which are two major determinants of credibility. Specifically, PSI is found to be the most affected by those three independent variables.

**Keywords:** Para-social interaction, Credibility, Influencer marketing, Social media

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION


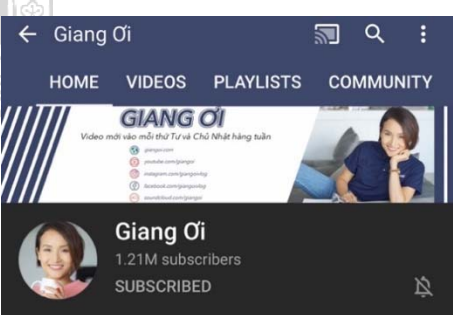


## 1.1. Research Background


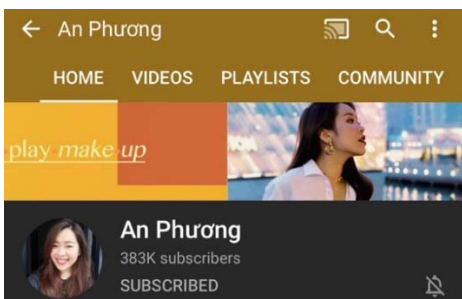

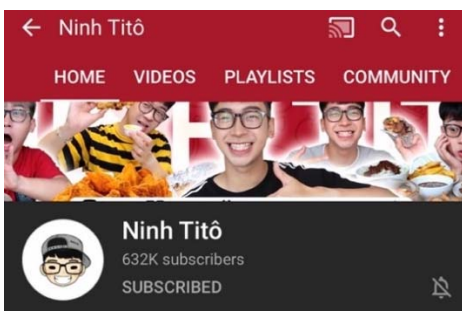
Over the recent years, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and others have aroused a lot of interest (Dwivedi et al., 2018; Knoll, 2016; Shiau, Dwivedi, & Yang, 2017). In addition to its fundamental function as connecting people, SNSs have become a crucial and efficient marketing tool for brands to disseminate their advertising contents (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; S. V. Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019). Compared to professional advertisements on the traditional media channels (i.e., TV, radios, magazines), User Generated Content (UGC) which is several active users' opinions on brands and products carries better credibility and induces a higher level of interactivity (Johnson & Kaye, 2013). Along with the growth of social media usage, conventional word-of-mouth (WOM) has co-existed with e-WOM (Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2015; Ismagilova, Slade, Rana, & Dwivedi, 2020; Shareef, Mukerji, Alryalat, Wright, & Dwivedi, 2018). As a result, brands and customers can be actively involved in exchanging their knowledge about the product and ultimately creating a reciprocal communication (Merz, Zarantonello, & Grappi, 2018; Shi, Chen, & Chow, 2016). A group of online users, which are often called online influencers, have more tendency to share their personal stories, opinions and feelings intended for their target audience on the multimedia platforms. These sharing can be in the form of videos on YouTube, pictures on Instagram or both. When those online users build up a strong following, their reviews can exert significant impacts on the brands and products' images (T. Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot, & Scott, 2007). In this study, they are termed as online influencers (Abidin, 2016; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). For example, in a recent survey, 40% of the participants claimed to buy products due to an influencer's suggestions on Twitter (Lou, Tan, & Chen, 2019).

With the ubiquity of Internet and technological devices, more and more people have been active on social media platforms. This has given rise to various influencers in almost every imaginable aspect of life such as food, health, fitness, relationships, gaming and so on (Klassen et al., 2018; Raggatt et al., 2018). It is a common content that after influencers have tried the products or followed a particular routine, they convey their sharing into the form of written posts, pictures or videos. To be specific, Instagram influencers normally post an eye-catching picture with a moderate-length caption while YouTuber will upload the videos enriched with their true personality and

personal thoughts. In many cases, influencers will take advantage of multiple platforms to optimize their exposure to the followers with a view to enhancing their image in the followers' minds. Therefore, many followers can even regard these online influencers as their gurus in each particular area of knowledge (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Out of various topics, lifestyle is seemingly the most common content deployed by the influencers because it is main-stream information that attracts the attention of a huge number of people regardless of their age, race and nationality. In Vietnam, digital marketing has been booming with the national social media penetration of 64% (Deloitte, 2020) and the seventh largest number of active Facebook users (Statista, 2020b). The young media users aged under 29 are reported to spend approximately 3.7 hours per day on social media activities, making up 74% of their media consumption. Accordingly, it is an ideal environment for SMIs to develop and materialize their influential powers (Starnagge, 2017).

Below are some examples of currently popular Vietnamese lifestyle influencers on both YouTube and Instagram:

Influencer	Instagram account	YouTube channel
<b>Giang Ơi</b>	 <p>giangoivlog</p> <p>821 Posts 402K Followers 144 Following</p> <p><b>Giang Ơi</b>          Adulthood of a Weirdo 🤪          Business enquiries ✉️ tan@giangoi.com  <a href="http://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-AJnWGWhPt...">www.youtube.com/channel/UC-AJnWGWhPt...</a>          Followed by junkadong, maihuongphung and 28 others</p>	 <p>Giang Ơi</p> <p>HOME VIDEOS PLAYLISTS COMMUNITY</p> <p>GIANG ƠI          Video mới vào mỗi thứ Tư và Chủ Nhật hàng tuần          @giangoi          @giangoi.com/giangoi          @giangoi.com/giangoi          @giangoi.com/giangoi          @giangoi.com/giangoi</p> <p><b>Giang Ơi</b>          1.21M subscribers          SUBSCRIBED</p>
<b>Châu Bùi</b>	 <p>chaubui_</p> <p>3,146 Posts 2M Followers 1,192 Following</p> <p><b>Chou Chou</b> 🐼          Public Figure          22 🇻🇳          Love Yourself - Pass it on!          Forbes 30 Under 30          ✉️ kat.nmt@gmail.com more  <a href="https://youtu.be/ZbF_QiSK76A">youtu.be/ZbF_QiSK76A</a>          Followed by quan.cartoon, minminmin0712 and 35 others</p>	 <p>Chau Bui Official</p> <p>HOME VIDEOS PLAYLISTS COMMUNITY</p> <p>Chau Bui          OFFICIAL YOUTUBE CHANNEL          Video mới vào mỗi thứ Tư và Chủ Nhật hàng tuần</p> <p><b>Chau Bui Official</b>          470K subscribers          SUBSCRIBED</p>

<p><b>An Phuong</b></p>		
<p><b>Ninh Titô</b></p>		

**Picture 1: Examples of Vietnamese lifestyle influencers**

## 1.2. Research Motivation

In this digital era, brands are recommended to forge a strong bond and partnership with social media influencers because social media has become an indispensable part of many people's lives and gone beyond its fundamental function of communication to other functional uses like shopping (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). This trend has developed a new form of marketing called "influencer marketing" (Forrester, 2019; Sammis, Lincoln, & Pomponi, 2015). It is estimated that up to \$15 million will be invested in influencer marketing by 2022 (Schomer, 2019). Other statistical reports show the similar result and support the anticipated amount of increasing investments in "influencer marketing" (Statista, 2020a). It goes without saying that influencer marketing will become a vital marketing tool in many major industries, especially the groups of daily-use products.

Influencer marketing can bring in counter-productive effects unless employed in the right way (Beres, 2019). While the numeric qualities of influencers (i.e., the follower number) can somehow signal the level of popularity (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), they do not guarantee their advertising effectiveness (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Instead, studies have shown that digital influencers' marketing effectiveness can be only optimized when they are perceived to be a source of credible and develop close attachments with their followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; S.-A. A. Jin & Phua, 2014; Yuan & Lou, 2020). In other words, in order to deploy successful marketing campaigns with online celebrities, the brands need to understand

the mechanism in which the influencers can be associated with being highly credible and interactive. For the online vloggers who intend to promote the products to their followers, they also need to have a profound understanding of key qualities to gain the trust from the audience (Aral, 2011; De Veirman et al., 2017). However, the research on this particular field is still limited and open to further investigation. As a result, these limitations fuel this paper's motivation to dig deeper and gain an insightful understanding of both the mechanism and characteristics of influencers' source credibility and parasocial interaction.

