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Social media influencers on brand equity and brand credibility in Hong Kong's sports industry

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to explore how the popularity and expertise of social media influencers (SMIs), as well as their similarity with consumers, affect brand equity and brand credibility in Hong Kong's sports industry.

Design/methodology/approach: A questionnaire survey was conducted to collect data. A total of 247 valid responses were obtained via an online platform. The questionnaire included 16 questions related to respondents' perceptions of SMI, brand equity, and brand credibility.

Findings: The reliability of the data was examined by Cronbach's alpha which was over 0.7. Pearson's correlation coefficients among all variables are over 0.3 and p-value are lower than 0.001, so it reflects that all variables are positively related. In addition, the p-value of corrected regression model is significant. Thus, it was concluded that the popularity and expertise of SMIs positively affected brand equity, whereas their expertise and similarity positively affected brand credibility.

Research limitation: This cross-sectional study focuses on Hong Kong's sports industry. Future research should investigate other industries and locations, which could provide additional insights into this field.

Practical implications: Social media is used worldwide, and SMIs' opinions influence consumer decisions. This study can help businesses identify SMIs for collaboration, benefiting their promotion and marketing activities.

Originality/value: SMIs' influence on brand equity and brand credibility in Hong Kong's sports industry has rarely been discussed or investigated. This study helps fill this gap in the literature.

KEYWORDS

Social media; Social media influencers; Brand equity; Brand credibility; Sports industry; Marketing; Hong Kong

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Introduction

Social media has changed the way consumers search for information before making purchasing decisions. Hong Kong has 6.5 million social media users, accounting for more than 90% of the population [1]. Consumers no longer rely on traditional promotional elements to obtain product information. Social media provides alternative platforms for consumers to collect and search for product-related information.

Social media provides an interactive approach for consumers to search for product information, enhancing its trustworthiness and facilitating dynamic reviews and interactive information gathering.

Consumers have become sceptical of traditional promotion and consider them unreliable since they overstate product functions [2-4]. Information collected from social media, including that provided by SMIs, is perceived as more reliable and trustworthy, and engages customers more effectively [5].

Thus, some companies are expected to increase their budgets for SMI marketing in the years ahead, the payment being determined by cost-per-impression and cost-per-click models, among others [6]. Global spending on influencer marketing has become one of the leading marketing channels and may reach more than USD 260 billion by the end of 2025 [7].

In addition, SMIs are experts in their respective areas and possess rich knowledge in their fields. Thus, influencer marketing can provide support and value to businesses in various ways, such as enhancing brand awareness and brand credibility, driving purchase intention, generating content, and improving visibility [6,8,9]. Businesses can benefit from improved value and revenue by engaging SMIs in their marketing plans.

There have been various studies on the importance and value of SMIs in business activities and on how the characteristics of SMIs can enhance their performance and significance. For example, SMIs have been considered "digital friends" rather than "digital celebrities". Consumers may develop and build parasocial relationships with SMIs, which could enhance the credibility and purchase intention [10]. Hughes suggested that influencer content could influence consumer behavior when purchasing products [8]. SMIs' similarity to consumers (hereafter, just similarity) and their alignment with the product could provide a higher level of influence and make their recommendations more persuasive and credible [11]. In addition, the number of followers may not be a major indicator of influence. Smaller niche influencers could be more effective than mega-influencers [12].

Few studies have investigated the relationship between SMI characteristics and brand equity in the sports industry. This study examines how the popularity, expertise, and similarity of SMIs affect brand equity and credibility in the sports industry.

Literature Review

Social media influencers

The number of SMIs in business and on the Internet is rising. SMIs should be independent endorsers who use social media, blogs, or other online means to deliver messages [13]. They differ from traditional celebrities, who originally used offline channels to establish their reputations [11]. SMIs also have a sizeable network of followers and possess knowledgeable in related fields, which could persuade others through their network and expertise [14].

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Accessibility, relatability, expertise, and trustworthiness are key characteristics of SMIs, which enhance their role as a new type of promoter and communication channel in the market [9,15,16]. Based on the above literature, SMIs must build their online reputation by attracting many followers. In addition, they must be knowledgeable about relevant areas, which can enhance their perceived authenticity.

