

From dazzling to dimming: How Chinese university students perceive criminal activities among Internet Influencers affects

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Abstract

This study examines the changes in how university students in China perceive internet influencers who are found to have broken the law. The rationale for conducting this study is that despite the growth in the growing popularity of internet influencer marketing, there is no literature on how internet influencers breaking the law impacts how they are perceived by their followers. To fill this research gap, this paper conducts a comprehensive literature review of the topic as well as uses the qualitative research methodology to collect data from a sample size of 16 individuals. The theoretical frameworks that are used to guide this study are the AISAS theoretical framework and the Cognitive Appraisal Theory. The findings of this study show that the perception of Chinese university students of two internet influencers who break the law is largely negative. The study also shows that these students develop a negative attitude towards brands whose services and products are marketed by internet influencers who are found to have broken the law. The study findings also establish that there is no change in how law-abiding internet influencers are perceived if some of their colleagues break the law.

Keywords: crime, marketing, internet influencer, consumer

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Introduction

Research Background

Internet influencers have developed into a global phenomenon. Even though the activities of these marketing individuals have disrupted the marketing communication norms from the first day, Covid-19 pandemic, the shutdown of brick-and-mortar stores, and increasing screen-time for many people have helped take the trend to a higher level (Aventura Group, 2021). In China, the new internet influencer market size has grown tremendously, and it is expected to generate more than \$1,000 billion revenues by 2025 (Warrington, 2021). China's National Bureau of Statistics reported that between 2018 and 2020 the new internet influencer market grew from \$38.5 million to \$210 billion respectively, with the figure doubling every year (Warrington, 2021). The increasing amount of revenues obtained from the internet influencer market is credited to the attractiveness of the industry. In 2020, for instance, 9 million internet influencers in China were reported to possess more than 10,000 followers (Aventura Group, 2021). In 2021, more than 37.8 million posts were posted daily by internet influencers.

Internet influencers have in recent times developed into brands market plans' pillars, as well as play an integral role in today's economy (Yang, 2021). The new internet influencer ecosystem and economy has also helped create business segments that are relatively new such as paid knowledge, IP authorization, livestreaming gifting and tipping, specialized supply chain, professional internet influencer training, and content analysis of internet influencers. According to Liang (2018), the internet influencer economy has developed into a new value chain, as well as provides connections between various business sectors while at the same time presenting a market potential that has proved to be significantly large.

Despite the growth of the social media internet influencer market in China, there have been several cases of internet influencers breaking laws. Xu Guohao, an internet influencer that is known for mostly posting on Momo, for instance, was ordered to pay in excess of 108 million yuan, which is equivalent to \$16 million due to late fees and tax evasions in 2019 and 2020 (Bloomberg, 2022). In what is perhaps one of the most famous cases of a Chinese internet influencer being convicted of engaging in criminal activities, the Chinese live-stream shopping internet influencer Huang Wei, who is popularly known as Viya was found guilty of tax evasion. The impact of this crime is that Viya was fined a massive \$210 million after being convicted on charges of tax evasion (Madhok, 2021). In addition to this, she was also kicked off the popular Chinese social media sites of TikTok, Weibo, as well as the online shopping platform Taobao (Madhok, 2021). In the United States, the famous YouTube influencer, Jake Paul was accused of having taken part in the looting of a mall during the George Floyd riots that took place across the country in 2020 (Blow, 2021). The impact of this crime is that Jake Paul currently faces up to 12 months in jail if he is convicted. In the UK, the internet influencer Mahek Bukhari has been charged alongside three other individuals with the murder of two cousins after a car chase, they were involved in resulted in a fatal car crash after they ran the victims off the road (Hussain, 2022). These charges could result in Bukhari's imprisonment if found guilty. The potential impact of celebrities engaging in crime is that not only could they

potentially damage their own reputations, but also brand images of the companies that they work with as well (Viira, 2022; Castro, 2020).

Feng (2021) argues that, with internet influencers continuing to break laws, China has been forced to enact laws that all internet influencers must follow in the country. Online platforms are now required to not only monitor accounts that belong to internet influencers but also to report any form of inappropriate activities associated with these accounts to authorities (Feng, 2021). Enacted laws extend to tax evasion, posting unauthorized materials, as well as banning whitewashing acts. They also regard any internet influencer who has broken internet laws or any other laws as unethical.

Research Rationale

Despite the rise of the internet influencer marketing, as well as reports of internet influencers being fined for not observing respective laws, research on how law-breaking impacts the perception of people towards internet influencers is close to non-existence. In an attempt to examine how regulating the activities of internet influencers can help protect consumers from fraudulent advertisements and poor purchase decisions, the Internet Marketing and Consumer Protection (IMCO) Committee (2022) noted that, while there have been a significant number of incidents regarding internet influencers breaking laws, there has been significantly little literature on whether these actions by internet influencers influence people perceptions towards them. IMCO Committee (2022) noted that understanding this concept is important given that consumers not only engage with different internet influencers voluntarily, but also because during this engagement, consumers are exposed to advertising, which relies on the relationship they create with internet influencers.

This study has worked towards closely examining this concept in details by focusing on Chinese university students. One of the reasons for targeting Chinese university students is because data published by Dexue Consulting (2021) shows that a significant number of young Chinese base their purchase decisions on internet influencers. Marjerison and Gan (2022) also found out that in China, more than 50% of young people base their purchases on information they acquire from social media, as compared to other channels. A study by Media Mo (2021) found out that the rate at which young people in China rely on social media posts for their purchases is the reason for the increasing number of internet influencers in the country. Focusing on Chinese University students is important as any change in their perception of internet influencers can potentially result in these individuals changing their overall career outlook. One of the most recent trends in China is that a large number of young people in the country are looking to become famous online (Guobao, 2021). This has precipitated a surge in the number of MCN (Multi-Channel Network) companies that are specifically focused on training university students on how to become internet influencers (Xu and Kilbride, 2018). Conducting this study is important as it will determine whether any change in how university students perceive internet influencers will have the effect of altering the ongoing trend in Chinese society. Based on these perspectives, examining how breaking laws affect internet

influencers from the followers' perspective is very important. This study will help generate information which will show whether internet influencers are placed at a higher level in the minds of their follows even after breaking laws or whether their actions may result in people losing belief and faith in them.

Research Aim and Objectives

Focusing on Weibo university student users, the aim of this study is to use the AISAS theoretical framework and the cognitive appraisal theory to conduct a study that will examine how breaking laws affect internet influencers from the perceptive of the customers. The main objectives of this study are:

- 1.To examine how Chinese university students perceive internet influencers after they have broken laws.
- 2.To examine whether the attitude of Chinese university students towards brands changes once the internet influencers marketing these brands engage in crime.
- 3.To examine how the attitude of Chinese university students towards internet influencers changes towards other internet influencers when one internet influencer commits a crime.

1.4: Research Questions

Based on the research objectives, this study has investigated the following research questions.

RQ1.How do Chinese university students perceive internet influencers after they have broken the law?

RQ2.What is the attitude of Chinese college students towards brands promoted by internet influencers who have been found to have committed criminal acts?

RQ3.How does the attitude of Chinese university students towards internet influencers change towards other internet influencers when one internet influencer commits a crime?

Literature Review

Internet influencers have, over the years, grown to become an important part of today's highly mediatized societies (Driessens, 2013). Far from being described as a noun, the term 'influencer' is an adjective that is used to signify that an individual possesses the quality of being able to attract attention (Furedi, 2010). It is as a result of this that we have influencers across different fields, including influencer workouts, influencer doctors, influencer diets, influencer chefs, influencer authors, influencer therapists, as well as influencer psychiatrists (Furedi, 2010). In the 21st century, the attainment of influencer status is noted to no longer be based on an individual's work in the entertainment sector, personal achievement, or sporting

success (Choi and Berger, 2010). Now that the internet has profoundly affected our lives, internet influencers have emerged and are playing an increasingly important role in our lives. For years, internet influencers have served as role models for individuals in China and across the globe as they present the perfect images of what their fans should strive to be (Panjra and Tiwari, 2021). However, these internet influencers are never perfect and at times end up breaking the law (Biagioni, 2019). When internet influencers are convicted of having broken the law, society's perception of these law-breaking internet influencers may change. Exploring this issue further, this literature review is divided into four sections. The first section, 2.1, will review literature comparing and contrasting traditional influencers vs internet influencers, and examine the internet influencer fan culture as well as internet influencer engagement in criminal activities. The second section, 2.2, will investigate internet influencer marketing and consumer trust. Section 2.3 will outline the AISAS framework model and the cognitive appraisal theory that will be used to guide this study, while Section 2.4 will identify the research gap this study will seek to fill.

