

Motives for Following Social Influencers and Electronic Word-of-Mouth: The Role of Social Capital

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Given the increasing popularity and significance of social influencer marketing phenomenon, it is important to understand why people follow social influencers and what gratification they get. Guided by theories of uses and gratification and social capital, this study examines the key motives of following social influencers and the relationship between the motivations and consumers' electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), along with social capital. The results show that self-oriented motivations (i.e., entertainment, information, and self-presentation) are positively related to bridging social capital, while other-oriented motivations (i.e., empathy, recognition) are positively related to bonding social capital. In addition, both bridging and bonding social capital are positively associated with eWOM. Managerially, the findings of this study can help provide marketing practitioners with insights of incorporating social influencers in their marketing strategy.

Keywords: electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), motives, social influencer, social capital, social media

Social media has become an integral part of our lives with an important venue for communication and interaction. Across multiple social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, social influencers connect with millions of followers through diverse types of channels and formats. Social influencers represent a type of content creators who take on the critical role of opinion leaders in the establishment of dynamic relationships through a sizeable social network and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014).

As social influencers play an important role in marketing by introducing products to their followers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), brands increasingly invest in influencer marketing—around US\$13.8 billion in 2021 (Dencheva, 2023). Compared with traditional celebrities, these social influencers are perceived as being more powerful, as they could effectively persuade consumers by showing more sense of authenticity

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(Jerslev, 2016) and building closer social relationships with consumers (Ferchaud, Grezeslo, Orme, & LaGroue, 2018).

Given this increasing popularity and significance of social influencer marketing phenomenon, academics have started to investigate the main characteristics of social influencers contributing to their success. Social influencers are characterized as trustworthy, authentic, accessible, relatable, and expert (Choi & Behm-Morawitz, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Zhou, Barnes, McCormick, & Cano, 2021). A growing body of research has also suggested important factors on influencer evaluation and advertising outcomes, such as the perceived fit between influencers and the endorsed brand, identification with the influencer, number of followers, and type of product endorsed (De Cicco, Iacobucci, & Pagliaro 2021; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Janssen, Schouten, & Croes, 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021).

While such studies have documented the characteristics and endorsement effect of social influencers, more information about why and how social media users follow and interact with social influencers is yet to be discovered (Voorveld, 2019). Recently, pioneering studies based on uses and gratification theory (UGT) have suggested the motives to follow social influencers on Instagram (Lee, Sudarshan, Sussman, Bright, & Eastin, 2022) and in the Netherlands (Croes & Bartels, 2021). While prior studies focus on finding the general motives to follow social influencers, the roles of gratifications vary in predicting motives when the research context is different (Li, Liu, Xu, Heikkila, & van der Heijden, 2015). Moreover, less attention has been paid to incorporate the constructs or dimensions of gratifications based on UGT.

Gratifications based on UGT and explored in recent literature of social media influencers seem well applied to the dimensions of perceived values including hedonic, utilitarian, and social (Gan & Li, 2018; Sokolova & Perez, 2021). Perceived value is defined as "consumers' overall assessment of the utility of a product (or service) based on perceptions of what is received and what is given" (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 14). Perceived value is a crucial construct in affecting user behavior in various contexts (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Thus, this study seeks for a more holistic examination of why and how people follow social influencers by incorporating the dimensions of perceived value including hedonic, utilitarian, and social.

Moreover, this study explores the relationships between motivations to follow social influencers and eWOM while considering social capital (i.e., bridging and bonding). Marketers are increasingly interested in incorporating social influencers in their eWOM marketing (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019; Zhou et al., 2021; Zou, Zhang, & Tang, 2021). As social media is the place where the users maintain their existing relationship and extend their networks, consumers generate eWOM by creating and disseminating brand-related information in their new and established social networks (Chu & Kim, 2011; Gvili & Levy, 2018; Voorveld, 2019). Given that social relationship is one of the primary reasons among social media users, this study attempts to examine how social capital's development through the use of social media affects users' eWOM in social media.