Brand equity

Brand is important in business, and brand equity refers to the added value and assets generated by a brand, which can positively affect a business [17]. The Aaker Model includes five aspects of brand equity: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and proprietary brand assets [18]. This model provides a framework for measuring and managing brand equity. Keller developed another model of brand equity that emphasized customer response to a brand [19]. The model included brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness comprises two components: brand recognition and brand recall. Brand image is related to customer memory, and brand association to favorability.

Keller also suggests that businesses can establish brand equity by increasing broad and deep brand awareness, creating strong and favorable brand associations, generating positive brand responses, and establishing active relationships with customers. Aaker proposed that new product development aligned with existing brands can enhance a firm's brand equity.

This study adopts the following dimensions of brand equity with reference to Aaker and Keller: brand awareness, brand association, and brand engagement. These three dimensions cover the major components of brand equity and can help explain how SMIs affect brand equity.

SMIs and brand equity

Previous studies might suggest that SMIs would have positive impacts on brand equity because SMIs are more relatable and identifiable than traditional celebrities [11]. However, how SMIs affect brand equity is still debatable. De Veirman argued that number of followers may arouse brand awareness while Breves said that alignment between SMI and the brand is more important [12,14]. Thus, it is suggested that popularity alone may not guarantee a positive impact. However, the number of followers affects the likeability of SMIs and how consumers perceive them. This also contributes to brand awareness [14]. Moreover, SMIs have a broader reach among customers, which could provide greater value to businesses [6]. Thus, it can be argued that the popularity of SMIs may positively affect brand equity.

$\mathbf{H_1}$: SMIs' popularity would have a positive impact on brand equity.

SMIs' expertise is a key contributory factor that attracts their followers, as this is positively related to the authenticity of their comments and promotion [20]. However, collaboration between SMIs and businesses might result in suspicion regarding SMIs' authenticity. Thus, SMIs should demonstrate greater intrinsic passion, desires, and transparent authenticity, which could reduce suspicion [18]. Several studies have different views on how SMI's expertise affects brand equity. This hypothesis could help us to identify and examine whether expertise is a critical factor in brand equity.

$\mathbf{H_2}$**:** The expertise of SMIs would have a positive impact on brand equity.

Brand credibility

Brand credibility refers to whether consumers believe in the expertise and trustworthiness of a brand, as promised [21]. Brand credibility affects consumers' perceptions of risk and uncertainty. Consumers use brand credibility to decide whether a brand should be included in their consideration set. The two major dimensions used to measure brand credibility are expertise and trustworthiness [22]. Brand credibility is affected by personal experiences and information received from other sources [23]. Thus, SMIs' comments may affect brand credibility. Moreover, brand credibility can be built based on the consistent behavior of a business, which can be predicted over

SMIs and brand credibility

SMIs assist businesses in promoting brand credibility. SMIs are considered more credible than traditional celebrities and have a positive influence on the brand image. Traditional celebrities may not have expertise or knowledge of a product. However, SMIs are often perceived as possessing greater expertise and power than traditional celebrities because they regularly create content and have interactions with followers. However, a close relationship between SMIs and business may affect consumers' trust in SMIs [2]. Thus, expertise alone may not enhance brand credibility. Based on previous studies, SMIs are more likely to possess knowledge in the field; therefore, the trustworthiness and expertise of SMIs would directly affect their impact on brand credibility [25]. This study proposed that SMIs with higher expertise would positively affect brand credibility.

$\mathbf{H_3}$**:** The expertise of SMIs would have a positive impact on brand credibility.

The similarity between SMIs and consumers affects consumers' trust in SMIs because it can enhance the parasocial interaction between SMIs and consumers. This also increases the trustworthiness of SMIs [10,16]. This would ultimately affect brand credibility when business-appointed SMIs promote a brand.

$\mathbf{H_4}$**:** The similarity of SMIs would have a positive impact on brand credibility.

Social media in the sports industry

Social media is widely used in the sports industry, which can help to attract more attendance and sponsorship [26]. SMIs can be classified as athletes, sports journalists, sports organizations, and digital content creators. Some athletes use social media to interact with their fans and deliver messages directly [27]. Consequently, athletes can build their personal brands through social media engagement with fans [28]. However, this may also lead to negative impacts because athletes may face online abuse and cyberbullying.

In addition, sports teams, organizations, and fans may use social media to manage or respond to crises, threats, or actions in their own way or through their own channels [29,30]. Moreover, sports organizations can increase fan engagement by posting more content, encouraging interaction, and sharing photos [31,32].