Influencer vs. Internet Influencer

Definition and Comparison of Traditional Influencers vs Internet Influencers

Definition of Traditional influencers vs Internet Influencers

Ever since the appearance of mass media, the concept of influencers and the widespread admiration of various media persona is noted to have grown to become more apparent. The emergence of various social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have had the effect of expanding the traditional definition of what is meant by the term influencer (Nouri, 2018). While traditional influencers are noted to have been identified in most instances to be the musicians, actors, and models that were able to easily influence what their fans and audiences desire, consumers are today exposed to and heavily influenced by a large number of influential internet influencers (micro-celebrities) whose claim to influencer status is the fact that they have successfully attracted a large number of followers (Park and Lin, 2020). Internet influencers are well known to the public and their identification is based on elements such as aspiration, admiration, recognition or association (Kutthakaphan and Chokesamritpol, 2013). It is progressively becoming harder for individuals to successfully differentiate between influencers and internet influencers (Nouri, 2018). This challenge is further compounded by the fact that both influencers and internet influencers tend to actively participate in brand campaigns and enjoy a considerable degree of influence on social media (Nouri, 2018). Given the influence that the two distinct groups of influencers have on society, it is imperative to try and establish the distinguishing features between them.

The rise in the popularity and application of the internet and social media is noted by Li and Cai (2019) to have given rise to a new type of influencer whose claim to fame and influencer status are the social media lifestyle, live streams, and lifestyle posts that they make. There are several different forms of internet influencers that have emerged in recent years

(Ouvrein et al., 2021). These include Vloggers, Youtubers and Instafamous internet influencers (Gómez, 2019). The assertion by Li and Cai (2019) about the emergence of different forms of internet influencers in recent years is noted to be similar to that which was made by Abidin (2018) who also observes that internet influencer emerges and vary in different cultures. In analyzing how internet influencers achieve their influencer status, the article by Senft (2008) makes note of the fact that one of the commonly used strategies by these internet influencers is the cultivation of a public image that seeks to portray them as a brand and interaction with their followers and fan with the view of establishing good communication with these fans.

Comparison of Traditional Influencers vs Internet Influencers

Based on previous research by Gergaud, Ginsburgh, and Livat (2012), traditional influencers and internet influencers differ in the following ways. Firstly, a comparison of influencers against internet influencers reveals that one of the main differences between the two is that traditional influencers tend to cultivate their reputations by ensuring that they stand out in one or more areas of the entertainment industry (Gergaud, Ginsburgh and Livat, 2015), on the other hand, internet influencers cultivate their reputation as a result of their social media posts and online reputation. The articles by Lunardo, Gergaud, and Livat (2015) and Gergaud, Ginsburgh, and Livat (2012) both note that some of the most popular of these areas that traditional influencers excel at and use to build their relationships include music, cinema, and television. These influencers get to enjoy widespread fame as a result of their having excelled in their fields. Internet influencers differ from this as they attract a huge following as a result of the curiosity and fascination that individuals have for the work and success of these influencers, Galbraith and Karlin (2012) note that in some cultures such as the Japanese culture, influencer idols are not necessarily expected to be skilled, but are instead packaged to attract fans through their characters and personality.

Another major difference between traditional influencers and internet influencers is that, as opposed to only appealing to a single demographic, such as a region, age group, or even a social group, traditional influencers generally tend to appeal to several demographics all at once (Jia, Hung, and Zhang, 2020). As a result of this, the audiences of traditional influencers tend to be highly diverse. As compared to traditional influencers, internet influencers are, for the most part, influencers who have demonstrated the ability to influence a given demographic (Xu and Pratt, 2018). Internet influencers earn their influencer reputation by sharing their experience and knowledge in a given field online.

As has been highlighted in this section, the main differences between traditional influencers and internet influencers are that while traditional influencers cultivate their reputation as a result of standing out in areas of entertainment such as sports and music, internet influencers cultivate their reputations as a result of their social media posts. In addition to this, while traditional influencers tend to reach highly diverse demographics, the reach of internet influencers is limited to a smaller demographic.

Internet influencers and Fan culture

Fans are identified by Lewis (2002) to essentially be the most identifiable and visible of audiences. Fans are the individuals that wear their team colours and know nearly every detail of the life and work of a movie star (Lewis, 2002). In describing fan culture Lasch (1979) argues that fan culture is essentially a culture of narcissism that is having the effect of determining the quality of modern individuals. Lasch (1979) goes on to argue that narcissists tend to constantly seek out new outstanding individuals or heroes and perceive these heroes as being an extension of themselves. By identifying with these internet influencers, narcissists get to enjoy the feeling of vicariously basking in the glory of internet influencers, and in the process fulfil their underlying desire for social approval and fame (Lasch, 1979). The narcissist culture causes internet influencers to be perceived as iconic symbols that their fans try to identify with. Earlier views of internet influencer fan culture such as those which were presented in the article by Horton and Wohl (1956) as well as by Caughey (1978) are noted to have historically perceived fan culture (fandom) as a pathological feature of society and held that it originated from some of the negative qualities of modern society. However, recent authors have dismissed these negative views and are noted to approach the fan culture phenomenon as a highly prevalent reality that is present in various post-industrial societies (Sandvoss, 2005; Jenson, 1992). Fiske (1992) holds that when viewed from a cultural economy lens, fandom is perceived to be a rational activity that a large number of individuals in modern-day society typically engage in to accumulate popular cultural capital in the form of improved self-esteem and prestige.

Internet Influencers and Crime

In modern-day society, there has been a trend that has seen renewed interest in the relationship that exists between culture and crime (Penfold-Mounce, 2010). While the success of internet influencers is admired by their loyal fan following. The failure of internet influencers has the effect of exciting their fans just as much as their most notable successes are able to (Newton, 2008). Gies (2011) observed that a large number of news media stories have been published about internet influencers who have been found on the wrong side of the law. The most thrilling tales are found at the intersection of fame and crime (Newton, 2008). Since fans enjoy watching the success of internet influencers, these fans are observed to enjoy with equal zeal watching these internet influencers lose their fortunes, be sentenced to jail, and in extreme cases, die (Newton, 2008). In an article that attempts to identify the reason why internet influencers engage in criminal activities, Rojek (2001) draws a close link between transgression and internet influencers by pointing out that internet influencer status has the effect of separating individuals from ordinary social life. In light of this assertion, Rojek (2001) argues that celebrities are, by their nature, based on how they project a public face, and this can have the effect of altering their perception of their non-public selves, and this can cause them to more easily break the law.

Despite the extensive degree of surveillance that celebrities and their antics are constantly subjected to, of note is that the public and the fans of these celebrities generally do not exhibit a greater degree of tolerance for any wrong doing on the part of celebrities but are instead quick to condemn celebrities that are found to have broken the law (Gies, 2011). Of note, however, is that the public does not have a uniform reaction to internet influencer crime, and this reaction varies depending on the severity of the crime in question. This is aptly demonstrated by Geis, (2011) who observe that the leniency that public opinion and the media show concerning certain types of influencer wrongdoing has the effect of validating the status of fame as a privileged status in the society: Celebrities appear to have the capacity to get away with certain types of law breaking where ordinary individuals can expect that the law will be fully enforced. This observation by Geis (2011) is observed to be similar to that which was made by Kurtzman et al., (2007) who note that there is a sense in society that celebrities tend to enjoy what can essentially be termed as “informal legal privileges” that are not afforded to persons that are not famous. The existence of these privileges raises concerns pertaining to concessions to fame those legal processes are prepared to make.

Moreover, a large number of media articles, consumer advocacy groups, and activists have reported on the challenges of fraudulent internet influencers, problematic content, and fake followers within the internet influencer marketing industry. The different media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, are observed to have independently provided guidelines to their advertisement polices that seek to regulate the internet influencers using their platforms. The efforts by these internet platforms to regulate internet influencers on their platforms are enhanced by the fact that different countries have implemented different regulations and rules to help them in governing internet influencers. In the case of the United States, the country’s Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is noted to be attempting to regulate internet influencers by releasing legal guidelines that mandate that internet influencers who endorse products from brands must disclose any relationship that they might have with these brands (Library of Congress, 2022). Internet influencers can be penalized by the FTC for any failure to adhere to these guidelines. In the UK, the Competitions & Markets Authority (CMA) has released similar guidelines that in addition to mandating that internet influencers must be clear with the relationship that they have with a business or brand, must also inform their audiences whether they have been given, paid or even loaned the products that they promote (CMA, 2019).