Therefore, the purpose of the study is, first, to explore the key motives of following social influencers with hedonic, utilitarian, and social dimensions. Second, the current study explores the interplay of the motivations and consumers' eWOM, along with social capital (i.e., bridging and bonding). This study

offers theoretical insights into understanding the motivations of social media use by focusing on following social influencers and the critical role of social capital in eWOM. Managerially, this study could help marketers effectively incorporate social influencers and eWOM in social media as an integral part of their marketing communication strategies.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Motives to Follow Social Influencers

Social influencers, also called social media influencers or digital celebrities, are nontraditional celebrities who influence a large audience through social media platforms (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Typical social influencers are usually ordinary people who engage in self-branding strategies by reaching out to followers, often disclosing personal information (Erz & Christensen, 2018). The authentic advice, tips, and recommendation of social influencers make consumers feel that they are communicating with their peers (Harrington, 2016); thus, social media users perceive social influencers as more credible and relatable than conventional celebrities (Howland, 2016). Social influencers are, therefore, more effective in influencing young consumers' brand attitudes and purchase behaviors (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) and can influence both pre- and postpurchase decisions of consumers (Song, Cho, & Kim, 2017).

While prior research provides sufficient evidence that social influencers have a large reach and effect on consumers, few works have documented users' underlying motives for following social influencers (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). Given this popularity of social influencers and large impact on their followers, it is important to seek for motivational approach with social influencers. This article will contribute to a deeper understanding of personal and social needs consumers seek to gratify themselves from following social influencers, and it will also predict specific behavior outcomes as a result.

In examining new media adoption and use, the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) provides a useful conceptual framework. The key premise of UGT is that individuals are goal-directed in their media selection, actively seeking out and using specific media to satisfy their needs and desires (Blumler & Katz, 1974). The UGT has been employed in understanding user motives for media use, ranging from traditional media such as radio and television (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rubin, 1983) to newer forms of digital media such as the Internet (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; Lin, 1999).

More recently, researchers have examined how and why individuals use different social media platforms such as Facebook (Lai & Yang, 2016), Twitter (Kwon, Park, & Kim, 2014), Pinterest (Mull & Lee, 2014), and Instagram (Erz, Marder, & Osadchaya, 2018; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), and YouTube (Khan, 2017). Facebook users seek to fulfill the primary needs—seeking friends, social support, entertainment, information, and convenience (Lai & Yang, 2016). For following brands on Twitter, primary motivations— incentive, social interaction, brand usage/likeability, and information—were found (Kwon et al., 2014). For hashtag use in Instagram, six motives—self-presentation, chronicling, inventiveness, information seeking, venting, and etiquette—were identified (Erz & Christensen, 2018). In terms of YouTube use, motivations of

information seeking and sharing, self-status seeking, entertainment, co-viewing, social interaction were discovered (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Khan, 2017).

In addition, the need for understanding the role of media content within UGT framework such as TV programs, and social media, and social influencers' content has been identified. For example, people consume the content of television programs for entertainment and information gratification (Rubin, 1983). In the social media context, users engage with the content based on information, entertainment, remuneration, and relation (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy, & Goodman, 2016). In addition, social media users interact with social influencers' content based on the characteristics of information, design, technology quality, and creativity (Cheung, Leung, Aw, & Koay, 2022).

Some constructs derived from previous UGT research on social media and its content would likely be applicable to the current study to capture the different types of gratification to follow social influencers, including hedonic value (entertainment), utilitarian value (information seeking, self-presentation), and social value (empathy, recognition; Gan & Li, 2018; Sokolova & Perez, 2021). First, previous research has provided evidence that people use social media for hedonic gratifications (Gan & Li, 2018; Li et al., 2015). Hedonic factors have been validated as strong predictors in determining user behavior when using social media, such as enjoyment, affection, and escapism (Li et al., 2015). People who follow social influencers may want to obtain hedonic gratification by enjoying the time with them. Followers may also seek to relax and escape the stress of daily life by watching the content their influencers provide. Second, utilitarian outcomes have been widely applied for using social media. Prior studies have empirically validated the important roles of utilitarian factors in influencing user behavior, such as information seeking/giving and self-presentation (Gan & Li, 2018). Social media users may seek informative and useful resource by following influencers and want to employ self-presentation strategy by expressing personal thoughts and opinions.

Lastly, previous research has provided strong evidence that individuals use social media for social gratifications (Lai & Yang, 2016). Social media users build and maintain their social networks while using social media. In the social influencer-follower context, it is in the influencers' best interest to engage with their followers who will continue to watch their content (Ferchaud et al, 2018). By cultivating meaningful connections with social influencers, followers may want to receive emotional empathy and recognition from social influencers via comments and direct messages (Ferchaud et al., 2018). Building on previous literature, therefore, this study presumes that: (1) entertainment is a hedonic factor that fulfill individuals' hedonic gratifications; (2) information and self-presentation are utilitarian factors that capture individuals' utilitarian gratification; and (3) empathy and recognition are social factors that fulfills individuals' social gratifications.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