Social media is considered to be widely adopted and managed in the sports industry. Some practitioners use and manage their own social media accounts. Therefore, it is important to understand how SMIs operate in the sports industry [33].

Previous studies examined the relationship between SMI, consumers' trust, purchase intention and brand equity, but most research focused on general products and brands. Little attention has been paid to the sports industry in which athletes and SMIs often played a role as opinion leaders or content creators. Even though there is rapid growth of social media usage and influencer marketing in Hong Kong, there is limited evidence and research on brand equity and brand credibility together. Therefore, this study can address the gap by examining how SMIs' characteristics influence brand equity and brand credibility in the Hong Kong sports industry.

Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological framework of this study, which investigates how SMIs affect brand equity and credibility. This chapter is structured as follows: (1) Research design; (2) Sampling; (3) Instrument development and measurement; (4) Analysis; and (5) Ethical considerations.

Research design

This study tests the causal relationships among SMIs, brand equity, and credibility, which can be measured using quantitative methods through empirical testing. The hypotheses are based on previous literature and established theoretical frameworks related to SMIs, brand equity, and brand credibility. These are examined through statistical analysis of quantitative data collected [33].

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The research employed a cross-sectional design, using a survey questionnaire to collect sample data from a defined population. A cross-sectional survey can help capture consumers' attitudes and perceptions at a single point in time, which can help examine the relationship among different variables [34]. This method is appropriate for measuring the relationships among the characteristics of SMIs (independent variables), brand equity, and brand credibility (dependent variables).

Sampling

The target population for this study was social media users in Hong Kong. This demographic was selected because the study focused on social media influencers. Respondents who did not use social media were unable to answer the questions.

Purposive non-probability sampling was adopted initially because the respondents had to meet the population criteria. Snowball sampling was used to access additional respondents. Non-probability sampling may limit generalizability; however, this approach did not introduce any bias into the study [35,36]. The target sample size was 100, which exceeded the required sample size of 10 respondents for each measured item [37].

Instrument development and measurement

An online questionnaire consisting of four sections was developed to collect data. The questionnaire was designed in a closed-ended format because the study was based on previous literature and examined the relationships between the independent variable (SMI) and the dependent variables (brand equity and brand credibility).

Section A collected demographic data to identify eligible respondents who were currently or previously using social media. Section B measured the characteristics of SMIs (independent variables). Section C collected data on brand equity (dependent variable), and Section D measured brand credibility (dependent variable). The design and questions of the questionnaire were based on previous studies and were presented in a closed-ended format. A 7-point Likert scale (1 [Strongly disagree] to 7 [Strongly agree]) was used in the questionnaire [38-40].

The link to the questionnaire was distributed through various channels, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WeChat, and WhatsApp, as well as other appropriate online channels. The first page of the questionnaire included consent and information statements explaining the purpose of the study, its anonymity, and its voluntary nature. Participants were asked to think of a specific social media influencer in the sports industry when answering the questions in Sections B–D. The data collection period lasted four weeks, and a reminder was sent during the final week of the collection period.

The questions were designed in English and translated into Chinese, as most of the respondents' first language was Chinese. This ensured that respondents could correctly interpret the questions.

Analysis

The IBM SPSS software was used to analyzes the data. Means and standard deviations were used to summaries the sample demographic information and key variable scores. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of each multi-item scale which can help evaluate the reliability of the data [41].

In addition, a one-sample t-test was adopted to test whether the mean scores of each statement were significantly greater than the midpoint of the scale, which could help demonstrate whether the respondents agreed with the statements.

Pearson's correlation between the independent and dependent variables showed that SMIs' expertise, popularity, and similarity were related to brand equity and brand credibility. Linear regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses and examine whether the independent variables affected the dependent variables.

Multiple regression analysis is adopted to test the proposed hypotheses. It is appropriate to use regression analysis because the research is to evaluate the direct relationship among the variables rather than to examine a comprehensive latent-variable model. Although Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) offers advantages in assessing measurements and modelling, it is deemed adequate to use regression analysis and consistent with the study's objective and framework.

Ethical considerations

This study followed the ethical guidelines of Lingnan University. Explicit consent was obtained from all respondents. Individual information was excluded from the questionnaires. The data were stored in a password-protected device. The respondents voluntarily participated in the study and could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis

A total of 252 participants responded to the survey, but five of them did not complete all the questions. Thus, 247 valid responses were obtained. The number of responses exceeded the required sample size, allowing the analysis to proceed. The demographic data did not reveal any obvious bias in the information.