In the case of China, the country has, over the years, implemented a series of stringent regulations that serve to govern social media behaviour and public appearance (Paul, 2022). These regulations are noted by Paul (2022) to now extend to internet influencers as well. China's government recently implemented a new regulation for the country's growing number of live streamers that mandates that internet influencers who produce content that requires specialist knowledge, such as that which is required in fields like finance, medicine, and law, must be qualified within these fields (Gordon, 2022). Internet influencers who flout this regulation risk being permanently banned from live streaming (Gordon, 2022).

Internet Influencer Marketing and Consumer Trust

Internet Influencer Marketing

The term internet influencer marketing is noted to be a term that is yet to become academically defined in literature (Bakker, 2018). Internet influencers have cropped up as a result of the continued growth of social media opportunities (Belanche et al., 2021). Internet influencers have for years been leveraged by brands for participation in marketing campaigns and these campaigns are designed to try and transfer the image and value that is associated with these celebrities to the brands that are being endorsed (Cheah et al., 2019). Internet influencers are noted to represent a highly unique and generally newer method of engaging in this marketing tactic. As a result of internet influencers serving as opinion leaders, their followers are normally driven to seek out these internet influencers and heavily rely on their opinions to determine their purchase decisions (Casaló et al., 2020). It is factor that has served to encourage the growing use of influencer marketing campaigns (Belanche et al., 2021). In describing influencer marketing campaigns, Glucksman (2017) observes that these marketing campaigns are essentially a form of marketing that is undertaken by internet influencers who represent a new type of third-party endorsers and can shape the attitude of their audiences through the post that they make on their social media platforms.

Internet influencer marketing has the effect of making it possible for young consumers to easily interact via the use of social media feeds (Feng et al., 2019). As a result of their integration of commercial content into the social content social media users are looking to consume, internet influencer marketing is noted by Childers et al., (2019) to have the effect of providing a less intrusive, albeit, more efficient alternative via which brands using internet influencer marketing can successfully reach different generations and especially so the younger generations (Kadekova and Holienčinova, 2018).

Consumer Trust

Over the past decade, there has been a significant shift in social media marketing, and this shift has primarily seen a trend toward increased internet influencer marketing (Kim and Kim, 2021). Data published by Statistica (2021) revealed that the size of internet influencer marketing was able to hit a new high of \$9.7 billion in 2020 and was projected to grow to \$15 million by 2022. It is as a result of this that D. Y. Kim and H. Y. Kim (2021) observe that internet influencer marketing has today grown to become an integral element of digital marketing strategy. Within the ever increasingly social media environment, internet influencer marketing is noted to have become a long-term partnership between internet influencers and their audiences (Ye et al., 2021). Marketers today understand the need to continuously weave their marketing messages into the narratives of the posts that are made by internet influencers over long-time periods to ensure that the brands that are being promoted by these marketers can enjoy the benefit of a greater degree of follower engagement (Nadanyiova et al, 2020). This suggests that internet influencer marketing can essentially be perceived to be a multi-

layered relationship where brands seek to leverage the trust and relationship that internet influencers have cultivated with their followers to better deliver their brand messages to the followers of these internet influencers. The findings of the study by Eyal (2018) highlight the importance of consumer trust in internet influencer marketing, as they found that about 92% of social media users indicated that they trust the internet influencers that they follow more than the traditional marketing channels.

Trust is an important concept in discussions of internet influencers, as is evidenced by the fact that it appears in most previous studies on internet influencers, such as the studies by Freberg et al. (2011) and Lim et al. (2017). Customers often view the recommendations that they receive from internet influencers with the same level of trust that they exhibit when receiving recommendations from friends and family as they often consider influencer recommendations to be more credible as compared to the messages that they come across from the various advertisers (Liljander et al., 2015; Ostaduyi and Turel, 2018). As a result of the lack of tangibility and the highly uncertain nature of digital marketing environments, trust is viewed as a critically important attribute within these environments. The importance of trust in internet influencer marketing is highlighted by the findings of Freberg et al. (2011), who were able to link the trustworthiness of social media influencers to the customers and purchase intention of their followers. The study by Chatzigeorgiou (2017) further enhances the importance of trust in internet influencer marketing as it established that the number of followers that influencers are able to attract on the internet is determined by the trust that these followers have in social media influencers.

The Internet influencers phenomenon in China

The impact of social media platforms on the lifestyles of consumers is becoming increasingly pronounced in the current era that has witnessed the rapid development of new mobile communication technologies as well as the evolution of the internet to Web 3.0 (Rudman and Bruwer, 2016). The mobile communication technologies that have come about during the era of Web 3.0 are responsible for having encouraged the emergence of internet influencers (Babenskaite and Yang, 2019). In China, a larger number of internet influencers are noted to have appeared on Weibo and other Chinese social media (Hu et al., 2020). These internet influencers, who are commonly referred to as 'Wang Hong' in Chinese have developed new revenue models by utilizing new information and communication technologies to aid them in exchanging value with their followers (Zott, Amit and Massa, 2011). The steady development of digital infrastructure has caused China to boast of being home to about 904 million internet users. This figure of internet users is noted to be more than in any other country in the world. About 72% of China's population maintains at least one social media account and actively visits multiple social media platforms (Chen, Lin, and Shan, 2021). It is this massive number of social media users that brands in the country are targeting by partnering with Chinese internet influencers.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks that will be used to guide this study are the cognitive appraisal theory and the AISAF framework model. The AISAS framework model will be used to demonstrate how good products, and services are promoted by internet influencers via the video streams. This model can be used to show how influencers create product awareness among their followers, supply them with information about the product and ultimately influence their purchase decisions by encouraging them to buy the promoted products. Moreover, in order to get a more nuanced understanding of Chinese university student's perceptions, emotion and behaviours, this study will also incorporate the cognitive appraisal theory.

AISAS Framework Model

The theoretical framework that will be used to guide this study is the (Attention, Interest, Search, Action, Share) AISAS framework. This framework, which was first advocated for in 2004 by Dentsu, is a non-linear model that is influenced by the emergence of new technology-based social media (Hendriyani et al., 2013). The reliance of consumers on corporate websites for information is gradually reducing and these consumers are increasingly becoming dependent on word-of-mouth social media such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter (Kottler, 2010). The AISAS framework posits those consumers that take note of services, products or advertisements (attention) and develop an interest in them (interest) will opt to try and gather information (search) about the service or product from the internet sites such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs and official websites or by talking to friends and family members that have purchased the service or product (Kang and Bai, 2016). These consumers will then take time to evaluate the information that they have received from the diverse sources that they have consulted and a positive evaluation will result in their deciding to purchase the product in question (action) (Hendriyani et al., 2013). Once the consumer has purchased the product, the consumer will then start talking to others about the product and commenting about it on the internet (share) (Kang and Bai, 2016). As a result of its non-linear nature, elements of the AISAS model can be repeated or skipped (Hendriyani et al., 2013). This model anticipates the diverse behaviours of modern-day consumers and encourages organizations to not solely rely on advertising but to also focus on cultivating the relationship between themselves and their consumers (Hendriyani et al., 2013). A representation of this framework is presented in Figure 1.0.