### **1.3. Research Objectives**

In this area of marketing research, the majority of previous papers focused on celebrity endorsements (Ford, 2018; McCormick, 2016). However, Internet-famous personalities hold certain characteristics different from traditional celebrities and their method to endorse a product does not share the same with regular advertisements (Abidin, 2016). It was shown that popular influencers were effective in circulating product messages, starting and popularizing new trends and driving up sales (De Vries & Carlson, 2014). While there normally exists an invisible barrier between the celebrities and their fans, that barrier is erased between the online influencers and their followers. At the core of their interaction activities, the influencers emerge as “an ordinary person” with a particular talent or specialist knowledge. This facilitates their relationships with the followers as a friendship with social closeness and builds up the trust in the followers' minds. Therefore, further exploration needs to be carried out to analyze the persuasiveness of YouTuber and Instagram influencers.

YouTube and Instagram are chosen as the two primary platforms for the current research because they actively offer monetizing features that have incentivized digital influencers to become dedicated content creators. For example, besides the financial incentives from their endorsing the branded items, YouTubers also make considerable earnings by Google AdSense (Rose, 2019). Since the public favor the image-based contents more than ever, Instagram becomes an effective marketing tool for brands to blend their products in the influencers' posts (Giles David & Edwards, 2018; Marwick, 2015). While Facebook is the leading networking sites in many regions, this gigantic platform does not offer those aforementioned features; therefore, it is not targeted in this study.

In their research, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) claim that credibility and parasocial interaction are two key elements regarding the level of persuasiveness extracted

from online influencers. Accordingly, this study chooses to investigate the antecedents of credibility and para-social interaction in the case of Internet-famous personalities.

Vietnam is one of the countries whose number of Internet and social media users is the highest in Asia. According to Accenture report (2016), 63.8 million users will be on the Internet, with more than half of the population using smartphones. However, the number of research papers on influencer marketing conducted in Vietnam is still extremely limited. Therefore, Vietnamese lifestyle influencers on Instagram and YouTube will be the focus of analysis because of its proliferation and finite studies (Lê Giang Nam, 2018).

As mentioned before, amidst the explosion of online influencers and the growing mistrust from the followers, source credibility and the intensity of virtual connection play a pivotal role in securing the influencers' advertising success. To gain a comprehensive understanding of influencers' persuasiveness, along with the source credibility model and parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), the persuasion theory developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) is also employed to uncover this underlying mechanism. While previous researchers considered the arguments as a vital part of persuasion, Mosler (2006) claimed that peripheral route pertaining to the Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) could even generate more persuasive results on their research context of experimental simulations. This paper argues that a number of persuasive message and peripheral cues including attitude homophily, social and physical attractiveness are conducive to formulating credibility and para-social interaction.

In sum, this study's objective is to gain insights into the antecedents of online influencers' perceived credibility and para-social interaction and thus make certain contribution to the development of lifestyle influencer' literature.

Considering these objectives, my paper aims at answering the following question:

*“What are the antecedents of perceived credibility and para-social interaction extracted from Vietnamese lifestyle influencers on YouTube and Instagram?”*

#### **1.4. Research Structure**

The research consists of five chapters which are structured as follows:

Chapter one outlines the research background, the motivation to carry out the research, its objectives and also the structure.

Chapter two is the section that provides theoretical background on the research

topic. It presents a specific definition of lifestyle influencers, perceived credibility and para-social interaction as well as their antecedents. From those detailed literature, seven hypotheses are formulated and proposed accordingly.

It is followed by Chapter three in which the paper discusses the methodology for sampling procedures, questionnaire design, measurements of constructs and data analysis.

Chapter four consists of the data analysis and results obtained in the research. Besides, the findings based on the mentioned hypotheses will be shown too.

Finally, major conclusions, implications, limitations and further research will be discussed in chapter five.



## CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

This chapter lays the theoretical foundation for the research topic. The first part is the definitions of online influencers and lifestyle contents, which are followed by comprehensive literature of ELM Model and three processes of attitude change. From the discussion of influencers and three target dependent variables including expertise, trustworthiness and para-social interaction, seven hypotheses are proposed accordingly.

### 2.1 Online Influencers

Ki and Kim (2019) define SMIs as online personae who own a sizable number of followers and the potential to exert significant impacts on their behavioral intent. Even though SMIs share certain similarities with traditional celebrities (i.e., actors, TV hosts, singers), they still distinguish themselves with unique characteristics that create their own advertising values and stimulate research interests (Gräve, 2017; S. V. Jin et al., 2019; Khamis et al., 2017; Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). For instance, while mainstream celebrities garner their fame through professional talents (Schouten et al., 2020), SMIs are Internet-famous figures who actively share self-generated contents and are perceived to be an expert in a particular area such as gaming, life tips, beauty and fitness (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Studies have shown that SMIs are highly associated with being trustworthy (S. V. Jin et al., 2019), down-to-earth (Chae, 2018) and more persuasive (Breves et al., 2019) to their followers, which makes influencer marketing an integral part of marketing campaigns for generating higher ROI compared to traditional celebrities. According to the report by Linqia (2019), 86% of surveyed marketers employed influencer marketing and 92% of them rated its effectiveness highly and considered re-employed it.

Through sites like Instagram and YouTube, social media influencers established themselves as likeable online personalities and created trendy contents with the goal of obtaining high recognition among their followers (Garcia, 2017). Given the above, Lou and Yuan (2019) proposed a specific definition of social media influencers as follows:

*“A social media influencer is first and foremost a content-generator; one who has a status of expertise in a specific area, who has cultivated a sizable number of captive followers - those are of marketing value to brands - by regularly producing*



*valuable content via social media.”*

This study concentrates on Internet-famous individuals who gained their fame from being content creators. To explore what to affect followers’ perceived expertise and trustworthiness on their favorable lifestyle influencer, the relevant attitude and persuasion models will be introduced in the following sections.

## **2.2 ELM Model**

Regarding the persuasion of communicators, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) is a common basis in which the amount of effort devoted by the receiver to process a message can affect his or her evaluation. ELM states that there exist two fundamental routes of persuasion which are called the central and peripheral routes. Philip, Kerr, Don, McColl, and Pals (2014) contends that those two routes require different levels of cognitive efforts used to digest a piece of information and represent two ends on a continuum. Different individuals will be persuaded by a different route, depending on whether their elaboration likelihood is high or low (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Wegener, Fabrigar, Priester, & Cacioppo, 1993). The level of elaboration likelihood can be attributed to either a person’s motivation or ability. From the viewpoint of (Petty et al., 1993), the audience’s motivation can vary in different contexts contingent on the degree of personal relevance, need for cognition (NFC) and the thesis’ origin. Pertaining to the ability, it is a vital factor in determining which route an individual will take. In particular, the intensity of repeated messages, argument intricacy, distraction stimulants and the level of previous exposure can individually or collectively impact an individual’s capability to process a message.

It is hypothesized that at high elaboration likelihood, the information will be digested via the central route with the activation of NFC to process factual information and assertions. This route can be helpful in predicting those individuals’ subsequent behavior. When the elaboration likelihood is low, individuals are expected to use the peripheral route with cognitive shortcuts which are reliant on peripheral hints such as personal perceptions of speakers’ characteristics (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In other words, the receiver’s attitude will not be affected by the quality of argument itself, naturally temporary, and not predictive of subsequent behaviors, which is relatively contrary to the central route’s implications.

In the ELM model, a number of variables can act as mediators which can influence an individual to choose a central or peripheral route. For instance, when the

audience is highly involved in the information disseminating process, there is a high likelihood that the central route will be triggered (Petty et al., 1993; Philip et al., 2014). However, when the audience is attracted by the speaker's favorable appearance, s/he will subconsciously make use of the central route instead (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In the context of social media platforms, SMIs are expected to utilize the peripheral route to optimize their persuasion and online influence, especially their perceived attitude homophily, physical attractiveness and social attractiveness.

### **2.3 Three Processes Of Attitude Change**

By and large, the communicator himself and the others' perception of him/her can have a profound influence on the audience's level of being persuaded. Three fundamental traits of a speaker in persuasion are authority, social attractiveness and credibility which bear a close relationship with compliance, identification and internalization respectively (Kelman, 1958).

In many cases, compliance is characterized by the position of the communicator in terms of social structure. In order to avoid punishments or gaining rewards, the audience chooses to conform to the induced behavior. The behavioral consequences do not necessarily root from his or her true belief in content. To online influencers, we argue that they do not have any authoritative power over their followers.