Analysis

Table 1 summarizes the demographic data of the survey respondents. The proportions of male and female were 36.84% and 63.16%, respectively.

Table 1. Demographic statistics.

Characteristics	No. of respondents	%
Gender		
Male	91	36.84%
Female	156	63.16%
Age		
18–29	217	87.85%
30–39	12	4.86%
40–49	2	0.81%
50–59	10	4.05%
60 and above	6	2.43%

Table 2 presents the major social media platforms used by the respondents. The three most frequently used platforms were WeChat (86.23%), Instagram (74.9%), and YouTube (65.18%). The results reflect current social media trends among the people of Hong Kong.

Table 2. Major social media platforms used by the respondents.

Social media	No. of respondents	%
Facebook	88	35.63%
Instagram	185	74.90%
Twitter	88	35.63%
WeChat	213	86.23%
YouTube	161	65.18%
Line	36	14.57%

Sixteen questions related to the study were designed according to a seven-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to identify one

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social media influencer in the sports industry whom they favored. They then selected one of the responses from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree") to indicate their level of agreement with each of the 16 statements.

The popularity of social media influencers was measured using Questions 1 to 3. Questions 4 to 6 evaluated the expertise of social media influencers, while Questions 7 to 9 measured the similarity of social media influencers. Brand equity and brand credibility were measured using Questions 10–13 and 14–16, respectively.

The reliability of the data was examined to ensure the credibility of the study. Cronbach's alpha (Table 3) was used to investigate whether the data were reliable and relevant for further analysis [41].

Table 3. Cronbach's alpha.

Part	No. of questions	Cronbach's alpha
Popularity of social media influencers	3	0.834
Expertise of social media influencers	3	0.851
Similarity of social media influencers	3	0.744
Brand equity	4	0.826
Brand credibility	3	0.840

With reference to the data in Table 3, Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.7 for all data, indicating acceptable reliability for further analysis [42]. Table 4 presents statistics for Questions 1 to 16.

Table 4. Statistics for questions 1 to 16.

Questions	Mean	Standard deviation	P-value
I think my favorite SMI is very famous.	5.16	1.609	<.001
I think my favorite SMI has a lot of fans.	5.40	1.524	<.001
I think the popularity of my favorite SMI is increasing.	5.21	1.476	<.001
I think my favorite SMIs clearly understand the products they recommend and how to use them.	5.02	1.473	<.001
I think my favorite SMIs convey information about the recommended products effectively and accurately.	5.06	1.403	<.001
I think my favorite SMIs give professional answers to questions about the recommended products	4.70	1.498	<.001
I think my favourite SMIs and I have a lot in common	4.66	1.489	<.001
I think the image of my favourite SMI matches how I see myself.	4.39	1.542	<.001
Whether the reviews are good or bad, I will support my favourite SMI.	4.04	1.699	.340
I can recognize the brand among competing brands because of my favourite SMI.	4.97	1.358	<.001
I am aware of the brand because of my favourite SMI	5.02	1.428	<.001
Some characteristics of the brand quickly come to mind because of my favourite SMI.	4.87	1.439	<.001
I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of the brand because of my favourite SMI	5.05	1.330	<.001
The brand recommended by my favourite SMI delivers what it promises	4.76	1.327	<.001
The product claims of the brand recommended by my favourite SMIs are believable.	4.68	1.430	<.001

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Table 4 (continued)

Questions	Mean	Standard deviation	P-value
The brand recommended by my favourite SMI has a name that can be trusted.	4.92	1.295	<.001

Sources: Chen et al. What key opinion leaders' expertise and renown shape consumer behavior in social commerce: An analysis using a comprehensive model [8]. Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research, 19, 3370-3385; Hur et al. How CSR leads to corporate brand equity: Mediating mechanisms of corporate brand credibility and reputation Journal of Business Ethics, 125(1), pp.75-86 [21].

Significance level = 95%; Means tested = 4.

The results showed that most respondents agreed with all questions except Question 9, because the p-value was less than 0.001. The mean values for these questions were significantly higher than 4. However, the respondents had differing views on Question 9. This may reflect the fact that the respondents used other factors to determine whether they supported their favorite SMIs.

Hypothesis testing

To test the hypotheses, correlation and regression analyses were conducted. As both the independent and dependent variables included several items, a multivariate test was adopted in the regression analysis [41].