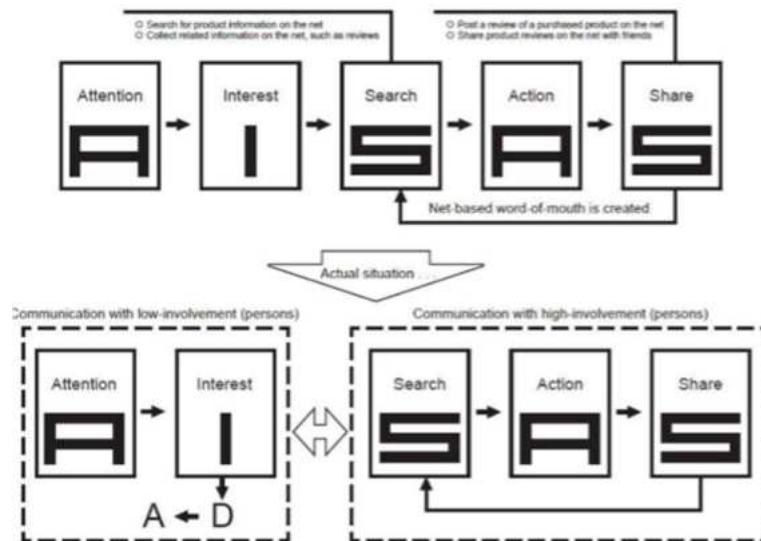


Figure 1 AISAS Framework Model (BBAA,2022)

Cognitive Appraisal Theory

This theory holds that cognitive evaluation is generally involved in the generation of all of the various emotions that are experienced by individuals (Peacock and Wong, 1990). Cognitive appraisals are fundamentally assessments of emotional situations whereby individuals undertake to establish how an event or experience has affected them, work to interpret the various aspects of the experience or event and ultimately arrive at an appropriate response based on how they have interpreted the event in question. The use of this theoretical perspective in this study is suitable as the theoretical framework is popularity applied in ambiguous situations, as is the case where influencers break the law, where there is little to no evidence as to how individuals should respond. In such situations individuals quickly undertake a primary appraisal where they evaluate just how the interaction or event will impact them personally before they quickly conduct a secondary appraisal where they evaluate the prevailing factors and determine how they will respond (Carpenter, 2016).

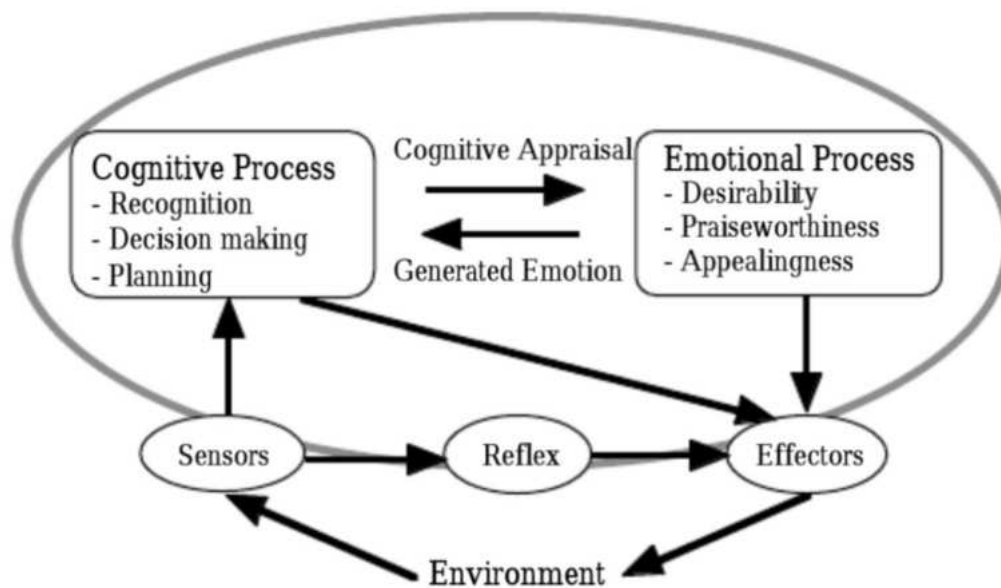


Figure 2 Conceptual Model of The Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Ushida et al.,1998)

Research Gap

Although studies such as those which were conducted by Penfold-Mounce (2010) and Gies (2011) have identified the link between celebrities and criminal activities, there currently exists a research gap in this topic as the majority of the literature on this topic such as that by Rojek (2001) is observed to be based on the results of studies that were not only conducted with a focus on traditional celebrities, but also before the emergence of internet celebrities and the development of the recent trend that has seen a growing number of internet celebrities increasingly become convicted of breaking the law. A quick review of research into this topic also reveals that while a large number of western literature and studies such as those conducted by Freberg et la., (2011) and Coco and Eckert (2020) have explored the topic of internet influencers, research on this topic is limited to the West and there is little to no literature on the East. It is worth noting that culture has a strong influence on how people see things, so this study focuses on the culturally different East. In addition to this no research has been conducted to establish whether society's perception of internet influencers that break the law ends up changing. This paper will seek to fill this critical research gap by exploring whether Chinese university students change their perception of internet influencers who break the law as well as influences such as how young people's perceptions of influencers carry over to products or brands.

Methods

This chapter highlights the methodology that was used to help guide this study. The main objective of conducting this study is to explore whether university students in China change

their perception of internet influencers if these internet influencers are convicted of having broken the law. Using a semi-structured interview that contained a series of open-ended and closed-ended questions, this research captured data about the respondent's perceptions of internet influencers that have been convicted of having participated in criminal activities. This chapter of the paper has been divided into a set of six questions that each highlight an important aspect of the methodology that was used in this study. The first section (3.1) identifies the research design and method that were used in this paper. It also notes the benefits that the study enjoyed as a result of its use of the qualitative research method, as well as the challenges associated with this research method that it had to surmount. The second section (3.2) highlights the research procedure and instruments that have been used in this study. To this end, this section will identify the research tool that was used in this study as well as the reason why this tool was selected for use in this study. The third section of the chapter (3.3) identifies how the study participants were selected for participation in this study, as well as the sampling procedure that was used to ensure that the sample that was used in this study is representative of the entire Chinese university student demographic. The fourth section (3.4) outlines how the data that was collected from the study respondents will be analysed, while section (3.5) identifies the methodological limitations that were experienced while conducting this study. The final section of the chapter (3.6) is the ethical considerations section. This section outlines the principles that were used to guide this research practice and design and will touch on aspects such as informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality.

Research Method and Design

The main research methodology that was used to conduct this study is the qualitative research methodology. The qualitative research method is a research methodology that is characterized by the collection and subsequent analysis of data that is presented in non-numerical form and is mainly intended to aid individuals in better understanding experiences, opinions, or even concepts. This methodology has been selected for use in this study as it will allow the researcher to collect qualitative views and opinions from the study respondents. Qualitative research is focused on understanding research queries as an idealistic or humanistic approach (Pathak, Jena, and Kalra, 2013). The process of collecting qualitative data is normally described as an interpretative and naturalistic approach that is mainly concerned with the exploration of phenomena from the inside as well as taking the accounts and perspectives of research participants as a starting point (Ritchie et al., 2014). The qualitative approach was selected for use in this study as it can be used to better understand the experiences, interactions, beliefs, behaviour and attitudes of individuals (Pathak, Jena and Kalra, 2013). The use of the qualitative research methodology was useful as it served to give voice to the study participants. It makes it possible for these participants to share their experiences as well as enhance the involvement of all of the participants who are involved in the study (Gibson et al., 2004).

The qualitative research data collection method that will be used in this study is that of in-depth interviews, where the researcher will engage in one-on-one interview sessions with the

study respondents. In-depth interviews are a direct and largely unstructured technique that is used to obtain insights whereby a skilled interviewer undertakes to probe a single respondent so as to uncover the respondent's various underlying attitudes, motivations, beliefs, and feelings on the topic that is under inquiry (Shukla, 2008). As opposed to collecting precise measurements, this interview technique strives to understand the makeup and nature of the area that is being researched (Shukla, 2008). The specific in-depth interviewing technique that will be used in this paper is the hidden test questioning technique, whose focus extends beyond socially shared values to the personal concerns of a customer (Shukla, 2008). A key advantage of using this data collection method in this study is that depth interviews provide more insight into the particular individuals who take part in a study as compared to focus groups (Hair et al., 2020). In addition to this, as a result of the fact that the interview setting or depth interviews are not a social setting, it is often common for study respondents to be more likely to discuss more sensitive topics as compared to those that are present in focus groups (Hair et al., 2020).

This research study is a small-scale, illuminative study that has been designed to collect rich qualitative data via the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. By adopting the use of this approach, this study enquired into various aspects of the world of the study participants as a means to gain better understanding and knowledge within a given social context (Bryman, 2016); which in the case of this study is an insight into the various ways contemporary Chinese university students view the internet influencer profession as well as their career outlooks. Qualitative semi-structured interviews are useful in this study as they are more flexible and can be used to explore the behaviours, motivations, and attitudes behind the piece of data that is the exploration of the ideas behind university students in China. In light of the fact that this study is a small study that only had a few participants, this study does not claim to be a comprehensive overview of the views of all Chinese university students concerning internet celebrities. However, this study aims to vigorously and carefully analyse data on the specific perceptions of university students towards internet influencer crime.