Identification can be applied to the cases when an individual aspires to an illusionary relationship with another person or group. The relationship can develop as a type of classical identification in which the individual overtakes the position of the other side, or it may take the manifestation of a reciprocal tie. He or she follows the induced behavior because of his/her expectations for the desired relationship. This identification process is in line with the development of para-social interaction in which the followers are immersed in an illusionary intimacy with their favorite online figures.

Last but not least, internalization occurs when the communicator and receiver share the same value system. In other words, the receiver considers the ideas and content of the speech congruent with his ideology and suitable for his needs. The induced behavior coexists with the individual's inherent beliefs and the contentment results from the informational attributes of the argument. In our research, this internalization process is further explicated by the concept of attitude homophily.

### **2.4 Source Credibility Model**

According to Hovland and Weiss (1951), credibility plays a crucial role in the

persuasiveness of both a communicator and a message source. Regarding its definition, a lot of researchers have defined credibility in their own ways. Some researchers considered it as an attribute that can influence how the individual perceives the quality of an argument (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010). Others characterized source credibility as “a judgment made by a receiver concerning the believability of a communicator” (O’Keefe, 1990, p. 130). From the perspectives of Metzger et al. (2010) and Robins and Holmes (2008), source credibility co-varies with how the information is perceived to be credible. In other words, the individuals have more tendency to trust the information whose source is associated with a high level of reliability (Arora, Stoner, & Arora, 2006; Buda & Zhang, 2000). On social media platforms, referred to as selective exposure, Johnson and Kaye (2013) proposes that people can determine the content to view or ignore on the basis of credibility. The brand messages communicated by the peers on SNSs are perceived as more valid than on conventional platforms such as TV or newspapers (Munnukka, Uusitalo, & Toivonen, 2016). Therefore, it can be said that there exists a strong relationship between credibility and perceived advertising values (Ismagilova et al., 2020; McKeown & Shearer, 2019). Moreover, the numeric qualities of social media accounts (i.e. the number of followers/subscribers, the level of engagement) are also reported to bear a positive correlation with the level of credibility (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Klassen et al., 2018; Youn & Jin, 2017).

Expertise and trustworthiness are originally proposed to be two key components of source credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Seiler & Kucza, 2017). Even though other researchers have tried to extend the source credibility model, expertise and trustworthiness are still commonly agreed to be the fundamental elements (Munnukka et al., 2016; Seiler & Kucza, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Thus, in this study, these two determinants are adopted as major dependent variables. Pornpitakpan (2004) stated that perceived expertise and trustworthiness are highly related to the perceived persuasiveness of the audience. As the digital influencers only have virtual interactions with their fans, a high level of perceived credibility is nothing but an essential feature that can secure their advertising performances.

Expertise is defined as a source’ proficiency or qualification, in terms of their know-how and accumulated experience, to make certain allegations pertaining to a particular area (J. C. McCroskey, 1966). According to Gass and Seiter (2015), acquiring extensive knowledge in an area, being experienced in doing something, or even holding a reliable title, all can enhance the level of perceived expertise in audiences’ mind. When the people digest the contents given by a communicator who is associated with

expertness, they are more easily involved in the compliance gaining process in many empirical studies (Crano, 1970; Crisci & Kassinove, 1973). In addition, it is specifically proven that the receivers hold more favorable judgements towards the advertisements and higher purchasing intents when the anticipated experts appear in the ad (Braunsberger & Buckler, 2000; Ohanian, 1991). The previous researchers have shown that the communicator's actual expertise is not as important as the audience's perception of his expertness (Erdogan, 1999). Online influencers' perceived expertise comes from their genuine experience and knowledge about the endorsed products. Besides, online influencers often devote their contents to one specific area and build up their expertness in this specific area (Horan, 2015). Therefore, as self-acclaimed experts, online influencers are perceived to be genuinely better-informed than normal celebrities.

Trustworthiness conceptualizes how reliable, earnest and candid an individual is perceived to be (McGinnies & Ward, 1980). In other words, trustworthiness concerns the source's integrity and whether the receivers believe in the communicator disseminating accurate and truthful statements (Bowers & Phillips, 1967; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In order to gain the trust in the receivers, only expertise is not sufficient; the communicator needs to be able to associate himself with the reliability and trustworthiness (Gass & Seiter, 2015). As one of two major determinants of source credibility, trustworthiness is known to exert a profound influence on both the source's persuasiveness and the receivers' evaluation of source credibility (Miller & Baseheart, 1969; Pornpitakpan, 2004; Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Especially in the context of advertising and marketing, consumers' perceptions about the brand and brand's credibility are closely related to the perceived trustworthiness of the spokesperson in the advertisements or brand messages (Yoon, Kim, & Kim, 1998).

Based on the empirical studies conducted by R. G. Smith (1973) and (Seiler & Kucza, 2017), trustworthiness is considered to generate higher impacts than expertise as a dimension of source credibility. This also applies to the case of SMIs. The first reason is that, in the minds of the audience, influencers' reviews, tips and advice are based on their personal experiences such as lifestyle influencers sharing about their life tips in their posts. It is undeniable that when the influencers become more famous, they can have more sponsored and commerce-oriented posts. However, most of the influencers seemingly keep their opinions neutralized and isolate the promotional goals. Secondly, the level of trustworthiness can be greatly enhanced in the influencers' contents because the endorsed products are arranged in the authentic and real-life setting. As a result, lifestyle YouTubers can receive a lot of trust when commenting on

the items that they have tried before (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014).

Under the examination of the attitude change process, source credibility has effects on the listeners via the internalization process in which the speaker's message is in line with his/her beliefs (Kelman, 1974; Vandenberg, Self, & Seo, 1994). Similarity was also found to be an effective persuasive cue (Berscheid, 1966), especially when the similarity is embedded in the argument (Simons, Berkowitz, & Moyer, 1970). Communicators with similar value systems can create trust since the suggestions can possibly be applied to the communicatees because of their resemblances (McPeck & Edwards, 1975; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2011), people tend to be persuaded by individuals that are thought to represent their personalities. For example, millennials are more inclined to purchase a product endorsed by the celebrities whose image is congenial to their needs (Sukhdial, Aiken, & Kahle, 2002). However, that similarity can possibly generate negative reactions if the communicator is regarded to be a novice or an amateur (Hilmert, Kulik, & Christenfeld, 2006; Wagner, 1984).

According to Prisbell and Andersen (1980), the similarity between the information receivers and the communicators pertaining to value system and social class is termed as attitude homophily. In other words, attitude homophily exists among the people who hold similarities in assumptions, social caste and the like (Lee & Watkins, 2016). This study considers attitude homophily as a determining dimension of source credibility because it reflects the perceived resemblances between a SMI and followers with regards to value system. As mentioned above, the internalization process embodies the relevant values that can be found between two interacting individuals. Thus, it is our argument that attitude homophily would bear positive correlations with the two aforementioned determinants of digital influencers (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

***H1a: The followers' perception of attitude homophily with an influencer is positively related to their perception of the influencer's expertise.***

***H1b: The followers' perception of attitude homophily with an influencer is positively related to their perception of the influencer's trustworthiness.***

It's a high likelihood that appealing speakers can create more impactful effects on the audience than less appealing ones via the identification process (Kelman, 1958). In the context of social media, the followers would adore their influencer's look and intuitively want to forge a positive relationship with him or her. Known as heavy users of social networking sites, millennials usually associate themselves with their idols and

apply certain facets of their glamour and style to their real life in order to achieve the similar attractive appearance (Boon & Lomore, 2006; Peter, Olson, & Grunert, 1999). According to (Patzner, 1983), consistent with existing research, physical attractiveness concerns facial appearance, and refers to the extent to which a person is regarded by the other as possessing a charming and alluring look (Munnukka et al., 2016). Therefore, when celebrities and Internet-famous personalities create trends or share their lifestyle tips, a great number of fans are inclined to follow them. Because this research focuses on lifestyle matters, our study argue that physical attractiveness is positively correlated with credibility when it can act as a catch. For instance, lifestyle influencers can justify the positive effects of endorsed products by using their own appearance in their digital contents. On the other hand, the lack of physical charm could possibly lead to negative impacts on the perceived credibility of the online influencer. Based on that reasoning, we hypothesize:

***H2a: The influencer's physical attractiveness is positively related to his/her expertise perceived by their followers.***

***H2b: The influencer's physical attractiveness is positively related to his/her trustworthiness perceived by their followers.***

## **2.5 Influencers and Para-Social Interaction**

The term “parasocial interaction” was first introduced by Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) to demonstrate the TV viewers’ presumably reciprocal relationship and intimacy with TV characters. Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) conceptualize PSI as an interpersonal engagement between media users and their media consumption, which can be manifested in various forms including “seeking guidance from a media persona, seeing media personalities as friends, imagining being part of a favorite program’s social world, and desiring to meet media performers” (p.156). This interpersonal interaction basically serves as one-sided friendship (Horton & Wohl, 1956) that is open to interactive responses (Labrecque, 2014; Rubin et al., 1985) but mainly imaginary (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Stever & Lawson, 2013) in the traditional media context. After multiple exposures, the media consumers establish a belief that they know the media figures personally and intuitively treat them as one of their friends’ circle with the illusion of intimacy (Ballantine & Martin, 2005; Tsiotsou, 2015).