H_1 suggests that SMIs' popularity would have a positive impact on brand equity. Tables 5 and 6 present the correlation and regression analyses for SMIs' popularity (Q1 to Q3) and brand equity (Q10 to Q13).

Table 5. Pearson's correlation between SMIs' popularity and brand equity.

	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13
Q1	0.393	0.352	0.420	0.310
Q2	0.397	0.408	0.390	0.393
Q3	0.360	0.372	0.378	0.413

Pearson's correlation coefficients between Q1 and Q3 and between Q10 and Q13 were greater than 0.3. Meanwhile, the p-value for each pair of questions was less than 0.001, indicating that the correlations among all questions were significant.

Table 6. Multivariate test results (Pillai's trace).

	Pillai's trace	F-value	Significance
Q1	0.062	3.937	0.004
Q2	0.041	2.539	0.041
Q3	0.059	3.752	0.006

A multivariate test was used to run the regression model when there was more than one item among the independent and dependent variables. Pillai's trace index was used to assess the significance of the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable [43].

Table 6 shows that Q1 to Q3 have significant positive impacts on Q10 to Q13, as the p-values for these questions are less than 0.05. In addition, the corrected regression model was significant, with a p-value of less than 0.001.

Based on the results in Tables 5 and 6, we prove that SMIs' popularity has a positive impact on brand equity. Therefore, H_1 is accepted.

H_2 proposes that SMI expertise has a positive impact on brand equity. Tables 7and 8 present an analysis of SMI expertise (Q4–Q6) and brand equity (Q10–Q13).

Table 7. Pearson's correlation between SMIs' expertise and brand equity.

	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13
Q4	0.360	0.413	0.354	0.371
Q5	0.368	0.391	0.314	0.343
Q6	0.401	0.400	0.344	0.448

Pearson's correlation coefficients between Q4 and Q6 and between Q10 and Q13 were greater than 0.3. In addition, the p-value of each pair of correlations was less than 0.001, indicating significant correlation among all items.

Table 8. Multivariate test results (Pillai's trace).

	Pillai's trace	F-value	Significance
Q4	0.036	2.211	0.068
Q5	0.010	0.625	0.638
Q6	0.088	5.765	<0.001

A multivariate test was used to run the regression model when the independent and dependent variables included more than one item. Pillai's trace index was used to assess the significance of the independent variable's impact on the dependent variable [43]. Table 8 shows that only Q6 has a significant positive impact on Q10–Q13, with p-values of less than 0.05. However, the p-value for the corrected regression model was less than 0.001. The overall model was statistically significant. Individual items related to expertise may not have had a significant effect on brand equity. Therefore, H_2 was not rejected. Further investigations should be conducted in this area.

H_3 proposes that SMI expertise (Q4 to Q6) has a positive impact on brand credibility (Q14 to Q16). Tables 9 and 10 were used to test this hypothesis.

Table 9. Pearson's correlation between SMIs' expertise and brand credibility.

	Q14	Q15	Q16
Q4	0.507	0.402	0.455
Q5	0.488	0.435	0.462
Q6	0.448	0.448	0.436

Pearson's correlation coefficients between Q4 and Q6 and between

Table 10. Multivariate test results (Pillai's trace).

	Pillai's Trace	F-Value	Significance
Q4	0.051	4.299	0.006
Q5	0.029	2.3690	0.071
Q6	0.050	4.242	0.006

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Q14 and Q16 were greater than 0.4. The p-value for the correlation between each pair of questions was less than 0.001, indicating that the correlation was significant.

Table 10 shows that only Q4 and Q6 had a significant positive impact on Q14–Q16, as the p-values were less than 0.05. However, the p-value of the corrected regression model was less than 0.001. The overall model was statistically significant. Individual items related to expertise may not have significantly affected brand credibility. Therefore, H_3 could not be rejected. Further research should be conducted on this topic.

H_4 suggests that the similarity of SMIs (Q7–Q9) would positively impact brand credibility (Q14–Q16). Tables 11 and 12 present the analysis results.

Table 11. Pearson's correlation between SMIs' similarity and brand credibility.

A	Q14	Q15	Q16
Q7	0.366	0.342	0.407
Q8	0.301	0.3271	0.374
Q9	0.323	0.291	0.367

Pearson's correlation coefficients between Q7 and Q9 and between Q14 and Q16 were greater than 0.3. The p-value for the correlation between each pair of questions was less than 0.001, indicating that the correlation was significant.