Research Instruments and Procedure

The Research Tool

The main research tool that will be utilized in this study is interview questions. Interview questions are argued by Longhurst (2003) and Bryman (2016) to be the most popular qualitative research method of data collection. This observation is supported by the assertion that was made by Ritchie et al. (2014), who held that interviews are a core and effective data collection method. They make it possible for researchers to explore issues in detail, understand the motivations behind the decisions that are made by individuals, as well as identify what interviewees consider important through the explanations that these interviewees give concerning behaviours and events (Ritchie et al., 2014). Given that the main aim of this study is to compile information from Chinese university students and then use this information to determine whether the perception that these students have of internet influencers experience a change if these internet influencers happen to break the law, this study utilized semi-structured

interviews as this data collection tool affords an immense degree of flexibility to researchers. Another benefit of using semi-structured interviews in this study is that, despite interviews often being considered informal and conversational, they are nevertheless noted to maintain a degree of predetermined, standardized order (Longhurst, 2003), which ensures sufficient comparability (Cohen, et al., 2007).

Research Procedure

In conducting this study, the first step entailed setting a clear definition of the objectives of this study. It is not possible for a research study to deliver quality results unless the researcher first understands the objectives and goals of the research study. This step in the research procedure was useful in helping to guide future steps in the study. As has already been indicated in this paper, the main goal of this study was to establish whether and how the perception of Chinese Students towards internet influencers changes if these internet influencers are found to have broken the law. The main factor that served to influence the goals and objective in this study is that after having followed the state of development of internet influencers over the years and reading the material that is presented in the literature review section of this project, the researcher became curious about whether the increase in the number of reported cases of internet influencers breaking the law has caused Chinese university students to change their perception of the values that they ascribe to these internet celebrities. The researcher was also curious about whether internet influencers breaking the laws have precipitated a change in how individuals view the internet influencer profession and caused them to no longer hold aspirations of being internet influencers in the future.

After clearly defining this study's goals and objectives, the second step in the research procedure entailed the screening of the potential interviewees. Chinese university students were selected for use in the study as they essentially comprise the largest group of social media users and are one of the groups that closely follow internet influencers. In addition to this, this demographic is also one of the groups that is most impacted by the fan economy and forms a target group for internet influencer incubation companies that are looking to train new internet influencers. In addition to this, contacting the members of this study and inviting them to participate in this study would also be an easy undertaking.

The third step of the research procedure for this study focused on the development of the criteria that would be used to screen the University students who would be invited to participate in this study. This criterion entailed sending out questions to the prospective study respondents to collect data such as whether or not they are university students, and their willingness to participate in the study, as well as establishing if they follow internet influencers. Once a list of the most suitable interview respondents had been collected, email invitations to participate in this study were sent out to these individuals.

The fourth step of the research procedure entailed the development of survey questions. Developing a survey questionnaire helped to keep the conversations with the interviewees on topic.

The fifth step of the research procedure entailed conducting the interviews. The interview techniques that were used in this study were mainly telephone interviews. The respondents in the study were mainly Chinese university students studying in the UK and are classmates and friends of the researcher. The interviews were recorded by telephone before they were eventually compiled into a transcript.

Sampling Procedure and Study Participants

The sampling procedure that was used in this study was the convenience sampling method on account of the fact that the participants in this study are all Chinese University students studying in the UK, have a good command of English, and are knowledgeable about internet influencers in China. The Convenience sampling method, which is also referred to as accidental sampling or haphazard sampling, is a type of random sampling where the individual members of the target population meet certain practical criteria such as easy accessibility, willingness to participate in the study, availability at a given time or even geographical proximity (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016). This sampling methodology was determined to be appropriate for use in this study as it helped the researcher in surmounting the resource limitations impacting the study by making it possible for the researcher to collect data from individuals that were willing to participate in the study, were available for the phone interviews, and were easily accessible to the researcher.

Convenience sampling is characterized by its being easy, affordable and that the subjects of the investigation are readily available. The main assumption that is linked to the use of this sampling method is that the members of the target population are homogenous. This means that there would be no difference in data that is collected from these individuals regardless of whether this data is collected from a cooperative sample, a random sample, a sample that is collected from a part of the population that is generally inaccessible or is collected from a nearby sample (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016). Concerning this study, the target population is noted to be homogenous as it is comprised of Chinese University students that are all active on various social media platforms and are aware of the crimes that some of the most popular internet influencers have in recent years been accused of having engaged in. As a result of this homogeneity, it was relatively easy for the researcher to compare data from these respondents and establish whether these study respondents have their ideas and attitudes about online celebrities as well as determine whether the accusations leveraged against internet influencers have brought about a change in how they view these celebrities or even impacted their ambitions to also become internet celebrities.

A total of 16 individuals were selected for participation in this study. Care was taken to ensure that all of these study participants are Chinese university students. All of the study

respondents were aware of the increasing number of incidents where Chinese celebrities and internet celebrities are being found to have broken the law over the past few years. To further optimize the volume and quality of the data collected for use in this study, the researcher ensured that all of the study participants have registered and actively use various social media platforms. This measure helped to increase the probability that these study participants actively follow internet influencers including some of the internet influencers that have been accused of engaging in criminal conduct.

Data Analysis

Before analysing the data that was collected from the survey respondents, the researcher first transcribed the data that had been collected from the telephone interviews. When transcribing this data, the researcher also included the non-verbatim data that had been collected including pauses, as well as the changes in the tone of voice of the study respondents. This data was used to gauge the emotions of the study participants when answering certain emotive questions.

The data analysis method that was used in this study is the narrative analysis method. A narrative analysis typically involves going through qualitative data to try and make sense of the individual stories that were provided by the study respondents (Almén, 2003). In conducting this narrative analysis, the researcher carefully highlighted the important aspects of the stories that were collected from the individual respondents.

Ethical Considerations

One of the ethical considerations in this study is that the researcher ensured that the privacy of the study respondents was guaranteed. When the study participants were sent emails inviting them to participate in this study, these invitations also included a section detailing how their privacy would be protected. To this end, the emails indicated that no identifying information would be collected from the study respondents and that their interview data would be assigned a simple alphanumeric code, such as participant F1 for female participants and participant M1 for male participants.

Another ethical consideration in the study is that an effort was made to limit the influence of bias in the study. This was done by ensuring that both the male and female genders were equally represented among the selected study participants.

Results

This section of the paper provides the results of the data collection as well as a comprehensive analysis of this data. It should be noted that the interviewees were all Chinese University Students studying in the UK and as such, all of the references to “university students” that are made in this section and the rest of the paper refer to Chinese University Students.

Impact of Internet Influencers

Impact of Influencers on the Purchase Decisions of their Followers

The convenience sampling method that was used in this paper ensured that only individuals that were knowledgeable about Chinese internet influencers and actually followed these influencers participated in this study. A list of these study participants and their favourite internet influencers is provided in table 1.0 below.

Name	Gender	Age	Grade	Major	Favourite Internet Influencer	Duration Following Influencer
Female 1	Female	24	BA	Digital Culture and Society	Li Jiagi	4 Years
Female 2	Female	23	BA	Digital Media	Papi Jiang	6 Years
Male 1	Male	27	MA	Banking and Finance	Tao Long (Mrbags)	3 Years
Male 2	Male	23	BA	Digital Economy	Liu Genghong (Will Liu)	2 Years
Male 3	Male	22	BA	Intellectual Property Law	Dipsy	2 Years
Male 4	Male	26	MA	Structural and Earthquake Engineering	Chrison	3 Years
Female 3	Female	25	MA	Data Science	Siva Shen	1 Year
Male 5	Male	24	BA	Economics and Finance	Steven He	3 Years
Female 4	Female	23	BA	Finance	Licheng Ling	2 Years
Female 5	Female	27	MA	Digital Economy	Kakao	4 Years
Female 6	Female	27	MA	International Management	Papi Jiang	4 Years
Male 6	Male	23	BA	National Security Studies	Chrison	1 Year
Female 7	Female	22	BA	Education	Zola Zhang	2 Years
Male 7	Male	25	MA	Leadership and Development	Bedless	
Male 8	Male	24	BA	Political Economy	Dipsy	3 Years
Male 9	Male	22	BA	Intelligence and International Security	Siva Shen	1 Year

Table 1 Study Participants Information Table

One of the most important findings that was made in the study is that about 90% of the study respondents indicated that they would be willing to purchase products that were being promoted by internet influencers. Some of the reasons given by these respondents as to why they would be willing to purchase products that were being promoted by internet influencers include positive experiences when purchasing products promoted by particular internet influencers in the past, the belief that internet influencers conduct comprehensive product reviews before recommending them, as well as the fact that in most instances, the prices of products that are promoted by internet influencers often tend to be significantly cheaper as compared to the store prices. All of the study participants were adamant that internet influencer marketing is a good marketing strategy.

