

Study finds social media verification not enough to sell products

March 11 2022



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Social media influencers are some of the most powerful celebrities of the internet era, and verification—the blue check mark that indicates the account has been vetted and the user's identity has been confirmed—is one of the most highly sought-after tools of the trade.

New research from Maine Business School at the University of Maine

shows that verification isn't always a positive, as social [media](#) consumers associate verification more with celebrity than credibility and are much less likely to trust product endorsements from verified accounts if the content is inconsistent with the influencer's brand.

The study, published in February in the *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, was conducted in two parts. For the first part of the study, the researchers recruited 223 participants ages 18 to 57 for the study from Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing marketplace run by the multinational technology company. Participants were asked how often they used Instagram and how familiar they were with the concept of Instagram verification. Then, participants were asked to rate various social media users on a scale from one to seven on three variables: authenticity, celebrity and credibility.

For the second part of the study, the researchers recruited 450 participants aged 18 to 42 from Amazon Mechanical Turk. The participants were presented with either a fitness or beauty influencer account—one showed a woman in a push-up position, the other showed a woman smiling—that were either verified or unverified and advertised a product. The participants were again asked to rate them on a scale from one to seven on various factors that were eventually consolidated into ratings for attractiveness, trustworthiness, credibility and celebrity. In addition to rating the influencers, the participants were asked to rate how well the advertisement "fit" with the account and how likely they were to buy the product.

The results showed that not only do consumers associate verification more with celebrity than authenticity or credibility, but because of that, they are less likely to trust a verified social media influencer if they are advertising a brand that is inconsistent with their usual messaging. Even when the brand seems suited to the social media influencer, consumers do not trust verified accounts more than their unverified counterparts.

"The demand for verification is so great that one can buy the verified badge through a ['black market'](#) made possible by third-parties. I wanted to understand why verification is so desirable and consequently, if its presence would produce advertising benefits. The results yield surprising and important implications because verification can harm trust. Endorser trust has been shown to influence many crucial facets, including intent to purchase. The research shines a much-needed light on a symbol that should be far more carefully considered—by both the influencer and the advertising partner," says Jazlyn Dumas, principal investigator of the study, who completed the research for her University of Maine Honors College capstone thesis project.

The study was funded through the UMaine Center for Undergraduate Research's Artificial Intelligence Scholarship and Charlie Slavin Research Grant. Dumas now works as a marketing and social media specialist for the Marden's Surplus and Salvage corporate headquarters in Winslow, Maine.

Billions of dollars are spent on social media endorsement partnerships every year, particularly with verified influencers. The results of the studies indicate to marketing researchers and managers that if they are going to spend money to partner with verified influencers—who often come at a premium cost—they should carefully consider the content that they aim to promote.

"One of the unique aspects of this research is the fact that currently advertisers are paying a premium for verified influencers. Through multiple studies we found that, on the consumers' side, verification can negatively impact brand perception. In fact, our findings suggest that it might serve advertisers better to pay less for partnerships with unverified influencers who are more closely aligned with their [brand identity](#)," says Rusty Stough, assistant professor of marketing at the Maine Business School.

More information: Jazlyn Elizabeth Dumas et al, When influencers are not very influential: The negative effects of social media verification, *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* (2022). [DOI: 10.1002/cb.2039](https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2039)

Provided by University of Maine

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