The term *eWOM* refers to consumers' information exchange behavior online and can take the form of user-generated content, online product reviews, or social media posts (Chu & Kim, 2011). It is considered one of the most influential factors on consumers' decision-making process from initial product awareness to postpurchase evaluation. Today, *eWOM* positively affects individual perceptions and behaviors, such as attitude and loyalty toward brands and websites (Teng, Khong, Chong, & Lin, 2017), purchase intention (Ma, Ruangkanjanases, & Chen, 2019), and psychological wellbeing (Lee, Ng, & Bogomolova, 2020). With

the development of digital media and new technologies, scholars have discovered that social media represent an ideal tool for eWOM as the sites provide opinion seekers, opinion providers, and opinion transmitters with great opportunities to share product-related thoughts and opinions with other consumers (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Social influencers exhibit opinion leadership on social media by spreading eWOM and building a dynamic relationship with consumers (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Social influencers are highly motivated to interact with and influence their social networks through information-sharing behaviors (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Followers perceive social influencers as experts in specific fields or in particular topics, as authentic sources for information and recommendations, and as references to guide opinions, attitudes, and behaviors (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Accordingly, a higher number of followers may result in a larger reach of the message from influencers and may thus leverage the power of eWOM (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Social Capital

Social relationships are a critical factor in understanding the effects of social media use on eWOM (Chu & Kim, 2011). In examining the nature of the social relationships formed and maintained in social media, the concept of social capital might be useful. Social capital is a construct that formalizes the value of social ties, framing social networks as resources that are important and useful to individuals and organizations (Putnam, 2000). The value of social networks is expected to provide reciprocal benefits, and social capital may be either a determinant of outcomes such as wellbeing or an outcome in itself (Williams, 2006).

Putnam (2000) suggests that two types of social capital exist—bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital occurs when individuals with strong ties, such as family members or close friends, provide emotional support for one another, and it is considered exclusive in that support provided by the network promotes insularity and out-group antagonism. While the individuals building bonding social capital have little diversity in their backgrounds, bonding provides strong emotional and practical support and mobilizes solidarity (Granovetter, 1973).

In contrast, bridging social capital occurs when individuals from different backgrounds and distal relationships make connections with one another (Putnam, 2000). Such weakly tied individuals provide weak emotional support, but bridging may broaden their social horizons or worldviews and thus promote the diffusion of information (Granovetter, 1973). Bonding and bridging are expected to differ in their relevance across relationship types as a function of the strength of those relationships (Perry et al., 2018).

Social capital has been a particular focus of social media studies. The orientation and architecture of social media are geared toward social connectivity; thus, membership of social media may increase both bridging and bonding social capital (Williams, 2006). In addition, social ties play a key role in spreading eWOM on social media (Gvili & Levy, 2018). Given the circumstance of interacting with social followers in considering social benefits, motivations become a pertinent factor to account for when studying social capital in the context of social influencer and follower.

The Relationship Between Motives and Social Capital

In relation to social capital, the dimensions of motivations to follow influencers may range from individualistic to social in nature. An online game study explored the differential types of motives as group- and self-oriented respectively (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Yee, 2006). Player motives were categorized by social (i.e., socializing, relationship, teamwork), achievement (i.e., advancement, mechanics, and competition), and immersion (i.e., discovery, role-playing, customization, and escapism; Yee, 2006) components. While immersion may entail a combination of both social and individualistic reasons for game playing, the study defines social as group-oriented and achievement as self-oriented motivations (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Along this line of reasoning, in this study, information, self-presentation, and entertainment motives are regarded as individualistic or self-oriented motives related with utilitarian and hedonic gratification. Meanwhile, empathy and recognition motives are considered as group or other-oriented motives related with social gratification (Gan & Li, 2018; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).

In bridging social capital, weakly tied individuals provide network members with better opportunities to disseminate and consume novel information (Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital provides individuals with the possibility of gaining exposure to new perspectives and more various resources. In the context of social influencer and follower, when people seek enjoyable and informative content or present their own ideas or opinions, sharing content with weakly tied individuals is more beneficial because it increases the level of bridging social capital. Therefore, following social influencers with self-oriented motives such as entertainment, information, and self-presentation may increase bridging social capital.

Bonding social capital tends to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups with similar backgrounds. Bonding social capital helps individuals gain social and emotional support in depth (Granovetter, 1973). In following social influencers, when people seek empathy and recognition, it would be more beneficial to share with strongly tied individuals, thus increasing the level of bonding social capital. Therefore, following social influencers with group-oriented motives such as empathy and recognition may strengthen bonding social capital. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: (a) Entertainment, (b) information, and (c) self-presentation are positively related to bridging social capital in social media.