In answer to the question of whether they would be willing to purchase products that have been recommended by internet influencers, 83% of the study respondents answered yes. Some of the reasons behind this answer include the use of highly interactive live streaming by these internet influencers, a sense of consumer involvement during these live streams, the feeling that they are friends with these internet influencers, an attraction to the personalities of these internet influencers, new product awareness, discounts, motivating sales pitch, and the availability of freebies with each purchase as shown in the response below from one of the study respondents.

“YES. When it comes to large Taobao promotions like Double 11 and 618, Internet influencer Li Jiaqi's way of selling goods makes people have a desire to shop, his live streams are very interactive, and there is a sense of consumer involvement. But whether I will really buy depends on the product itself, if I need it, plus Li Jiaqi's recommendation, I will definitely buy it.” (Study Respondent Female 1, Digital Culture and Society, MA Student).

However, not all of the study respondents indicated that they would be willing to purchase products that are promoted by internet influencers. Some of the reasons behind this decision include a desire to avoid going with the flow unless there is a sizable difference between the internet influencer price and the price at which the services or goods are being offered at online or offline shops as well as the reviews written in the comments sections of social media posts about the product by non-internet influencer social media users that have bought the product in question. This finding confirms the observations made by Saleem et al. (2014), who note that internet influencers serve as experts or opinion leaders among their followers within their respective fields. As a result, these followers often seek out or rely on the opinions of these internet influencers to inform their purchase decisions. This reliance on internet influencers is an apt indicator of the relevance and substantial potential impact that is enjoyed by internet influencers (Schaefer, 2012).

Why Follow Internet Influencers

The study respondents indicated that they follow internet influencers for several reasons that include the product reviews that these internet influencers provide, the humorous content of some of the social media posts that they provide, the belief that these internet influencers currently live the lives that their followers aspire to, and access to the useful information that is provided by these internet influencers such as information on how they can improve their financial literacy as shown in the response below from one of the respondents.

“One reason is that I've been focusing on how to take care of my skin lately and want to be a sophisticated boy; the other reason is that I'm about to join the finance industry and want to learn more about the industry.” (Male 1, Digital Economy, MA Student)

The results of these study findings are similar to those of the articles examined in the literature review that showed that celebrities and internet influencers differ on account of the fact that while celebrities are popular because of their non-social media activities such as engaging in sports and music (Schouten et al., 2019), internet influencers are essentially 'born' on social media and their reputations are primarily derived from their social media activities and the content that they happen to post (Schouten et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2020). As was evidenced by the results of this study, internet influencers tend to only focus on a segmented social media audience with whom they happen to share similar interests and are as such considered to be a kind of virtual friend (Belanche et al., 2021). The trust that the study respondents indicated that they have in internet influencers is explained in the article by Lou and Yuan (2019) to be a result of internet influencers appearing to be closer to their specific audiences and as a result, cultivating a degree of trustworthiness.

Effectiveness of Internet Influencer Marketing

When questioned whether they believed internet influencer marketing to be an effective marketing strategy, all of the study respondents indicated that they believed that this form of marketing is highly effective. Some of the reasons that they gave to support their answers include the belief that internet influencer marketing exploits the human psyche by creating an idol effect and then proceeding to cultivate a fan base for people to follow; the willingness of internet influencers to use the products that they promote, its effective exploitation of fan mentality, the tendency of fans to believe in the products that their favourite internet influencers are selling, and the desire to purchase products promoted by their favourite internet influencers regardless of whether they require the product or not. To this end, internet influencers play a critical role in the AISAS framework that is being applied in this study. According to the AISAS framework, customers that take note of services and products via advertisements first develop an interest in these products before going on to gather information on these products using various avenues such as social media, blogs, and talking to family and friends that have purchased the service or product (Kang and Bai, 2016). Consumers then proceed to carefully review all of the information that they have managed to collect before eventually arriving at a

purchase decision. Internet influencers are noted to play a key role in this process, as outlined by the AISAS framework, not only because of their ability to create product awareness among their followers but also because they provide customers with information on the product or service, as well as encourage them to purchase it. This is seen to have the effect of helping customers to rush through various stages of the purchase process that is outlined by the AISAS framework.

Popularity of Internet Influencers and the Internet Influencer Industry in China

The results of this study show that all of the study respondents actively follow internet influencers. This finding is noted to align with the findings of the literature review that showed that internet influencers have grown to become an important part of today's highly mediatized society (Driessens, 2013). Internet influencers are now a global phenomenon and while these internet influencers have been actively disrupting the prevailing marketing communication norms since the phenomenon first burst into the limelight, the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant shutting down of physical stores are noted to have taken this social media influencing trend to the next level (Aventura, 2021).

It is not surprising that all of the study respondents in the study follow at least one internet influencer as China is argued to be the global front-runner for internet influencer marketing and is currently taking the lead in helping to build up the new internet influencer business ecology with the investment and development company Aventura Group indicating that according to latest data published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the direct market size of the country's new internet influencer economy has posted steady growth over the years as is illustrated by the fact that it stood at US\$3.5 billion in 2018, grew to US\$96 billion in 2019, and posted a new high of US\$210 billion in 2020 (Aventura, 2021). This impressive growth trend essentially represents a doubling of this economy each year. It is currently estimated that by 2025, the total market size of this new value chain will attain a new high of US\$1,035 billion (Aventura, 2021). This is illustrated in Figure 2.0.

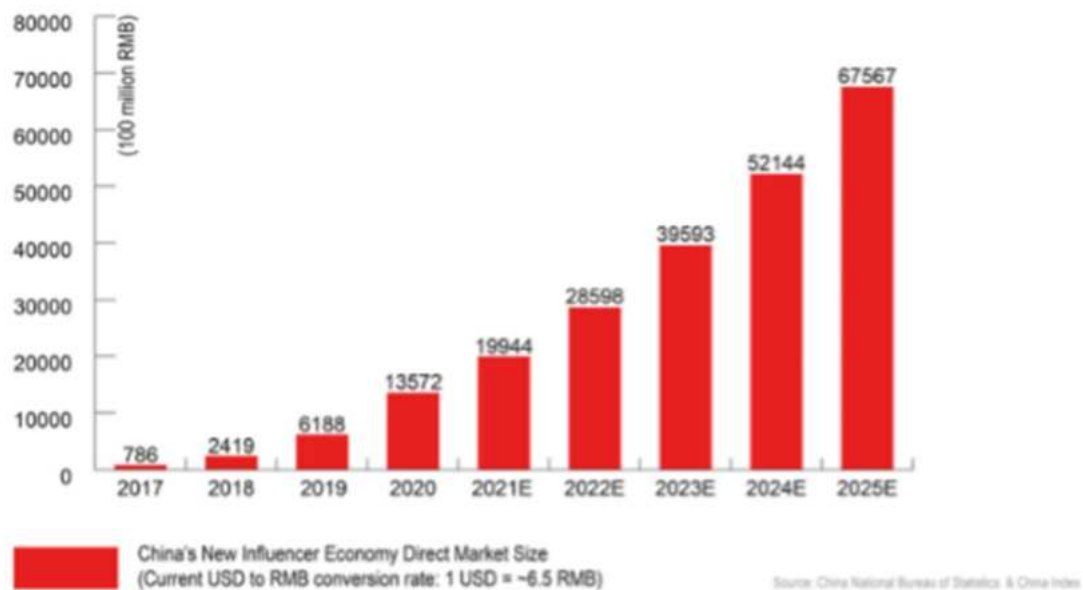


Figure 3 Chart showing the Direct Market Size of China's New Internet influencer Economy(Aventura, 2021)

How Respondents Respond to Internet Influencers Engaging in Criminal Activities based on the Cognitive Appraisal Theory Framework

As has been earlier highlighted in this paper, there are three main points in the response of individuals to external situations. these are emotion, cognition and behaviour.

Emotion

When questioned on what are their thoughts and attitudes on the prevailing phenomenon that has seen a growing number of internet influencers engage in criminal activities. Most of the study respondents had a negative attitude towards internet influencers engaging in crime and indicated that they do not believe that this is a good trend. Categorizing the respondents' attitudes from an emotional perspective showed that 3 of the respondents were indifferent to the law-breaking internet influencers, 5 viewed them as being greedy, 6 respondents indicated that they were angry with these internet influencers, and 2 respondents believed that these influencers were immoral.