Table 12. Multivariate test results (Pillai's trace).

	Pillai's trace	F-value	Significance
Q7	0.023	1.918	0.127
Q8	0.0232	1.903	0.130
Q9	0.083	7.282	<0.001

Table 12 shows that only Q9 had a significant positive impact on Q14–Q16, as the p-values were less than 0.05. However, the p-value of the corrected regression model was less than 0.001. The overall model was statistically significant. Individual items related to similarity may not have significantly affected brand credibility. Therefore, H_4 could not be rejected.

Summary

Based on the results in this section, SMI's popularity and expertise would have positive impacts on brand equity. In the meantime, SMI's expertise and similarity also positively impacted brand credibility. Overall, SMI's engagement in business promotion positively impacted brand equity and brand credibility.

Discussion and Limitations

Discussion

The major objective of this study was to investigate the impact of SMIs on brand equity and brand credibility. Previous studies have shown that SMIs can positively affect consumers' perceptions and decisions and have a greater influence than traditional celebrities. As social media is widely used by businesses and consumers, SMIs' involvement in and impact on businesses are inevitable. SMIs can provide alternative ways for product promotion and customer engagement. These could be more effective than traditional advertising and promotional methods. This study confirms that such effectiveness extends specifically to the sports industry in Hong Kong, a context that has rarely been examined in the literature [11].

The results of this study reflect findings similar to those of previous studies. The popularity and expertise of SMIs have positive impacts on brand equity, whereas their expertise and similarity have a positive impact on brand credibility. Specifically, the finding that their popularity positively affects brand equity aligns with of the findings of De Veirman and Campbell and Farrell, who argued that a larger follower base enhances brand awareness and extends market reach [6,14]. In Hong Kong's densely connected digital environment, popular SMIs can efficiently boost brand recognition and association, two core components of brand equity–as defined by Aaker and Keller [18,19]. Regarding expertise, its positive impact on both brand equity and brand credibility corroborates the findings of Audrezet, who emphasized that perceived authenticity and intrinsic passion are critical for effective influencer marketing [20]. When an SMI is viewed as knowledgeable, for example, when a former athlete or certified trainer endorses sportswear, consumers are more likely to develop favorable brand associations and trust. Similarly, the positive effect of similarity on brand credibility supports the findings of Sokolova, Kefi and Schouten, who highlighted that similarity fosters parasocial interactions, making recommendations more reliable and trustworthy [10,11]. Notably, although popularity significantly influenced brand equity, it did not directly affect brand credibility, suggesting that consumers differentiate between awareness-driven outcomes (brand equity) and trust-driven outcomes (brand credibility), a nuance that managers in the sports industry should recognize.

Although some individual items were not statistically significant, the overall model demonstrated a significant relationship with the dependent variables. It is suggested that it is a multidimensional model and concept, so the combined effect of multiple indicators could contribute to the outcome. Similar situations were reported in previous studies where individual items had varying levels of impact while the overall model remained significant.

The results show that business practitioners can consider recruiting or collaborating with SMIs to promote brand equity and credibility [6]. However, the authenticity of SMIs is important; therefore, they should demonstrate greater passion and dedication in their videos or posts [20]. In practical terms, this study offers guidance to sports brand managers. When the goal is to build long-term brand credibility, managers should provide SMIs with high expertise and strong perceived similarity to the target audience. Popularity remains a valuable criterion for enhancing overall brand equity, particularly brand awareness. The results also caution against overreliance on mega-influencers with large but impersonal followings, as niche influencers with higher perceived similarity may generate stronger credibility [12]. Expertise emerged as the most versatile characteristic, positively influencing both brand equity and brand credibility. Therefore, sports brands should provide SMIs with superior verifiable domain knowledge over those who are merely well known, especially given the performance-oriented nature of sports products and services, where specialized knowledge adds tangible value to consumers. Finally, the findings contribute to the limited literature on SMI marketing in Hong Kong's sports industry, filling a gap that has rarely been discussed or investigated and providing a foundation for future research in this area.

Limitations

This paper is based on a cross-sectional study. However, customers' perceptions of SMIs may change over time. Social media is dynamic, and more interactive applications may emerge, which could change the entire industry. In addition, this study focuses on the sports industry in Hong Kong; therefore, the findings may not be applicable to other industries or countries. Future studies in other industries or locations should be conducted to enhance research in this area. Beyond these inherent constraints, several additional limitations should be acknowledged to provide a more complete perspective for future researchers.

