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Young adults' motivations for following social influencers and their relationship to identification and buying behavior

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ABSTRACT

The main focus of this study is to understand why young people buy the products endorsed by social influencers on social media platforms. Specifically, the first aim of this study was to investigate the motivations young adults have for following social influencers. The second aim was to analyze social identification as a possible underlying mechanism in the relation to these motivations and young adults' online advertisement clicking and buying behavior. To achieve these aims, we employed an online questionnaire among 415 individuals between 16 and 25 years old. Respondents were asked to choose a social influencer whose social media account they recently visited, and keep that influencer in mind when responding to the survey questions. The results of the survey confirmed that there are six primary factors that motivate young adults to follow their selected social influencers, namely *information sharing*, *cool and new trend*, *relaxing entertainment*, *companionship*, *boredom/habitual pass time*, and *information seeking*. Furthermore, our findings showed that the importance of the motivations for following influencers differed between age groups, genders and educational backgrounds. Finally, social identification played an important role in the relationship between all six motivations and online advertisement clicking and buying behavior.

1. Introduction

The popularity of social media among young adults continues to rise. Following blogs and vlogs (video blogs) has become hugely popular among millions of people (Lin, Bruning, & Swarna, 2018). Nowadays, over 500 million people watch videos on Facebook, and the video-sharing website YouTube has 1.86 billion users worldwide (Statista, 2021). The exponential growth of social media has given rise to so-called "microcelebrities," such as bloggers or vloggers who have gained fame on social media through self-branding (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). These new types of celebrities, also called social influencers, use social media to engage in strategic self-presentation to attract attention and a large number of followers (Chae, 2018). Social influencers can reach thousands or even millions of potential customers through the use of social media and are thus highly effective advertisers (Lin et al., 2018). Research shows that young adults often visit platforms like Instagram or YouTube for product reviews before making a purchase, and frequently purchase items solely because influencers recommend them on social media (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Marwick, 2015).

As young adults spend increasing amounts of time on social media following social influencers, it is essential to understand why they follow these influencers and what gratifications they receive. Accordingly, the first goal of this study was to investigate young adults' motivations for following social influencers on various social media platforms. Second, we developed a model to examine the impact those motivations have on young adults' identification with social influencers, as well as the impact this identification has on buying behavior. People often associate themselves with certain groups, brand communities, or even celebrities; this so-called social identification is common in current life. Tajfel (1972) defined social identity as 'the individual's knowledge that he (or she) belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him (or her) of the group membership' (Tajfel, 1972, p. 31). An important outcome of identification is in-group favoritism: shouting at fans of opposing sports teams, buying t-shirts of your favorite brand, and following and liking famous people on Instagram. These are only a few day-to-day examples of behavioral outcomes resulting from strong identification with a sports team, a brand or a celebrity. In short, the stronger the relationship between an individual and group, brand or celebrity, the more these individuals are willing to show cooperative

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behavior towards this group (Haslam, 2001; Kelman, 1961; Tajfel, 1972). Based on this information, we assume that young adults' identification with a social influencer can play an important role in their behavior towards this social influencer.

The contribution of this research is twofold. First, this research provides the first investigation of young adults' motivations to follow social influencers. This is important because social influencers are increasingly popular among young adults, and these "microcelebrities" are seen as the new opinion leaders on social media platforms (Marwick, 2015; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Social influencers are viewed as trustworthy and credible sources of information, as well as active endorsers of products and services (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). By conceptualizing the most important motivations young adults have for following social influencers, we want to add to existing research that focuses on understanding the popularity of social influencers and their impact on their (young) followers. Second, we contribute to the existing literature on social influencers as product endorsers by shedding light on the underlying process of social identification. Recent research shows that people identify more strongly with social media influencers than other endorsers, such as more traditional celebrities (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). Social media influencers present themselves as "ordinary" people online and appear approachable, authentic, and friendly, and consumers are generally positively influenced by online advertisements featuring endorsers with whom they can identify (Basil, 1996). Thus, research shows that identification with endorsers is strongly linked to buying behavior because young adults' perceived risk is significantly reduced when they make a purchase based on their admiration of and trust in social media influencers (Alotaibi, Alkhathlan, & Alzeer, 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