The majority of the respondents are noted to have held the belief that internet influencers engaging in crime is not a major concern, as only a few internet influencers are engaging in criminal activities. Some of the study respondents went as far as pointing out that they generally do not pay much attention to internet influencer crimes, as numerous other law-abiding internet influencers will quickly end up replacing internet influencers who are found to have engaged in crime. Two of the study respondents argued that internet influencers engaging in crime is a

reflection of the greed that forms a key part of basic human nature. To this end, they observed that some of the most popular internet influencers tend to earn large amounts of money from their activities. As a result of greed and a general desire to make even more money, the individuals resorted to engaging in criminal activities such as tax evasion as well as encouraging their customers to purchase products that were later on discovered to have been fake as shown in the response below from one of the respondents.

"I think this reflects the greed of human nature. When these people gain huge profits, they will want to gain even more. Like the internet influencers who were exposed they were already gaining very much, but they wanted to avoid tax by breaking the law and keep even more benefits, they are very ambitious and greedy people." (Male 3, Intellectual Property Law, MA Student)

These findings provide a useful answer to the question of how Chinese university students perceive internet influencers who are found to have broken the law. In answer to this query, the study shows that the perception of Chinese university students towards these internet influencers generally ranges from indifference to that of their having a negative perception of these internet influencers.

These findings as established by the study, are noted to be similar to those of Eriksson and Cronqvist (2019) who sought to study internet influencers and their ethical obligations on social media from the perspective of a user. Concerning breaking the law Eriksson and Cronqvist (2019) found that internet influencers breaking the law is regarded as an ethical issue by social media users. Interestingly, these respondents in the study by Eriksson and Cronqvist (2019) provided diverse perspectives on the ethics of breaking the law as while some of the study participants held that breaking the law is essentially an inevitable ethical transgression regardless of the law, the other participants held the opinion that if the law is just and legitimate, this law should not be broken. The findings of the study by Eriksson and Cronqvist (2019) explain the differences in how Chinese university students perceive internet influencers breaking the law which this study notes ranges from indifference to a negative perception depending on the ethical perspective of these students on the action of breaking the law.

The results of this study also showed that greed among internet influencers often takes the form of constantly urging followers to purchase merchandise or an internet influencer shifting from content creation to placing more focus on wanting to earn more money on collaborations and advertisements (Eriksson and Cronqvist, 2019). Greed and its associated implications among internet influencers are also highlighted in the article by Pettigrew and Harrigans (2014) whose findings suggest the theme of greed and depiction concerning internet influencers looking to earn more money also crops up if there happens to be insufficient clarity on whether an internet influencer is currently engaged in doing paid advertising/collaborations or not. The results of this study expand on the themes of greed and unethical conduct that borders on

criminal activities among internet influencers by pointing out that Greed is part of the reason why some internet influencers opt to engage in criminal activity.

Cognition

In answer to the question of their perception of internet influencers who are found to have engaged in criminal activities, nearly all of the study respondents indicated that they would have a negative perception of these internet influencers. From a cognitive perspective, these respondents felt that law-breaking internet influencers exceeded the moral threshold. Moral self-regard is a concept that is applied in the description of how individuals evaluate their own moral merits or the extent to which they happen to believe that they are actually moral (Xiao et al., 2021). Individuals attempt to create a consistent moral identity that proves that they are actually good and, as such preserve their moral self-regard. From a cognitive perspective, the action of breaking the law by internet influencers exceeds the moral threshold as it goes against the hypothesis presented by the moral threshold model which holds that in the process of making prosocial decisions that serve to enhance moral self-regard, individuals work to ensure that the effect of the choices that they make are generally not the worst possible outcomes as compared to all of the available choices and their outcomes (Xiao et al., 2021). By engaging in activities that result in their breaking the law, these internet influencers are deemed by the study respondents as having exceeded the moral threshold.

The responses of the study respondents on whether they would unfollow internet influencers convicted of a crime as well as whether their perception of these internet influencers would change include confirmation that they would unfollow convicted internet influencers, disappointment in these internet influencers, a feeling of betrayal, and disappointment as is showing in the response below from one of the study respondents.

"I would unfollow and my attitude would change completely. Even if I like an Internet influencer again, if he/she breaks the law or does something immoral, I will be angry, feel I have misjudged him/her and firmly stop following him/her, and probably call the illegal Internet influencers online for failing me." (Female 2, Digital Media, MA student).

Other respondents indicated that they would be angry at internet influencers who are convicted of a crime and would unfollow them as they would feel that they had misjudged these internet influencers. Interestingly, two of the study respondents indicated that depending on the degree to which they happen to like the internet influencers who are convicted of engaging in criminal activity. They would probably not unfollow these internet influencers. They would instead choose to wait and see whether these internet influencers will reform and come back onto social media. Despite their opting not to unfollow these internet influencers, both of these study respondents indicated that their perception of these internet influencers would nevertheless become negative.

To help in collecting more data on any potential change in how Chinese university students perceive internet influencers who are convicted of a crime, the study sought to establish how the criminal conviction of Viya, one of China's most influential internet influencers, caused changes in how she was perceived by these students. The results of this study showed that all of the study respondents indicated that their perception of Viya changed after she was accused of engaging in tax evasion. The answers given by the study respondents concerning Viya include disgust, shock that she broke the law despite her benefiting from the immense resources that are offered by society, a loss of trust in Viya and the conviction to no longer look at any of the recommendations that she might give in the future in an attempt to influence social media users, a loss of admiration, and the desire that she should be imprisoned and removed from the public eye. One of the study respondents indicated that while his perception of Viya had not been positive from the start on account of his having brought products based on her recommendations only to find that the products in question were of relatively poor quality, he nevertheless believed that his perception of Viya could potentially switch back to a positive view if Viya paid for her offences and changed her ways.

These findings are noted to be supported by the assertions that are made by Penfold-Mounce (2010), who argues that the culture industry today provides a structure that affords no limitations, restraints, or even regulations on who eventually ends up obtaining internet influencer status. This has had the effect of resulting in the development of a situation whereby criminals and crime are at times celebrated (Penfold-Mounce, 2010). Of note, however, is that a structure alone does not serve to guarantee any success for the emergence of celebrated criminality trends of criminals that end up being celebrities or those celebrities that inevitably end up engaging in criminal activities. For individuals to become celebrated, as is the case with internet influencers, they must be connected to by the public (Penfold-Mounce, 2010). It is the existence and strength of the public connection to a potential internet influencer that results in the development of an internet influencer career or the disappearance of an individual back to obscurity (Penfold-Mounce, 2010). This connection of the public to internet influencers explains the findings of this study concerning how internet influencers are connected to the public and the fact that engaging in criminal activity can potentially weaken the strength of the connection that these celebrities have with the public and cause them to disappear back to obscurity. Disappearing back to obscurity is occasioned by the substantial loss of followers as well as the change in perception that followers have of internet influencers that are convicted of engaging in crime.

How the Purchase Decisions of Chinese University Students Change toward Brands Marketed by Internet Influencers that have broken the Law

The Decisions and Behaviours of the Interviewees

In answer to the question of whether an internet influencer getting convicted of engaging in criminal activity can influence their purchase decision concerning products or services that have been promoted by the convicted internet influencers. Some of the study respondents

responded that they would purchase any products that have been promoted or are associated with these internet influencers. One of the study respondents indicated that the reason behind their decision to not purchase products promoted by convicted internet influencers is the breaking of trust and the belief that internet influencers are essentially responsible for their fans and not breaking the law is the bottom line of this responsibility. One of the study respondents answered that the decision of whether or not they would purchase a product from an internet influencer that had been convicted of criminal activity would be dependent on whether they liked the internet influencer. In the event that they happen to like the convicted internet influencer, they would probably continue purchasing the items that these internet influencers recommend. If the internet influencer in question is one that the respondent has not followed before, the respondent will think twice about purchasing the promoted product. This shift in purchase decisions can be argued to be on account of the influence of internet influencer activity on stages that are outlined in the AISAS framework.