First, as this study measured respondents' attitudes at a single point in time, it could not capture how the effects of SMIs' popularity, expertise, and similarity on brand equity and credibility might evolve as consumers are repeatedly exposed to influencer content or as SMIs themselves change their posting styles and endorsement portfolios. Consequently, the causal relationships implied in the hypotheses

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cannot be conclusively determined from cross-sectional data alone.

Second, concerning the focus on Hong Kong's sports industry, the findings may not be generalizable to other industries such as fashion, beauty, technology, or luxury goods, where the relative importance of popularity, expertise, and similarity could differ. Similarly, cultural factors unique to Hong Kong, such as its high social media penetration rate (over 90% of the population), dense urban environment, and blend of Eastern and Western influences, may limit the applicability of the findings to other regions. Therefore, cross-cultural replication is encouraged.

Third, the sample of 247 valid responses, while exceeding the minimum requirement of 10 respondents per measured item suggested by Hair, was relatively modest for advanced multivariate analysis. A larger sample size would increase statistical power and enable techniques such as structural equation modelling to simultaneously test direct and indirect effects [37].

Fourth, the use of non-probability sampling (purposive and snowball sampling) was appropriate for reaching social media users who met the population criteria. However, this approach may limit generalizability and introduce self-selection bias, as noted by Baltar and Brunet and Marcus [35,36,44]. Future research employing probability or quota sampling would provide more representative estimates.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a solid foundation for understanding the effects of SMIs in Hong Kong's sports industry. The limitations identified do not invalidate the findings but rather offer clear directions for future research to build upon and extend this work, ultimately enhancing knowledge in this important and growing field of influencer marketing.

Based on these limitations, several directions for future research are proposed. To address the constraints of the cross-sectional design, future studies should adopt longitudinal approaches that track the same consumers across multiple time points such as before, during, and after exposure to SMI campaigns. This would allow researchers to examine how the effects of SMI popularity, expertise, and similarity on brand equity and brand credibility evolve over time and establish stronger causal evidence. In addition, to enhance generalizability, future research should replicate this study in other industries, such as fashion or beauty, and in other geographical regions. Cross-cultural comparisons would be particularly valuable for understanding how cultural dimensions such as individualism-collectivism or uncertainty avoidance moderate the effects of SMI characteristics on brand outcomes. Future studies in other industries or locations should be conducted to enhance research in this area. In addition, future studies should aim for larger sample sizes to increase statistical power and enable more advanced analytical techniques, such as structural equation modelling. Probability sampling methods should be employed to obtain estimates that are more representative of the general population. Finally, to mitigate common method bias, future research should adopt multimethod approaches, such as combining surveys with experimental designs or collecting data from multiple sources to establish causality more rigorously.

By addressing these limitations, future research can build on the foundation provided by this study and advance understanding of SMI marketing in the sports industry and beyond.

Conclusion

There are various ways to promote products and services; some are traditional, such as television commercials and print media, while others are new, for example, digital marketing strategies. With the rapid growth of social media platforms, customers increasingly use these channels to search for information, read reviews, and collect opinions of the products and services before making purchase decisions. Social Media Influencers play important roles in marketing and promotion because they can directly communicate with followers and shape their perceptions. Thus, the use of SMIs is increasing as marketing through social media has become more common.

Despite the growing importance of SMIs in marketing, there is limited research on how the characteristics of SMIs affect brand-related outcomes in the sports industry. This study helps fill this gap in the literature and provides guidance to sports industry managers on how to collaborate effectively with SMIs.

This study confirmed that SMIs have positive impacts on brand equity and brand credibility depending on their popularity, expertise, and similarity; therefore, managers in the sports industry should understand how to select and recruit SMIs for collaboration.

Data Availability Statement

The data were collected by survey. All data are stored on the researcher's computer with a password locked. The datasets used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Ethics Declaration

This study followed the ethical guidelines of Lingnan University. Ethics Approval was obtained from the Sub-Committee on Research Ethics and Safety of the Research Committee, Lingnan University.

Authors Contributions

Wong Man Chung Albert contributed to Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Data Curation, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Supervision, Project Administration, and Funding Acquisition. Han Jia Rui contributed to Writing – Review & Editing, Visualization, and Data Curation.

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