This study investigated identification as an underlying mechanism between the motivations that young adults have for following social influencers and whether or not they buy the products endorsed on social media. Knowing the extent to which we could understand which motivations have the strongest links to young adults' identification with social influencers and their buying behavior would enable us to extend the existing research on social influencers as endorsers of products and services on social media. In the theoretical background of this paper, we first explain who social influencers are and how they have gained popularity. Next, we employ the uses & gratifications theory (UGT) to explain why young people follow social influencers. Finally, we apply social identity theory to explain why young adults buy products that social influencers endorse, and propose that social identification is an important underlying process in the relationship between the motivations people have for following social influencers and online advertising clicking and buying behavior.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The rise of social influencers

Social influencers, also called "micro-influencers" or "digital celebrities," are influential non-traditional celebrities who have become famous through social media (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Whereas more traditional celebrities include musicians, movie stars, or TV personalities, social influencers use social media channels for blogging or vlogging about their lives, building a large fan base, and attaining celebrity status (Khamis et al., 2017). Social influencers use social media for self-branding while striving to build a specific public identity focused on a target audience. Central to their self-branding strategy is constructing an authentic personal brand centering on a sense of genuineness and intimacy (Khamis et al., 2017). Research shows that individuals see influencers as accessible, and possessing a familiar personality (Benito, Illera, & Fernández, 2020). In that sense, social influencers differ from more traditional celebrities, in that they take the time to get to know their fans and interact with them. In doing so, they attract large numbers of followers and, as a result, the interest of corporate advertisers.

Social influencers have gained popularity primarily among young adults, who lead increasingly digital lives (Len-Ríos, Hughes, McKee, & Young, 2016). For example, in the Netherlands, the use of social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube continues to rise among young people between 15 and 19 years of age (Newcom, 2021). Given this increased role of social media in young adults' lives, it is not surprising that social influencers have become the new digital celebrities that young adults look up to and aspire to be (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In addition, social influencers are viewed as trustworthy sources of online information, making them effective spokespersons for products and brands (Fink, Cunningham, & Kensicki, 2004). Many young adults view social influencers' social media accounts as catalogs with images representing a lifestyle they dream of having (Chae, 2018; Marwick, 2015).

Consequently, social influencers have become the new opinion leaders, and serve as brand ambassadors for products and services (Lin et al., 2018). Due to their considerable following on social media platforms, they can reach thousands to millions of potential customers, who view them as both celebrities and experts in a given domain (Lin et al., 2018). Research shows that expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness are the three most important attributes of effective spokespersons (Fink et al., 2004). Social influencers present themselves on social media platforms as experts, and convey a certain social prestige among their followers (Lin et al., 2018). When they endorse products on their social media channels, they attach their social status and personal brand to them (Lin et al., 2018). That status makes social influencers even more influential than traditional endorsers (i.e., celebrities or company-sponsored online information).

Although research shows that social influencers are effective endorsers, more so than traditional celebrity endorsers, no study has analyzed the motivations young adults have for following these digital celebrities. While ample research focuses on the consequences of following these new opinion leaders (e.g., Chae, 2018; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), it remains unclear why young adults choose to follow social influencers in the first place. Since social influencers can reach thousands and even millions of (young) followers, the products they endorse can have an equally large reach and impact. Furthermore, social influencers develop a bond with their followers, often called a parasocial relationship, where followers view these influencers as their friends (Labercque, 2014). As a result, influencer endorsements can have an even larger impact on their followers, who view them as attractive, trustworthy, likable, and approachable (De Veirman et al., 2017). It is, therefore, essential to understand people's motivations to follow a social influencer.