H2: (a) Empathy and (b) recognition are positively related to bonding social capital in social media.

The Relationship Between Social Capital and eWOM

Research shows that bonding and bridging social capital play critical roles in encouraging eWOM in social media (Gvili & Levy, 2018; Zhang, Liang, & Qi, 2021). Weak ties contribute significantly to people's resources and opportunities (Granovetter 1973) and may influence people's decision making more (Steffes & Burgee, 2009) as the users provide network members with the better opportunities to disseminate and consume novel information (Kim, Ko, & Kim, 2015). When bridging social capital

increases, social media users are more likely to value the instrumental resources shared over social media by others (Gvili & Levy, 2018).

To the area of social influencers, the need for individuals to meet self-oriented gratifications (e.g., to be entertained, to be informed about a brand, to present their opinions) may explain the power that influencers can exert on the followers' behavior regarding the brands they endorse. The more people use the endorsed content by social influencers for entertainment, information, and self-presentation, the stronger their bridging social capital, which in turn generates eWOM on social media. Therefore, bridging social capital would increase eWOM in social media.

Moreover, strong ties encourage people to share information on social media (Ma, Lee, & Goh, 2014). Bonding social capital provides network users with substantive, close, and tight social relationships (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1998). Emotional support may enhance consumers' attitude toward the eWOM message they receive (Gvili & Levy, 2018). In addition, relationships with strong ties can bring individual scarce resources and share precious and credible resources with their members, influencing the generation of eWOM (Yuan, Deng, & Zhong, 2021).

In the influencer and follower context, social relationship based on emotional support (i.e., empathy and recognition) may be related to credibility and trust between influencers and followers (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). The stronger consumer connection with social influencers, the greater the likelihood that they will be more attentive and willing to follow their advices and also distribute messages (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Therefore, bonding social capital would increase to eWOM in social media, and the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: (a) Bridging and (b) bonding social capital are positively related to eWOM behavior in social media.

Methodology

Data Collection and Sample

Among various social media platforms, YouTube is the most visited social media site in the world, with 8.5 billion monthly visitors and 1.6 billion monthly U.S. visitors in 2020 (Geysler, 2022). YouTube has more than 5,000 creators with at least 1 million subscribers, and almost 70% of users engage with creators and channels (Smith, 2020). Brands also have a strong YouTube presence, and marketers rely on YouTube not only for promotion but also for the interaction with consumers (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). The site offers many functionalities beside uploading and video viewing, which encourage user engagement such as liking, commenting, and sharing (Khan, 2017); therefore, the current study investigates the motives to follow influencers and the relationships of motives and eWOM along with the social capital on YouTube.

The online survey was created on Qualtrics, and participants were recruited from the online pool at a large U.S. university. A total of 397 undergraduates participated in the online survey. Almost 28% of generation Z (ages between 16 and 23) follow social influencers and they are most likely to respond to influencer marketing efforts (Civic Science, 2021). Therefore, university students are most relevant to this

study. Once they signed up, they saw a consent form presented on the first page of the survey site. For those who agreed to participate, a screening question was presented to exclude those who did not meet the criteria. In particular, a definition of social influencers (e.g., YouTubers) was presented: YouTuber is also called as YouTube Star or YouTube celebrity, who uploads, produces, or appears in videos on the video-sharing site YouTube. Participants were asked whether they have ever followed YouTubers.

After eliminating non-YouTube followers and participants with incomplete questionnaires, a final sample of 299 respondents (233, 77.9% female, *M* age = 22 years) was used for the analysis. The majority described themselves as Caucasian (216, 72.2%), followed by African American (39, 13%), Hispanic American (30, 10%), and others (14, 4.8%).

Measures

The questionnaire consisted of four primary sections. The first section measured the use of YouTube, and respondents were asked if they had ever subscribed to a YouTube channel. Next, four measures were used to examine the type and extent to which respondents used the YouTube channel of their choice: (1) the number of visits to the site per week (i.e. In an average week, how many times do you watch the YouTuber's channel?), (2) the usage time per day (i.e. In an average day, how much time do you spend watching the YouTuber's channel?), (3) the number of subscriptions of the YouTube channel, and (4) the content genre that their favorite YouTubers produce.