The advent of connecting media personalities with their fans via social networking sites has broken a new ground for the development of PSI. Although social media platforms intrinsically facilitate two-sided conversation and promisingly forge a

bilateral communication among the users, the interactions between media users and their favorite Internet characters are mostly unidirectional (Brown, 2015). For many social media sites like YouTube, the users can seemingly have intimate access to personal aspects of media personalities' lives but those account owners are still the one that controls the two-sided correspondence (Stever & Lawson, 2013). This characteristic is typical of PSI with regards to its unilateral communication (J. Kim & Song, 2016).

In J. Kim and Song (2016) research, PSI is proposed as an applicable tool to get an insightful look into the connection between the stars and their fans; accordingly, this argument can be applied to the case of YouTubers and Instagrammers too. The fans can gradually enhance their belief in "knowing" online influencers through media exposure. After an extended period of exposure, the followers can develop that subconscious awareness of mutual understanding, which bears close similarities with the result of traditional media.

To be specific, female viewers who are in a para-social interaction with a famous character normally appeal to owning a similar look and wish to be a part of his/her social circle (Greenwood, Pietromonaco, & Long, 2008; Konrath, Chopik, Hsing, & O'Brien, 2014). Taillon Brian, Mueller Steven, Kowalczyk Christine, and Jones Daniel (2020) has contended that social media provides an environment conducive to formulating PSI between SMIs and their followers. That relationship can be established when online users subscribe to the bloggers' channels and follow their posts shared on multiple social media platforms. In many cases, the followers can create their own virtual community to have more private conversations with their influencers in terms of their common interests and beliefs (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). YouTube channels with only one presenter are reported to gain my popularity and impacts than group-based channels (Arthurs, Drakopoulou, & Gandini, 2018). This can be attributed to the intensity of para-social bonds forged with the singular representative. Besides, celebrities who connect with their audience on a regular basis can perform better persuasiveness (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004) than unfriendly ones (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

In fact, the communication between an influencer and his/her followers on YouTube and Instagram is not totally one-sided because media users are can make use of commenting function and there still exist the possibility of media personalities responding to the messages and remarks concerning that content. Nevertheless, there is a high likelihood that influencers cannot actually reply to all the comments and be fully engaged in a true discussion owing to their large following. In this respect, online

influencers bear certain resemblance to traditional celebrities. One more interesting fact is that the level of para-social interaction with online influencers covaries with the followers' frequency of using social media (H. Kim, Ko, & Kim, 2015).

As mentioned above, attitude homophily refers to the similarities between communicators in terms of value system and social class Prisbell and Andersen (1980). These similarities are said to enhance the possibility and intensity of interpersonal communication (Hsu, 2020). The more similarities there exist between two people, the more likely they are to communicate with each other. Eyal and Rubin (2003) even argue that those interactions are an effective tool for the individuals to express and confirm their value systems. Regarding PSI, the more similar the followers' value systems are to their influencers', the more frequently they want to maintain and enhance the online interaction with those Internet-famous characters. Based on previous works of McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) and Aral and Walker (2012), attitude homophily is considered as an explanatory element to activate the bilateral communication and regulate the relationship-induced establishments, particularly in the studies of social media. In line with that proposition, attitude homophily is also positioned as a crucial aspect of PSI in the influencer/follower relationships (Giles, 2002). Accordingly, we predict that influencers' attitude homophily will positively affect their para-social interaction.

***H3a: The followers' perception of attitude homophily with an influencer is positively related to their para-social interaction with the influencer.***

Perse and Rubin (1989) claim that being allured to a media personality is a fundamental precursor of PSI. The presenters' attractiveness consists of both physical and social aspects (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

Under the perspective of the social psychology literature, physical attractiveness concerns one person's perceived charming and pleasing physical features as well as aesthetic look. In each culture and period, requirements of physical attractiveness can be different; however, they are still highly relevant to interpersonal interaction (Reis, Nezlek, & Wheeler, 1980). Kelman (1974) argues that attractive communicators can reinforce their influence through identification process. When the followers are attracted to the online influencers' looks, they have more tendency to interact and form a long-term relationship. Consistent with many previous academic research, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) argue that physical attractiveness bears a position relationship with PSI. In line with the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:



***H3b: The followers' perception of an influencer's physical attractiveness is positively related to their para-social interaction with the influencer.***

Social attractiveness is concerned with the likelihood that a follower chooses the online personality as a friend or a work partner in real life (Lee & Watkins, 2016). In addition to physical appeal, social attractiveness has also been stated as another aspect of PSI whether the communication is on the basis of conventional channels (television, newspaper) or new media (online networking platforms) (H. Kim et al., 2015; L. L. McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006). Socially attractive presenters have the ability to alter the perceptions of the audience (Sharma, 1990). Chaiken (1979) proposes that the audience have more tendency to interact with the more sociable communicators than the less approachable ones when the same message is communicated. As an effective peripheral cue, social attractiveness can significantly establish a strong connection between the influencers and their followers. Therefore, it is argued that social attractiveness can have positive impacts on the followers' para-social interaction with their influencers.

***H3c: The followers' perception of an influencer's social attractiveness is positively related to their para-social interaction with the influencer.***



## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research framework

In line with the literature review, the following research model reflects the relationship between attitude homophily, physical attractiveness, social attractiveness and credibility and para-social interaction.

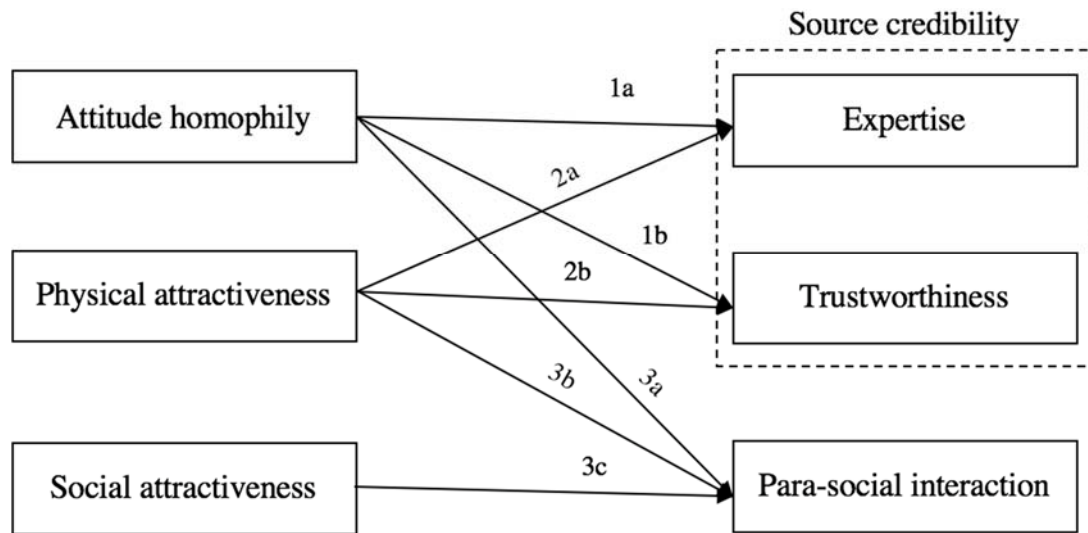


Figure 1 Proposed framework

### 3.2. Research Method and Sampling Procedure

This research used questionnaire survey method to verify the proposed framework by measuring influencer followers' perception of one of their preferable lifestyle influencers. The main subject of this study is Vietnamese individuals who are familiar with social media and use the Internet at a high frequency and follow at least one lifestyle influencer on social media platforms. This method has been used by several researchers due to its convenience and fast speed (Ertimur & Gilly, 2012; Kumar & Ghodeswar Bhimrao, 2015; van Noort, Voorveld, & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Because YouTube and Instagram are currently the most popular social media platforms used by the influencers in Vietnamese market, the target respondents will be the ones who are used to those two channels. This research used snowball sampling method by choosing a group of qualified respondents first and identifying additional people through their acquaintances and social networks online. The sample size of 500 respondents are expected in this study. Geographical factor is not taken into consideration because of the fundamental concept of social media in terms of borderless platform.