2.2. The uses and Gratifications Theory and the motivations for social media use

We propose that UGT may explain why people follow social influencers (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). The theory is based on the premise that people actively use media to satisfy their personal needs (Wu, Wang, & Tsai, 2010). The UGT was originally developed to understand why people use mass media, like television. It has since been applied to many contemporary media channels, including social media platforms like Facebook (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008), YouTube (Khan, 2017), Instagram (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), and Snapchat (Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017). Initially, the theory centered on five primary gratifications that people experience with media use: information, entertainment, social interaction, personal identity, and escape from daily life. Applying the UGT to new social media platforms led to the addition of new gratifications that explain people's social media use (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The current study investigates whether these gratifications can be applied to following social influencers as well.

Previous research applying the UGT to social media platforms revealed that gratifications differ depending on the platform and how

one uses it. For example, a study showed that for Instagram use, the four most important motivations were *surveillance/knowledge about others*, *documentation*, *coolness*, and *creativity* (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). According to Sheldon and Bryant (2016), *surveillance/knowledge about others* is the most significant determinant of Instagram use. In addition, research on YouTube consumption shows that the gratifications sought differed depending on the platform's use (Khan, 2017). More specifically, people's motivation for passively viewing and liking or disliking videos was *relaxing entertainment*, while commenting and uploading were predicted by the *social interaction* motive.

Furthermore, both sharing content and reading comments on YouTube were driven by the motive *information giving* (Khan, 2017). These findings show that while people have different motivations for using social media platforms, their motivations *also* depend on the type of activity on the platform. Moreover, many social influencers are active on Instagram or YouTube (or both). The findings above show that people may use these platforms to gain knowledge about others for both entertainment and social interaction (Khan, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

Although the UGT has not yet been used to investigate why young adults follow social influencers, some of the gratifications studied in previous research will likely apply in the current study as well. For example, it is probable that young adults follow social influencers to seek information, because many influencers present themselves as experts in a particular domain (Chae, 2018). In addition, previous research shows that people often follow celebrities and social influencers to gain knowledge and expertise about a specific product or service (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Social influencers are characterized as charismatic experts, which explains why young adults see social influencers as opinion leaders (Lin et al., 2018); young consumers look for influencers who can provide practical information relevant to their lives (Chae, 2018).

Moreover, many influencers focus on creating an identity for themselves through narrative and creative visual posts that may be viewed as entertainment for young adults (Khamis et al., 2017). Social influencers gain popularity by attracting attention to what they post online and constructing an authentic brand (Khamis et al., 2017). This type of content is often admired, recognizable, and entertaining (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Finally, young adults may follow social influencers for companionship and social interaction. What distinguishes social influencers from more traditional celebrities is that they actively reach out to their followers on social media. They respond to comments, emails, and direct messages to foster relationships with their followers (Marwick, 2015). Furthermore, as social influencers are so popular among young adults (Lin et al., 2018), these young adults may follow social influencers to fit in with their peers, or because it is trendy or 'cool' to follow them. Thus, young adults may have a variety of motivations for following social influencers, including sharing and seeking information, entertainment, companionship, or to be considered 'cool'.

Although various studies have applied the UGT to map the motivations for using multiple types of media (e.g., Khan, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), they have not yet focused on people's motivations for following social influencers. This study aims to fill that research gap by analyzing people's motivations for following social influencers and their possible effects. By outlining the primary motivations people have for following social influencers, it is possible to gain a complete understanding of why these influencers are so popular among young adults. Taking into account existing social influencer and UGT literature (e.g., Phua et al., 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011), we suggest six motivations that young adults have to follow social influencers: information sharing, information seeking, trend-following, relaxing entertainment, companionship, and boredom/habitual pass time.