The second part of the questionnaire assessed the motives for using the YouTube channel that respondents reported visiting on a regular basis. Motives for using the YouTube channel were examined via a 7-point, Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). All the specific items were borrowed from prior literature, such as Khan (2017), Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), and Phua, Jin, and Kim (2017).

The third part of the questionnaire contained addressed eWOM and the social capital (bonding and bridging) scale. Social capital in YouTube was measured by adapting an online bridging and bonding social capital scale tested in previous work (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Williams, 2006), and eWOM was assessed using measures developed by a prior study (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Lastly, age, gender, racial/ethnic background, and education level were recorded for demographic information.

Results

Before testing the hypothesized relationships, analyses assessed if the scales achieved satisfactory levels of reliability and factor loadings were significantly related to their corresponding constructs. Next, the proposed model shown in Figure 1 was tested and retested with AMOS 24, using the two-step model-building approach as specified by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). We first analyzed the measurement model, including the latent constructs and their respective observed variables, and then tested the structural model with the hypothesized relationships.

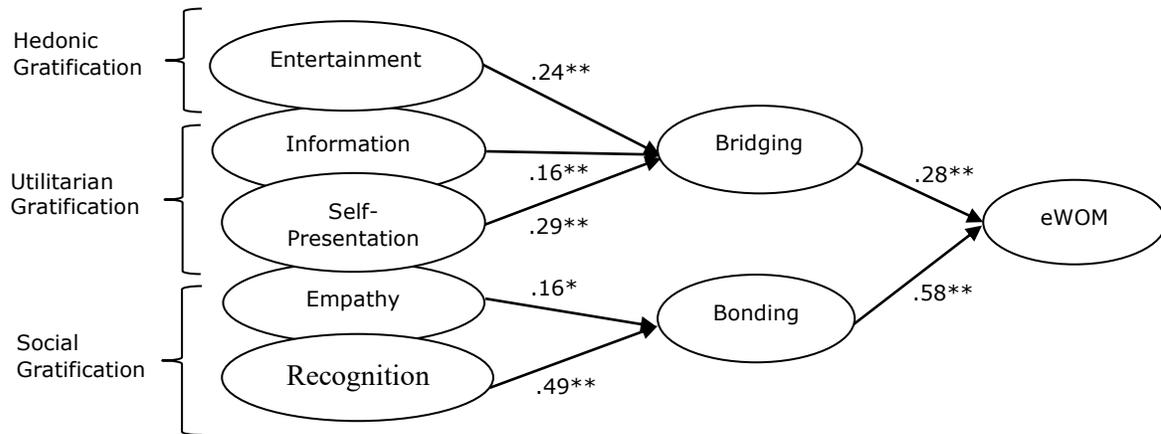


Figure 1. Proposed model.

Note. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$

Use of the Contents of YouTube Channels

Before testing the proposed model, descriptive statistics were run to examine the general use of YouTube. Table 1 illustrates frequency of visit, amount of time, number of subscriptions, and favorite topics.

Table 1. General Use of Social Media.

Characteristics		
Following influencers (n = 397)	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Yes	299	75.3
No	98	24.7
Frequency of use per week	3~4 times	
Amount of time per day	Less than 1 hour	
Average number of subscription	20.89	
Top five topics on social media	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
How to & Style	96	32.1
1. Entertainment	65	21.7
2. Comedy	44	14.7
3. Music	20	6.7
4. Sports	15	5.0

Note. A total of 299 respondents who follow influencers were used in the analysis.

Measurement Model

The results of a confirmatory factor analysis indicate that the measurement model achieved a satisfactory fit ($\chi^2[224] = 463.56$, $p < .001$; $TLI = .93$; $CFI = .95$; $RMSEA = .06$). All the indicators significantly loaded on their corresponding latent constructs ($p < .001$), and the construct reliability (CR)

and average variance extracted (AVE) were also assessed for convergent validity. The CRs for all constructs ranged from .79 to .94, and the AVEs were greater than .50; thus, the variance captured by each dimension was significantly higher than the variance because of measurement error, indicating adequate convergent validity for each dimension. In addition, all square roots of AVEs were higher than the correlations with other constructs, satisfying discriminant validity.

Harman's one-factor test was used to assess the severity of common method bias (Harman, 1976). In this test, all variables are subject to exploratory factor analysis, and it is assumed to exist if one factor accounts for the majority of variance in the variables or if one-factor surfaces from unrotated factor solutions. In this study, the variance explained by single-factor was found to be 30.27%, which is less than the 50% criterion suggested by Harman (1976). Thus, results suggest that the absence of common method bias in the data sets being used.