### **3.3. Questionnaire Design**

The research is based on quantitative approach; therefore, a set of questions measured in the questionnaire was designed and distributed in the form of online survey (Please refer to the Appendix for questionnaire in English version). While the adapted question items are in English, this paper's target respondents are Vietnamese. In order to guarantee a clear understanding of all questions, back-translation steps were implemented to ensure the accuracy of questions. First, I translated the set of questions into Vietnamese and then one Vietnamese friend of mine who has an excellent command of English translated that Vietnamese version back into English. We arranged an appointment for double-checking both versions and during that discussion, I modified some particular words and expressions. Next, I spread that edited version to 10 Vietnamese friends as a pilot test. All of them encountered no difficulty in understanding the questions and providing these answers; as a result, I used it as the final version of questionnaire and distributed to the target respondents.

The questionnaire is classified into seven sections: Section 1 contains demographic information of participants; the other six sections consist of items pertaining to their subjective perceptions about the lifestyle influencers' attitude homophily, physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, and para-social interaction respectively.

The data obtained from the survey results will be coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package Social Science (SPSS) software, which be shown in Chapter 4.

### **3.4. Variables and Measurement**

To operationalize the constructs, all the measurements applied in this study were adapted from the literature. For the constructs of attitude homophily, physical attractiveness and trustworthiness, we adapted the measurement of Munnukka et al. (2016). Social attractiveness and expertise were adapted from the measurement of J. C. McCroskey (1966). Para-social interaction has been operationalized using Lee and Watkins (2016). In conformance with the literature, all the items are reflexive and assessed with a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 to 5 denotes "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neither disagree nor agree", "agree" and "strongly agree".

Attitude homophily is defined as the degree to which people who interact are similar in beliefs, education, social status and the like. One sample item is "The influencer and I have a lot in common." Because attitude homophily refers to the similarities in the value systems, another item is proposed as "The influence and I are

a lot alike.” Besides, when the influencer and the follower share the same thinking way, the followers often have a lot of sympathy for the influencer. That leads to another item which is “I can easily identify with him/her.”

Next, physical attractiveness is defined as the extent to which a person is perceived by the other as possessing an appealing and pleasing physical appearance. Related to the level of physical appearance, the questionnaire presents three items which are “I find him/her very physically attractive”, “I think the influencer is good-looking” and “I think the influencer is sexy.” In addition, a lot of influencers’ charisma lies in their fashion style too; therefore, another item is “I consider him/her very stylish.”

Another aspect of attractiveness is social attractiveness which is defined as the likelihood to befriend or to choose the media figure as a social or a work partner. This concept is translated into two positive items which are “I think he/she could be a friend of mine” and “I would like to have a friendly chat with her.” In order to ensure the attention and authenticity of the respondents, negative items are added to this group of questions. They are “We would never establish a personal friendship with each other”, “He/She just wouldn’t fit into my circle of friends” and “it would be difficult to meet and talk with him/her.”

As mentioned in the literature review, credibility results from two major determinants which are expertise and trustworthiness. Regarding source expertise, it means a source’s competence and qualifications, including their knowledge or skills, to provide certain perspectives in a particular topic or subject. A person who is perceived to have expertise is commonly associated with being knowledgeable and experienced. These elements are illustrated in the items including “I feel he/she knows a lot” and “I consider he/she sufficiently experienced to make assertions about his/her area.” The followers’ perceptions about the expertise of the influencers are also found in the other two items which are “I feel he/she is competent to make assertions about the things he/she is good at” and “I consider him/her as an expert on his/her area.”

Pertaining to trustworthiness, it concerns the receivers’ perception of a source as honest, sincere or truthful. These perceptions are clearly demonstrated through four items which are “I feel he/she is honest”, “I consider him/her trustworthy”, “I feel he/she is truthful” and “I consider him/her earnest” respectively.

Last but not least, para-social interaction is an illusionary experience, such that audience interact with personas (i.e mediated representations of presenters, celebrities, or characters) as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship. This kind of relationship normally excites the followers to watch the influencers’ videos on

multiple platforms, especially YouTube. From that point, two following items which are “I look forward to watching his/her videos on her YouTube channel” and “If the YouTube bloggers appeared on another YouTube channel, I would watch that video” are included. Another element of para-social interaction is related to friendship-like relationship. Lee and Watkins (2016) proposed two items which are “When I’m watching his/her videos, I feel as if I am part of his/her group”, “I think the influencer is like an old friend” and “The influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.” With that illusionary experience rooted in minds, the followers are likely to develop their desire to meet the influencer and read more about that influencer. This idea is presented in two items which are “I would like to meet the influencer in person” and “If there were a story about the influencer in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.”



## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 4.1 Descriptive Analysis

#### 4.1.1. General descriptions

In order to reach a large group of people, the set of questionnaires was converted into Google Form survey and distributed through snowballing method. After one-month period of April 2020 and May 2020, the total number of 516 responses were collected. However, 23 responses were deleted because they did not meet two particular requirements of the study. When asked about one of their lifestyle influencers, 19 answers were either “I don’t know” or non-existing names. which could be difficult for researcher to verify the influencer information again. In addition, regarding the question about which platform he/she uses to follow the influencer, four respondents clicked “no platforms”, which made them unsuitable for the aim of study. Consequently, 493 samples were retained for the data analysis procedure.

Among 493 remaining responses, 69 survey participants reported foreign influencers, not Vietnamese ones. In particular, 33 of those 69 responses are traditional celebrities who are singers, actors or sport stars, which makes them even more improper for the research. Another interesting finding from this group is that 19 respondents mentioned Korean individuals. This illustrates that Korean celebrities and YouTubers are significantly popular among Vietnamese audience. Because this study’s target research is about Vietnamese lifestyle influencers, those 69 answers are still not qualified for further data analysis.

The remaining 424 samples were kept for the following data analysis. The following Table 1 describes reasons to remove those invalid samples:

**Table 4.1 Invalid samples**

Invalid samples	Number	Reasons
Non-followers	23	Not follow any online influencers
Foreign influencers	69	Not belong to the targeted objective
Total	92	

#### **4.1.2. Detailed characteristics of respondents**

At the beginning of survey, seven questions were presented to obtain demographic data of respondents. Those questions were designed to record (1) Gender, (2) Age, (3) Vietnamese lifestyle influencer that they have followed on the social media, (4) which social media sites they use to follow the lifestyle influencer, (5) how long they have followed the influencer, (6) how often they check on that influencer's account per week and (7) why they decide to follow that influencer.

Based on the result in Table 4-2, almost 80% of the respondents are female, which is not surprising because women are more inclined to pay attention to lifestyle-related contents than men. Quantcast report (2017) states that six of ten top websites with the most female audience are lifestyle-relevant contents. Only 84 participants are male, accounting for 19.8% and the other 0.95% identify themselves as other genders. In addition, as reported in indaHash Labs' report (2017), 68% of social media influencers are female and women are reported to be more effective communication partners on the network level (Lokithasan, Simon, Jasmin, & Othman, 2019).