As has been noted in this study, the AISAS framework is designed to adopt the perception that consumers tend to share service and commodity information after making purchases and this has the effect of shaping the shopping behaviour of other individuals (Jun et al., 2021). This process comprises a set of five key stages that include attention, interest, search, action and sharing (Jun et al., 2021). Internet influencers have the effect of positively impacting this process by bringing commodities and services to the attention of potential consumers, increasing their interest in the service or product, providing them with the product and saving them the hustle of searching for it and ultimately encouraging them to take action by purchasing the product and sharing positive information concerning it.

As has been illustrated by the findings of this study, internet influencers that are found to have engaged in criminal activities ultimately find themselves unable to influence the purchase decision of their followers as a result of these followers holding the belief that these internet influencers have broken their trust as a result of their failure to be ethical. As a result of the lack of trust, internet influencers are unable to encourage their followers to quickly go through the stages outlined in the AISAS framework and ultimately make a purchase and share about it and their experience with their purchase.

In answer to enquiries about whether internet influencers engaging in criminal activities has altered their perception of other internet influencers and their desire to also become internet influencers, the majority of the study internet influencers indicated that this has not affected how they generally perceive other internet influencers. A review of their answers showed the majority of these respondents indicated that this is on account of the fact that they believed that not all internet influencers are bad and that the negative reputations of some few internet influencers should not impact how all of the other internet influencers are viewed. Among the respondents that indicated that they initially held the desire to become internet influencers even before the emergence of the current trend where a growing number of internet influencers are being accused of engaging in criminal activities, none of these respondents indicated that their career choices have been impacted. The answers given by these respondents on why they still wanted to become internet influencers despite this worrying trend ranged from wanting to

benefit from the considerable income that they stand to enjoy if they become successful internet influencers and the conviction that there are still a large number of internet influencers out there are keen to follow the law as well as maintain their moral character. These individuals held that the entire industry should not be judged based on the actions of those who have been blinded by profit.

Factors that Affect Change in Perception among University Students

The results of this study have identified a set of three main influential factors that can affect the changes in perception that university students have towards internet influencers who break the law. These are personal subjective factors, the attitude of the respondents towards authority managers, and the Justification for the Situation

Personal Subjective Factors

The first of these is whether the traits of the interviewee (personal subjective factors) will influence their attitudes towards internet influencers. An example of this is that respondents who have a strong sense of justice and morality might perceive illegal acts as bad. If a study respondent happens to have a strong sense of justice and morality, the respondent will generally be inclined to never again pay attention to an influencer who breaks the law, regardless of how fond the respondent was of this influencer before the criminal event. In this instance, the prevailing factor which is the act of breaking the law impacts the cognitive appraisal process, such that when the respondent assesses the situation and establish how it affects them, the fact that the influencer has broken the law drives to arrive at a response that sees them determine that it would be best to condemn and avoid promoting the law-breaking influencer. 4.3.2.2: Attitude of the Respondents Towards Authority Managers

The study results demonstrate that the attitude that individuals have towards authority managers can have a significant impact on their perception of influencers who break the law. An example of this is that in the event that an influencer's followers have a supportive attitude towards the authorities, these followers are likely to engage in a harsh cognitive appraisal process that will determine that the law-breaking influencers are wrong to have engaged in criminal activities. The results of this stringent cognitive appraisal will drive these followers to develop a very negative attitude and perception of these law-breaking influencers.

When questioned on whether these measures are enough, some of the study respondents answered that the measures adopted by the authority can sufficiently dissuade internet influencers from engaging in criminal activities. These individuals supported their view by pointing out that several prominent internet influencers, such as Viya, have been accused by the relevant authorities of having engaged in crime. They also observed that authority managers are currently relatively strict in their efforts to regulate internet influencers, and their efforts towards improving how they regulate these internet influencers are constantly improving. Two of the interviewees were very supportive of the actions that have been undertaken by the

authority measures and advocated for the shutting down of influencers that engage in illegal activities. Interestingly, one of the study respondents indicated that not enough was being done to discourage crime among internet influencers. The respondent gave the example of the internet influencer Simba, who was found to have engaged in the sale of fake bird nests. While this illegality was eventually discovered and the internet influencer was punished, the consumers who had bought these nests had already consumed them. To this end, the respondent held that the regulatory authorities should not only investigate criminal activities among internet influencers after the fact but also make an effort to constantly check the legality of the products that are sold by internet influencers from the very beginning.

Justification for the Situation

The specific particulars surrounding the particular situation that caused the internet influencer to break the law can also play a significant role in determining the attitude and perceptions that their followers have towards them, as well as whether there is any justification for forgiving them. Other particulars include whether the crime committed by the influencer was intentional, or if it was a first offence. If there is sufficient justification for influencer breaking the law, it is possible that the influencer's followers might engage in a cognitive appraisal process that interprets the situation mildly, and results in their choosing to adopting a response that sees them choose to continue following the law-breaking influencer.

Conclusion

This study was able to successfully achieve its aims and objective of examining just how the perception of university students in China changes towards internet influencers that break the law, it examines whether the attitudes of these students change towards these law-breaking internet influencers, as well as examines just how the attitude of these students towards other internet influencers changes if one internet influencer happens to commit a crime. To investigating this issue, this study conducts a comprehensive review of existing literature that examines literature relating to internet influencers and crime, and internet influencer marketing and consumer trust. The study also proposes the application of the AISAS theoretical framework and the cognitive appraisal theory to help in guiding the study procedure and its results. The review of existing literature on the topic also reveals that while a relatively large number of studies have been conducted examining the topic of internet influencers, research on this topic with a focus on China is relatively scarce and there is currently no research that has been conducted to investigate if there are any changes in how the society perceives internet influencers once they have been found to have broken the law. The methodology that is used in this study is the qualitative research methodology, and the data collection method is the use of interviews that were conducted on a sample size of 16 individuals.

The main findings of this study showed that internet influencers are having a growing impact on marketing, as indicated by the fact that 83% of the respondents in this study indicated that they would be willing to purchase products that have been recommended by internet

influencers. Most of the study participants held the belief that the recent trend that has seen a growing number of internet influencers engaging in criminal activities is negative. The perception of these university students towards internet influencers that engaged in crime for the most part changed and became negative. The purchase decisions of these students were also negatively impacted by criminal activities among internet influencers, as these respondents indicated that they were largely unwilling to purchase products that are recommended by internet influencers who are found to have engaged in crime. The respondents also believed that government authorities are adequately implementing actions targeted at dissuading internet influencers from engaging in criminal activities and that internet influencers engaging in crime does not impact how they view other internet influencers or their ambitions to also pursue careers as internet influencers. The findings of this study have significant implications for how internet influencers conduct themselves, as well as the internet influencers that brands choose to partner with.

Recommendations

The findings of this study provide different recommendations that target different individuals:

Recommendations for Businesses and Brands

1. Businesses and brands should be careful when choosing internet influencers. They should not only take into consideration the appearance and popularity of influencers, but also their integrity.

2. If the internet influencers that a brand or business is working with break the law and bring a negative impact to the brand, firstly, the brand should not post content on the internet that stimulates a strong sense of fairness and morality among consumers, so that the brand is not resisted. Secondly, it is important to find reasonable ways to justify and guide consumers' perceptions of negative news about the brand. This can, for instance, be achieved by terminating their relationship with the offending internet influencer and mitigating the negative effects of such incidents on the brand.

Recommendations for Internet Influencer Training Companies

When selecting young people to be trained as internet influencers, MCN companies should not only consider their appearance, but also their character and values, in the hope that they can bring positive effects to society after becoming influencers.

Recommendations for University Students

This study recommends that university students should always have their positive values, and if they are inclined to become internet influencers, they should obey the law, avoid involvement in criminal activities, and not be deterred by the current worrying trend that more and more internet influencers are being criminalised.

Recommendations for Followers

It is recommended that followers should not judge all internet influencers based on the actions of a few internet influencers who engage in crime.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Future research on the topic should use a larger sample size and should not be limited to Chinese university students. This will aid in enhancing the overall level of generalizability of the study results to the entire Chinese population. In addition to this, these studies can also focus on the change in perception of older people who are already working and have more spending power as compared to students.

Culture can potentially have a significant impact on how university students perceive internet influencers breaking the law. With this in mind, future studies can examine how influencers breaking the law influence how they are perceived by university students in Western countries.

Limitations

The main limitation impacting this study is that resource constraints had the effect of limiting the number of individuals who could take part in the study. While the researcher wanted to collect data from different geographic, educational, social, and economic demographics to enhance the overall generalizability of the study results across the general Chinese population, this was not possible, and the researcher was forced to only focus on a small sample size of China's university students' population.

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