Table 2 presents the specific items, descriptive statistics, and reliability coefficients as well as the factor loadings of the indicators for each latent variable and the goodness-of-fit indices. Table 3 presents correlations, covariances, and variances of the latent constructs used in the measurement model.

Table 2. Measures, Factor Loadings, Descriptive Statistics, and Reliabilities.

Factors	Items	Loading	CR	AVE
"I follow the influencers...."				
Entertainment ($M = 5.63, SD = 1.28, \alpha = .83$)				
	To pass the time	.73	.84	.64
	To relax	.91		
	To forget about work or other things	.75		
Information ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.64, \alpha = .86$)				
	To get new ideas	.74	.79	.56
	To learn about unknown things	.83		
	To do research	.67		
Self-Presentation ($M = 2.56, SD = 1.83, \alpha = .94$)				
	To share what I know	.93	.94	.85
	To communicate about myself	.90		
	To express my personal beliefs and opinions	.93		
Empathy ($M = 4.34, SD = 1.29, \alpha = .81$)				
	Influencer in this channel respects me as a person	.80	.81	.59
	Influencer in this channel listens carefully what I want	.76		
	Influencer in this channel shares my feelings	.74		
Recognition ($M = 2.63, SD = 1.63, \alpha = .90$)				
	For Influencer to know my existence	.76	.90	.76
	For Influencer to respond to my comments	.93		
	For Influencer to recognize and read my comments	.91		
Bridging ($M = 4.11, SD = 1.85, \alpha = .89$)				
	Interacting with people on this channel makes me want to try new things.	.88	.86	.70
		.82		

Interacting with people on this YouTube channel makes me interested in what people unlike me are thinking.	.81		
Interacting with people on this YouTube channel reminds me that everyone in the world is connected.			
Bonding ($M = 2.63, SD = 1.63, \alpha = .85$)			
There is a member of this channel I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions.	.82	.86	.66
When I feel lonely, there are members of this channel I can talk to.	.85		
The people I interact with on this channel would help me fight an injustice.	.77		
eWOM ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.79, \alpha = .79$)			
Have you post comments to this channel?	.85	.82	.61
Have you read chatting in this channel?	.59		
Have you chat with others in this channel?	.87		

Notes. Standardized coefficients reported. All coefficients are significant at $p < .001$.

Table 3. Correlation–Variance–Covariance Matrix for Latent Constructs.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Information	2.03	.35	.24	.42	.26	.29	.30	.26
Entertainment	.44	.79	.03	.30	-.04	.30	.01	.05
Self-Presentation	.62	.05	3.28	.34	.46	.32	.68	.62
Empathy	.71	.31	.73	1.41	.47	.30	.37	.46
Recognition	.55	-.05	1.21	.88	2.15	.30	.53	.54
Bridging	.69	.44	.97	.93	.74	2.77	.47	.49
Bonding	.65	.01	1.85	.66	1.17	1.18	2.27	.65
eWOM	.68	.08	2.08	1.00	1.46	1.49	1.80	3.41

Notes. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$, $p < .001^{***}$. Variances are on the diagonal. Correlations are in the upper triangle, and covariances are in the lower triangle.

Hypotheses Testing

To determine the overall relationship structure of the eight latent variables, we conducted structural equation modeling. The results showed that all hypothesized relationships between the latent constructs were statistically significant in the expected direction (see Table 2). With respect to the fit statistics for the full model, the goodness-of-fit indices ($\chi^2 [235] = 634.84, p < .001; TLI = .90; CFI = .91; RMSEA = .07$) demonstrated a good fit.

In examining the relationship between motivations and social capital, entertainment ($\beta = .24, p < .01$), information ($\beta = .16, p < .01$), and self-presentation ($\beta = .29, p < .01$) appeared to have a significant influence on bridging social capital, lending support for H1(a), H1(b), and H1(c). In addition, empathy ($\beta = .16, p < .05$) and recognition ($\beta = .49, p < .01$) appeared to have a significant influence on bonding social capital, lending support for H2(a) and H2(b). In testing effects of social capital and eWOM, bridging ($\beta =$

.28, $p < .01$) and bonding ($\beta = .58, p < .01$) social capital were found to have significant and positive impacts on eWOM, confirming both H3(a) and H3(b); thus, all hypotheses from H1 to H3 were supported.