Regarding their age, 85 and 294 of the respondents are below 18 and from 18 to 22, which accounts for 20.05% and 69.34% respectively. 42 participants, making for 9.91%, fall into the range of 23 and 29 while only one belongs to the group of 30 and 35 and two respondents are above 36. Since this study is snowballing in which the participants were selected among my own social network, it can be seen that a big percentage of participants are the individuals who are aged 18 and 22 and have a habit of using social media at high frequency. Based on the respondents' answers, it can be easily seen that the mentioned lifestyle influencers are varied in many aspects of contents ranging from cooking, make-up, skincare to fitness training. As to the following social sites, 365 respondents subscribe to their influencers' YouTube channels, which makes up for 86.08% and 215 participants (50.71%) follow their influencers on Instagram. With respect to Facebook and TikTok, 236 and 32 respondents follow their influencers on these two platforms, accounting for 55.66% and 7.55% respectively. These figures illustrate that YouTube and Instagram are clearly two prominent platforms that influencers use to communicate the contents to their targeted followers. In terms of their following duration, 93 participants stated that they have been following the influencer for a period of less than six months, accounting for 21.93% of the sample. The number of people who follow the influencer between 6 to 12 months is 146 (34.43%) while there are 185 respondents following the influencer for more than 12

months (43.64%). This means the majority of the respondents have been following their lifestyle influencers for over six months, which gives them enough time to build up and gain clearer perceptions of their influencers. For the visiting time on a weekly basis, half of the respondents said that they visit the influencer's accounts less than three times per week, followed by 39.86% of the sample whose visiting frequency was between 3 and 7 times weekly. The remaining samples visit the influencer's social sites more than seven times per week (10.14%)

Lastly, the reasons why the respondents follow their lifestyle influencers varied remarkably. This question allows respondents to select more than one reason. Six options of the following reasons provided in this question are coded as follows:

- R1 - The content is relevant to my interest.
- R2 - The content is presented in an authentic way.
- R3 - The influencer is good-looking.
- R4 - The influencer has an interesting presentation skill.
- R5 - The influencer's accounts have a great number of followers.
- R6 - Others (please list another reason why you decide to follow that influencer)

The results indicate that the content relevant to followers' interest is the determining factor when a follower decides to follow an influencer (N = 332, 78.3%). The way the content is authentically presented is the second common element in the followers' following motivation (N = 308, 72.6%), followed by the interesting presentation skill of the influencer (N = 234, 55.19%). "The influencer is good-looking" and "The influencer's accounts have a great number of followers" rank the fourth and fifth (N = 127 – 30% and N = 43 – 10.14% respectively). The least chosen option is Others (N = 28, 6.6%). The following Table 2 details the respondents' demographic profiles



**Table 4.2 Profiles Of The Respondents**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Frequency (n=424)</b>	<b>Percent (100%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	84	19.8
Female	336	79.25
Others	4	0.95
<b>Age</b>		
Under 18 years	85	20.05
18-22	294	69.34
23-29	42	9.91
30-35	1	0.24
36 and above	2	0.46
<b>Following sites</b>		
YouTube	365	86.08
Instagram	215	50.71
Facebook	236	55.66
TikTok	32	7.55
<b>Following duration</b>		
Less than 6 months	93	21.93
6-12 months	146	34.43
More than 12 months	185	43.64
<b>Frequency of checking accounts</b>		
Less than three times	212	50
3-7 times	169	39.86
More than 7 times	43	10.14
<b>Following reasons</b>		
R1 – The content is relevant to my interest.	332	78.3
R2 – The content is presented in an authentic way.	308	72.6
R3 – The influencer is good-looking.	127	30
R4 – The influencer has an interesting presentation skill.	234	55.19
R5 – The influencer's accounts have a great number of followers.	43	10.14
R6 – Others ((please list another reason why you decide to follow that influencer)	28	6.6

It is argued that the reasons to follow an influencer can essentially determine the followers' perception about their influencers. To justify this judgement, T-test was conducted to explore any relationship when a follower decides to choose or not to choose a particular reason.

Table 4-3 provides the T-test result for the followers with and without that a particular reason, as well as their perception of key dependent variables.

**Table 4.3 Independent Sample T-Test For Expertise, Trustworthiness And PSI**

Reasons to follow	Expertise		Trustworthiness		PSI	
	t	p	t	p	t	p
<b>R1</b>	1.783	.75	1.313	.190	2.203	.28
<b>R2</b>	.263	.793	2.904	**	2.025	0.43
<b>R3</b>	-1.577	.116	-.127	.899	-.525	.600
<b>R4</b>	2.974	**	1.749	.081	2.680	**
<b>R5</b>	.380	.704	-.841	-.401	-.285	.776

\*\* :  $p < 0.05$

In the Table 4-3, while R1 - The content is relevant to my interest – is the most common chosen reason; it does not create any remarkable effect on three dependent variables including expertise, trustworthiness and PSI. Based on the t-test results, it can be seen that there is a remarkable difference in the level of perceived trustworthiness when it comes to R2 – The content is presented in an authentic way ( $t = 2.904$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ). In other words, when the influencers can communicate their contents authentically, there is a high likelihood that the follower's perceived trustworthiness about them will be enhanced. The most striking detail is that R4 – The influencer has an interesting presentation skill – statistically impacts both the perceived expertise and PSI with  $t = 2.974$ ,  $p = .003$  and  $t = 2.680$ ,  $p = .008$  respectively. This emphasizes the importance of presentation skill if an influencer wants to develop his/her online career in the long term. Three dependent variables show no difference under the impact of R3 – The influencer is good-looking and R5 – The influencer's accounts have a great number of followers. In other words, the popularity does not necessarily come with a high level of perceived expertise, trustworthiness and PSI. In line with Indahash Labs' report conducted in 2017, 25% of the most engaging influencers in the study had between 4,000 to 5,500 followers because it's undoubtedly easier to interact and communicate with smaller communities.

## 4.2 Reliability Test

Reliability is defined as the degree to which the research instrument generates stable and consistent results over multiple trials. Cronbach's coefficient alpha is used

as an effective tool to measure the reliability of a scale. This figure should be larger than 0.6. An item-total correlation test is also performed to check if one item closely correlates with the other items in the scale. Item-total correlation value should be greater than 0.3. The following Table 4 and 5 summarize the results for each variable.

**Table 4.4 Reliability Test Result For Independent Variables**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Item code</b>	<b>Question items</b>	<b>Item-total correlation</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
<b>Attitude homophily</b>	AH1	The influencer and I have a lot in common.	.495	.713
	AH2	The influencer and I are a lot alike.	.586	
	AH3	I can easily identify with him/her.	.514	
<b>Physical attractiveness</b>	PA1	I find him/her very physically attractive.	.768	.825
	PA2	I consider him/her very stylish.	.513	
	PA3	I think the influencer is good-looking.	.720	
	PA4	I think the influencer is sexy.	.624	
<b>Social attractiveness</b>	SA1	I think he/she could be a friend of mine.	.338	.612
	SA2	I would like to have a friendly chat with her.	.401	
	SA3	We would never establish a personal friendship with each other.	.451	
	SA4	He/ She just wouldn't fit into my circle of friends.	.332	
	SA5	It would be difficult to meet and talk with him/her.	.310	

**Table 4.5 Reliability Test Result For Dependent Variables**

<b>Varialbes</b>	<b>Item code</b>	<b>Question items</b>	<b>Item-total correlation</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
<b>Expertise</b>	E1	I feel he/she knows a lot.	.535	<b>.789</b>
	E2	I feel he/she is competent to make assertions about things he/she is good at.	.720	
	E3	I consider him/her sufficiently experienced to make assertions about his/her area.	.638	
	E4	I consider him/her as an expert in his/her area.	.536	
<b>Trustworthiness</b>	T1	I feel he/she is honest.	.744	<b>.867</b>
	T2	I consider him/her trustworthy.	.781	
	T3	I feel he/she is truthful.	.755	
	T4	I consider him/her earnest.	.595	
<b>Para-social interaction</b>	PSI1	I look forward to watching his/her videos on his/her YouTube channel.	.502	<b>.784</b>
	PSI2	If the YouTube blogger appeared on another YouTube channel, I would watch that video.	.509	
	PSI3	When I'm watching him/her, I feel as if I am part of his/her group.	.638	
	PSI4	I think the influencer is like an old friend.	.347	
	PSI5	I would like to meet the influencer in person.	.556	
	PSI6	If there were a story about the influencer in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.	.487	
	PSI7	The influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.	.542	

The tables show the values of Cronbach's coefficient alpha for each construct are: (1) Attitude homophily (.713), (2) Physical attractiveness (.825), (3) Social attractiveness (.612), (4) Expertise (.789), (5) Trustworthiness (.867) and (6) Para-social interaction (.774). These results indicate that items in each construct have a high degree

of internal consistency and they measure the same construct. Those 27 items in four constructs also have item-total correlation value greater than 0.3, which shows a strong correlation between one item and the other items in the same construct.

### 4.3 Linear Regression Analysis

In order to examine the direct relationship between independent and dependent variables, linear regression analysis was applied. *Attitude homophily*, *Physical attractiveness* and *Social attractiveness* would form three independent variables while *Expertise*, *Trustworthiness* and *Para-social interaction* form three dependent variables. Three regression models were conducted to test the hypotheses proposed in the previous chapter.

In general, attitude homophily, physical attractiveness and social attractiveness can explain 7.8% of the variance of expertise (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.078$ ), 16.4% of the variance of trustworthiness (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.164$ ) and 32.7% of the variance of para-social interaction (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.327$ )

Table 4-6 demonstrates the result of the first regression model. The overall regression model was significant,  $F(2, 420) = 12.93$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ,  $R^2 = 0.078$ . Hypothesis 1 was supported ( $\beta = .163$ ,  $p = .001$ ) while Hypothesis 3 was rejected ( $\beta = .069$ ,  $p = .140$ ). This means that attitude homophily has a positive impact on the influencer's perceived expertise; however, physical attractiveness has no influence on the perceived expertise.

For the influencers whose sharing topics are mostly about make-up, skincare, fashion and fitness, physical attractiveness can play an important role in their followers perceiving the expertise. Among 424 responses, only 124 names, which makes up for approx.29%, fall into this category and the other answers belong to different aspects of lifestyle like cooking. To find out whether there exists a difference between those two groups in terms of perceived expertise, a t-test was conducted. The data result supports that reasoning with Mean= 4.26 and Mean= 4.42 for the beauty-relevant group and the other group respectively;  $t = -2.616$  and  $p = .009 (<.05)$ . Another regression on expertise was separately conducted for the group of beauty-related influencers with the result of  $\beta = -.040$  and  $p = .650$ . This result implies that physical attractiveness cannot significantly predict the perceived expertise of the influencers who sharing topics are related to the beauty section.

This, along with the disproportion between two groups of influencers, can account for the insignificant relationship between physical attractiveness and expertise

in this study. Moreover, as reported in the previous section, the reason “The influencer is good-looking” does not show any remarkable impacts on three dependent variables including the perceived expertise.

**Table 4.6 Regressions On Expertise**

<b>Expertise</b>					
	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Unstandardized coefficients</b>	
				<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>
<b>Attitude Homophily</b>	.163	3.401	**	.129	.038
<b>Physical Attractiveness</b>	.069	1.477	0.140	.045	.031
<b>Social Attractiveness</b>	.196	4.119	***	.157	.038
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	7.8%				

\*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

It is an interesting finding that social attractiveness is significantly correlated with the perceived expertise at  $\beta = .196$  and  $p = .000$ . As in its definition, social attractiveness refers to “*an individual’s likelihood to befriend and to choose the media as a social or work partner*”. In other words, a socially attractive person is expected to be able to build up a favorable image in the others’ minds and this can substantially affect their followers’ perspectives. In the case of online influencers, this can be strongly related to their perceived expertise too.

Table 7 shows the result of the second regression model. The overall regression model was statistically significant  $F(3, 420) = 28.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.170$ . Both hypothesis 2 and 4 were supported with  $\beta = .293$ ,  $p = .000$  and  $\beta = .153$ ,  $p = .001$  respectively. This means that both attitude homophily and physical attractiveness have positive impacts on the lifestyle influencer’s perceived trustworthiness.

**Table 4.7 Regressions On Trustworthiness**

<b>Trustworthiness</b>					
	<b>Beta</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Unstandardized coefficients</b>	
				<b>B</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>
<b>Attitude homophily</b>	.293	6.429	***	.289	.045
<b>Physical attractiveness</b>	.153	3.428	**	.124	.036
<b>Social attractiveness</b>	.179	3.947	***	.178	.045
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	16.4%				

\*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

This table also demonstrates that social attractiveness bears significantly positive relationship with the perceived trustworthiness ( $\beta = .179$ ,  $p = .000$ ) which is not hypothesized. The finding is reasonable because when one individual holds favorable thoughts about another, he/she can trust the other's sharing more easily. This can also be applied in the perceptual relationship between the followers and their influencers. Since social attractiveness is remarkably correlated with both expertise and trustworthiness, those two constructs are expected to have a high correlation with each other. To elaborate on that, a correlation test was conducted and displayed in the following table:

**Table 4.8 Correlations Between Expertise And Trustworthiness**

		<b>Expertise</b>	<b>Trustworthiness</b>
<b>Expertise</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.460**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	424	424
<b>Trustworthiness</b>	Pearson Correlation	.460**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	424	424

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

Pearson correlation between expertise and trustworthiness shows that these two variables are significantly correlated with  $p = .000$  and Pearson correlation value of .46. As a result, social attractiveness can positively impact both in the same study.

Table 9 shows the result of the third regression model. The overall regression model was significant:  $F(3, 420) = 69.36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.331$ . To be specific, hypotheses 5, 6, 7 are all supported with  $\beta = .381$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $\beta = .178$ ,  $p = .000$  and  $\beta = .309$ ,  $p = .000$  respectively. It means that attitude homophily, physical attractiveness and social attractiveness all have positive impacts on the influencer's perceived para-social interaction. Of those variables, attitude homophily poses the strongest impact on para-social interaction with the largest beta value ( $\beta = .381$ ). It is followed by social attractiveness ( $\beta = .309$ ) and physical attractiveness ( $\beta = .178$ ).

**Table 4.9 Regressions on para-social interaction**

Para-social interaction					
	Beta	t-value	p	Unstandardized coefficients	
				B	Std. Error
<b>Attitude homophily</b>	.381	9.33	***	.356	.038
<b>Physical attractiveness</b>	.178	4.45	***	.137	.031
<b>Social attractiveness</b>	.309	7.58	***	.289	.038
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	32.7%				

\*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

In summary, the regressions indicate that attitude homophily generally have a positive impact on expertise, trustworthiness and PSI. Regarding physical attractiveness, it is positively correlated with trustworthiness and para-social interaction but exists an insignificant correlation with expertise. Beside PSI, social attractiveness also holds a significant relationship with expertise and trustworthiness, which are two determinants of credibility. The following discussion would present detailed explanations to those results.





## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Research Conclusion

Over the past five years, more and more attention has been paid to the social media marketing, especially influencer marketing. Therefore, this study sets out to gain an insight into the antecedents of para-social interaction and credibility which mainly consists of trustworthiness and expertise by using lifestyle influencer in Vietnam as a research context. As mentioned in chapter one, the prior studies about Vietnamese influencers are still limited; therefore, this study has added to the knowledge about this particular area. Although a great number of scholars have carried out the research about credibility (Lou et al 2018; Ohanian 1990; Sokolova and Kefi 2019), only a few papers have investigated the followers' perception in terms of expertise and trustworthiness which are two determinants of credibility. In overview, the research findings prove that attitude homophily, physical attractiveness and social attractiveness can all impact three target dependent variables including expertise, trustworthiness and PSI. In the following section, the key findings are concluded and discussed.

First, according to Sokolova and Kefi (2019), both physical attractiveness and attitude homophily can have a significant influence on expertise. However, this study's statistical result only lends support to the relationship between attitude homophily and expertise, not the other relationship. This can be because Sokolova and Kefi's research targets the influencers of the beauty and fashion sector in which physical attractiveness plays a critical role in the followers' evaluation. For this study, the target research group is lifestyle influencers whose online sharing contents can be about various aspects of life such as home décor, fitness and cooking. Another major finding is that social attractiveness is significantly correlated with the influencer's perceived expertise, which contributes to the literature on social attractiveness in relation to social media marketing. It is conceivable that an influencer with a high level of social attractiveness have more chances to be regarded as an expert by his/her followers.