In addition, we conducted mediation analyses to investigate the mediating role of social capital, using bootstrapping based on 5,000 samples and 95% confidence intervals (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2021). As shown in Table 4, bridging social capital had a significant indirect effect on eWOM with relation of entertainment ($\beta = .13, p < .01$; $CI [.05; .27]$), information ($\beta = .06, p < .05$; $CI [.00; .14]$), and self-presentation ($\beta = .10, p < .05$; $CI [.01; .19]$). Regarding the mediating role of bonding social capital on eWOM, bonding social capital had a significant indirect effect on recognition ($\beta = .14, p < .05$; $CI [-.02; .36]$), but it did not have an indirect effect on eWOM with empathy ($\beta = .14, p = n.s.$; $CI [-.02; .36]$).

Table 4. Mediation Analysis.

Independent variables	Mediator	Dependent variables	<i>b</i>	95% confidence interval	
				Lower	Upper
Entertainment	→ Bridging	→ eWOM	.13**	.05	.27
Information	→ Bridging	→ eWOM	.06*	.00	.14
Self-Presentation	→ Bridging	→ eWOM	.08**	.03	.16
Empathy	→ Bonding	→ eWOM	.14	-.02	.36
Recognition	→ Bonding	→ eWOM	.35**	.20	.52

Notes. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

95% bias-corrected confidence intervals computed from 5000 bootstrapped resamples.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the motives behind following social influencers and determine how those motivations may relate to social capital, which is linked to eWOM on YouTube. The results showed five motivations—information, entertainment, self-presentation, empathy, and recognition—when social media users followed social influencers. As predicted, the results suggest that social media users' motives related to information, entertainment, and self-presentation tend to be positively related to bridging social capital, while empathy and recognition motives appear to be positively related to bonding social capital. Bridging and bonding social capital also seem to affect eWOM positively.

Motives for Following Social Influencers

In this study, five motivations—entertainment, information, self-presentation, empathy, and recognition—were identified as the main reasons for following social influencers in social media. One of the primary reasons for following social influencers was entertainment, which fulfills individuals' hedonic gratification. People follow social influencers to be entertained and pass the time by watching the content. This is consistent with the findings of prior studies, as perceived enjoyment and passing the time are considered key motivations for using and continuing to use social media (Gan & Li, 2018; Xu, Ryan, Prybutok, & Wen, 2012). Thus, our results suggest that social media users follow social influencers when they perceive the contents as enjoyable and relaxing.

Another notable motivation for following social influencers is information that fulfills individuals' utilitarian gratification. It suggests that people follow social influencers to gain knowledge, expertise, and practical information about products and services. Previous research has also stated that people follow social influencers to watch creative and informative content, suggesting that following social influencers is a useful resource for information (Croes & Bartels, 2021; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Furthermore, self-presentation motivation that fulfills individuals' utilitarian gratification indicates that social media users follow social influencers to communicate about themselves and express personal beliefs and opinions. Prior research has shown that social media users tend to disclose information, engage in strategic self-presentation, and enhance their profiles (Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012). Social media are ideal tools for providing and sharing what people know and think by virtue of promoting maximum user participation (Khan, 2017). Such self-presenting behaviors, provided via liking, commenting, sharing, and uploading, may be possible in the realm of social media (Khan, 2017). Thus, people seem to be encouraged to share what they know and express personal beliefs and opinions in social media by following social influencers.

Next, empathy motivation indicates that social media users tend to develop social relationships with influencers and perceive social gratification by sharing feelings with them. Previous research shows that a higher level of empathy—the ability to understand the emotions of others and to change one's own emotions to match those of others—is associated with higher social media engagement (Kunyk & Olson, 2001). Activities such as chatting or viewing other users' photos and posts link to higher levels of empathetic concern (Alloway, Runac, Quershi, & Kemp, 2014). Social influencers regularly interact with their followers and can provide empathetic comments or feedback to social media users. The use of social media and following influencers seem to be positively related, suggesting that people follow social influencers for being respected and comforted by sharing feelings with them.

Lastly, recognition motivation that fulfills social gratification indicates that social media users follow social influencers for a desire for recognition from them. Influencers regularly address the audience by looking at them through the camera. Repetitive exposure to social influencers and their content promotes the development of social relationships, where social influencers would become more and more important to the audience (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016). The possibility of acknowledgment and comments from the influencers could provide a parasocial relationship, in which the audience members feel a deeper connection to the media personality, even if it is unidirectional (Welbourne & Grant, 2016); thus, results suggest that people follow social influencers to be recognized by and to build an emotional connection with them.

The Relationship Between Motives and Social Capital

In terms of the relationship between motives and social capital, our results of the first hypothesis suggest that entertainment, information, and self-presentation motives are positively related to bridging social capital. This finding shows that social media users' motives related to entertainment, information, and self-presentation had a significant influence on increasing bridging social capital. Bridging social capital provides useful product-related information or new perspectives, mostly to individuals with different

backgrounds who are remotely connected via tentative relationships, but not emotional support (Granovetter, 1982). In bridging social capital, weakly tied individuals provide network members with better opportunities to disseminate and consume novel information (Putnam, 2000). Weakly tied relationships can be less costly to maintain but can broaden one's abilities or social resources (Yuan et al., 2021). Bridging social capital provides individuals with the possibility of gaining exposure to new perspectives and more varied and useful resources. Thus, when people seek informative and enjoyable content or present their own ideas or opinions in the channel of social influencers, it would be more beneficial to share with weakly tied individuals, thus increasing the level of bridging social capital.

In addition, our results revealed that empathy and recognition motives are positively related to bonding social capital. This shows that social media users' motives related to empathy and recognition had a significant influence on increasing bonding social capital. As the fame of social influencers mostly emerges through positive responses from their audience and large circulation, social influencers are eager to form affective relationships with the users, showing them empathy and recognition (Smith, 2014). Likewise, seeking empathy and recognition from social influencers is a major motivation for social media users, and those motives are related to social benefits with emotional support. Bonding social capital tends to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups with similar backgrounds. The maintenance cost of stronger relationships may be high as they require frequent interactions between members, thus consuming much time and attention (Yuan et al., 2021). However, bonding social capital helps individuals gain social and emotional support in depth; thus, when people seek empathy and recognition from social influencers, it would be more beneficial to share with strongly tied individuals, thus increasing the level of bonding social capital.

The Relationship Between Social Capital and eWOM

In terms of the relationship between social capital and eWOM, our results suggest that social capital is positively related to eWOM in social media. This indicates that both dimensions of bridging and bonding social capital had a significant positive influence on eWOM. This result is consistent with the findings of previous research that the social network's bridging social capital may shape eWOM (Gvili & Levy, 2018; Nam, Son, & Yu, 2019). Loose bridging interpersonal relationships often contain a broad range of new, complementary information sources; thus, social media users are willing to share information and opinions provided by bridging social capital by expanding existing personal networks. At the same time, close and tight bonding interpersonal relationships can bring individuals substantive and emotional support, improving individuals' attitudes toward the eWOM messages (Yuan et al., 2021). The resources provided by strong tie relationships are often trusted and credible, and people can thus decrease their uncertainty and stimulate their risk-taking behaviors. This encourages social media users to seek and share information provided by bonding social capital through their core members. Therefore, bridging and bonding social capital increase eWOM in social media.

Practical Implications and Limitations

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study can help provide marketers with insights into the design of a successful marketing strategy. By understanding exact motivations that encourage

participation in social influencer's channel, social influencers can better develop their content or features based on various motivations, which will be beneficial for building strong consumer-brand relationships as well as increasing eWOM. For example, practitioners can distinguish their specific channels as informative, entertaining, or socially supportive for gratifications needed by users. In that way, they can have maximum followers who contribute and therefore reap the benefits of being a major player.

In addition, practitioners should note the relationship among motives, social capital, and eWOM. For consumers who seek entertainment, information, and self-presentation from influencers, the relationship with weak ties is more important, which increases eWOM among more remotely connected members. Meanwhile, for consumers who seek empathy and recognition from influencers, the relationship with strong ties is more helpful, which increases eWOM with closed networks. Thus, influencers should prioritize distributing product-related content to weakly and strongly tied individuals properly based on different kinds of consumer motivations.

Despite these findings, this study also has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, it focused on one social media channel, namely YouTube. Digital eWOM channels vary in respect to their perceived attributes (Gvili & Levy, 2018; Voorveld, 2019). Future research should therefore examine additional types of social media channels regarding motives to follow social influencers. Second, this study used convenience sampling in the United States with a heavy proportion of females; therefore, a more balanced sample should be employed in future research, including other cultures and generations. Third, identifying additional motivations to follow social influencers may yield valuable insight into UGT research. Future research could extend our findings with a greater variety of motives for following social influencers in diverse social media channels and compare the similarities and differences among them. Lastly, while this study focused on motives to follow social influencers, some negative issues (e.g., hatred, vanity, fear of missing out) often occurred with social influencers, too. In relation to previous studies showing what motivates people to leave social media, in future research, it would be interesting to examine motives for unfollowing social influencers.

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