Secondly, the results demonstrate that both attitude homophily and physical attractiveness positively influence the perceived trustworthiness. Consistent with Horan, (2015), the similarities, or the homophily, between two individuals can enhance the perceived credibility or trustworthiness for each other. Affecting both expertise and trustworthiness, homophily proves to be a powerful factor of persuasion. Unlike the traditional celebrities whose advertisements can be intuitively considered

commercialized, online influencers regularly share their personal preferences and daily tips that establish a strong sense of authenticity for the audience. Many people associate physical attractiveness with a wide range of positive social attributes, with trustworthiness being one of the most important. However, looking back at Table 4-7, it can be seen that attitude homophily even pose a stronger impact on trustworthiness than physical attractiveness ( $\beta = .293$  and  $\beta = .153$ ). In addition, the high correlation between expertise and trustworthiness is reinforced when social attractiveness is also reported to positively affect trustworthiness.

Third, three hypotheses about the positive relationship between PSI and independent variables are supported. Compared to expertise and trustworthiness, PSI is the most affected with the highest adjusted  $R^2$  of .327 and p-values which are all smaller than .001. Interestingly, physical attractiveness comes with the most insignificant effect of  $\beta = .178$ . In other words, when a lifestyle influencer becomes more physically attractive, it does not mean his/her followers desire to interact with him/her more actively on the network. Instead, attitude homophily and social attractiveness are more likely to enhance PSI with  $\beta = .381$  and  $\beta = .309$  respectively.

In summary, six out of seven proposed hypotheses are statistically supported, only hypothesis 3 regarding the relationship between physical attractiveness and perceived expertise is rejected. The possible reasoning for this unsupported result has been explained in chapter 4.

## **5.2 Theoretical And Managerial Implications**

### **5.1.1 Theoretical implications**

This study helps affirm the research model of credibility and para-social interaction, especially when investigating the perceived credibility in terms of two separate variables including expertise and trustworthiness. Besides, two major findings about the significant relationship between social attractiveness and credibility can serve as a starting point for future empirical research in this particular area. As mentioned before, there are not many studies specialized in Influencer Marketing in Vietnam; therefore, this current study also makes a valuable contribution to this particular research area.

### **5.1.2 Managerial implications**

Managerially, this study can offer some helpful suggestions for marketers and brands that express a burning interest in influencer marketing. For example, the majority of followers have the trust in the influencers because of the relevant interest

and authentically presented contents. This should be taken into consideration when the brands want to cooperate with an influencer and the marketers need to identify the influencers who share the same personal image and personality with their brands as well as products. If the brands expect to receive a high level of engagement, the number of followers does not guarantee that result. It has been shown in this study that only a small percentage of followers (10.14%) choose to follow an influencer because of his/her huge following. It is not surprising as the influencers with less followers normally have more chances to interact with their fans directly (indaHash Labs, 2017)

For the lifestyle influencers, they should bear in mind that authenticity is crucial in fostering their credibility and para-social interaction between them and the followers. Another critical point found in this study is that over a half of the followers (55.19%) consider presentation skill as one of their motivating reasons to follow someone. Accordingly, the influencers are supposed to put more efforts in improving their skill of presenting content. If online influencers expect to increase their perceived expertise in the area of lifestyle contents, physical attractiveness is fundamentally not the most important factor. In many cases, a perfect look can even distance the influencers from their audience because the followers are inclined to regard that level of appearance as something surreal and fake (Djafarova, 2017).

### **5.3 Limitations and Future Research**

This study holds some particular limitations that should be addressed in the future research.

First and foremost, the focus research group belongs to a general lifestyle sector which cannot provide specific conclusions to a single area such as skincare, make-up or fitness. Because the lifestyle contents have become more and more varied on social media, an emerging sector such as cooking can be chosen to obtain insightful details.

Secondly, this study may have been limited by the major age group of survey participants. In Vietnam, more and more people from all age groups have had access to the Internet and joined multiple social media platforms. Due to the snowball method based on my personal network, the majority of respondents are generation Z. Therefore, future research should try to enlarge the sample with a broader range of age groups answering the questionnaire.

Last but not least, the study is conducted to research the followers' perceptions about their influencers on both YouTube and Instagram at the same time, which is another limitation for further marketing activities if new social media platform emerges.

Although popular influencers have been trying to approach their fans via both platforms, each platform has its own marketing characteristics that requires specific marketing techniques. For example, YouTube is a video-sharing website; consequently, YouTubers need to have an excellent presentation skill to attract their subscribers. However, Instagram is a picture-sharing application whose users are required to possess an attractive appearance or aesthetic sense to catch others' attention instantly. Therefore, based on the unique characteristic of social media, future research which explores the influential marketing is suggested to take this factor into consideration.



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## APPENDIX

*Dear Respondents,*

I'm Canh Vu, an MBA student of College of Management at Yuan Ze University, and I'm preparing my graduation thesis. I would like to ask for your participation to answer this questionnaire. The purpose of this survey is to explore your experience about online lifestyle influencers. Since your responses are kept completely confidential and will only be employed for academic research purpose, please feel free to provide your answer.

If you have any comments or questions, please do not hesitate to contact me through [vuvancanhftu@gmail.com](mailto:vuvancanhftu@gmail.com). Thank you very much for your time and your participation!

### **1. What is your gender?**

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Others

### **2. How old are you?**

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18 - 22
- ☐ 23-29
- ☐ 30-35
- ☐ 36 and above.



Below is the definition of the term “lifestyle influencer” applied in this research:

*“Social media influencers are digital personalities who have amassed large number of followers across one or several social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Vine, Snapchat, or personal blogs) and carry influencer over others.*

*Lifestyle content is about the posts which are premised on everyday life as lived, meaning it encompasses many aspects of the influencer’s life during their relationships, hair and skincare routines, home décor, fitness, and anything else that their viewership may demand.”*

### **3. Name a Vietnamese lifestyle influencer that you have followed on the social media platforms.**

- ☐ Answer:



**4. On which of the following sites are you subscribed to or follow that lifestyle influencer? (Tick all that apply.)**

- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ None of the above

**5. Regarding the lifestyle influencer you mentioned, how long have you been following him/her on those social media platforms?**

- ☐ Less than 6 months
- ☐ 6-12 months
- ☐ More than 12 months

**6. How often do you check on that influencer's accounts per week?**

- ☐ Less than three times
- ☐ 3-7 times
- ☐ More than 7 times

**7. Why do you choose to follow that influencer?**

- ☐ The content is relevant to my interest.
- ☐ The content is presented in an authentic way.
- ☐ The influencer is good-looking.
- ☐ The influencer has an interesting presentation skill.
- ☐ The influencer's accounts have a great number of followers.
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Fill out the following questionnaire based on your perception about the aforementioned Vietnamese lifestyle influencer.**

Please select the most appropriate answer based on your own perception.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
<b>Attitude homophily</b>					
<b>1.</b> The influencer and I have a lot in common.					
<b>2.</b> The influencer and I are a lot alike.					

3. I can easily identify with him/her.					
<b>Physical attractiveness</b>					
4. I find him/her very physically attractive.					
5. I consider him/her very stylish.					
6. I think the influencer is good-looking.					
7. I think the influencer is sexy.					
<b>Social attractiveness</b>					
8. I think he/she could be a friend of mine.					
9. I would like to have a friendly chat with her.					
10. We would never establish a personal friendship with each other.					
11. He/ She just wouldn't fit into my circle of friends.					
12. It would be difficult to meet and talk with him/her.					

<b>Expertise</b>					
13. I feel he/she knows a lot.					
14. I feel he/she is competent to make assertions about things he/she is good at.					
15. I consider him/her sufficiently experienced to make assertions about his/her area.					
16. I consider him/her as an expert in his/her area.					
<b>Trustworthiness</b>					
17. I feel he/she is honest.					

18. I consider him/her trustworthy.					
19. I feel he/she is truthful.					
20. I consider him/her earnest.					
<b>Para-social interaction</b>					
21. I look forward to watching his/her videos on his/her YouTube channel.					
22. If the YouTube blogger appeared on another YouTube channel, I would watch that video.					
23. When I'm watching him/her, I feel as if I am part of his/her group.					
24. I think the influencer is like an old friend.					
25. I would like to meet the influencer in person.					
26. If there were a story about the influencer in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.					
27. The influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.					