Furthermore, the motivations young adults have for following social influencers may be impacted by gender, age, and education. There is ample research on social media and gender differences (e.g., McAndrew & Jeong, 2012; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008), but findings are mixed. Specifically, these studies find that women are more active social media users than men, but show different participatory behaviors (Khan, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Research on YouTube, for example, shows that males tend to read more comments on YouTube compared to females, who tend to share more content (Khan, 2017). In contrast, research on Facebook shows that males use the chat function more frequently than females (Smock et al., 2011). Additionally, research also shows that media use varies among age groups, who also have different purposes for using different media (e.g., Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013). Research reveals that young females are more likely to use social media to maintain existing relations, or for informational and education gratifications, while young men prefer to use social media to meet new people and socialize. Younger people are more likely to use social media for entertainment and much less likely to use these platforms for informational and/or educational gratifications (Kircaburun, Alhabash, Tosuntaş, & Griffiths, 2020). Finally, educational background can impact both accessibility to digital/social media and the motivations for the use of different media (Villanti et al., 2017). Because social influencers are present on various media, motivations to follow them can vary depending on gender, age, and education, as these variables have been shown to impact the motivations for using different social media platforms in previous research. This research, however, is mixed and varies greatly depending on the platform studied (Khan, 2017; Smock et al., 2011). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Young adults following social influencers will find different motivations important depending on their age (**H1a**), gender (**H1b**) and education (**H1c**).

2.3. Social identity theory and online buying behavior

One way to explain why young adults buy products that social influencers endorse is social identification. Social identity theory is a useful way to explain consumption behavior in social contexts and how people define themselves as being part of a group (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Tajfel (1972, p. 31) defined social identity as "the individual's knowledge that he (or she) belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him (or her) of the group membership." Social identification is a significant predictor of behavior in organizational (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000) and marketing contexts (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). More specifically, the consumer's identification with a product or brand has proven to be a strong predictor of brand trust (He, Li, & Harris, 2012), brand loyalty (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012), and brand consumption in online communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006).

Recent studies have also found social identification with celebrities to be an essential part of peoples' online behavior (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Jin & Ryu, 2019; Loureiro & Sarmento, 2019). For instance, Jin and Phua (2014) found a positive relationship between social identification with celebrities and buying behavior regarding products promoted by those celebrities on Twitter. They also found a mediating role of social identification between type of endorser and buying intention. More recently, Jin 2018 confirmed this mediating effect of social identification, only this time between the type of endorser (e.g., celebrity) and parasocial interaction with the celebrity on Facebook. Loureiro and Sarmento (2019) also found that identifying with a celebrity was essential to building an online friendship with that celebrity.

In short, social identification seems to be an important factor in (online) behavior in a variety of social contexts. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2: The more young adults identify with the online social influencer, the more they will (**H2a**) show online advertising clicking and (**H2b**) the more frequent their online buying behavior.

H3: Social identification with the online social influencer mediates the relationship between young adults' motivations to follow an online social influencer, (**H3a**) online advertising clicking, and (**H3b**) online

buying behavior.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

To test the hypotheses, we conducted an online survey among 415 Dutch individuals between 16 and 25 years of age ($M = 18.81$; $SD = 2.75$). Of the survey participants, 73% were female, 53% were in high school, and 41% were college students. On average, the participants followed eight vloggers ($M = 7.84$; $SD = 10.69$)[1] and spent three and a half hours per day on social media ($M = 3.44$; $SD = 2.22$). Of that time, 45% was devoted to following social influencers ($M = 1.50$; $SD = 1.96$). Participants were recruited via convenience sampling using in-class surveys, invitations from Dutch high school teaching staff, and Facebook posts. For participants younger than 18, parents submitted a signed consent form. Participants were asked to choose a vlogger whose YouTube channel they had recently visited and then rate the scales in the survey while keeping this vlogger in mind. The online questionnaire was distributed by six researchers using Qualtrics to various high schools in the Netherlands. Respondents received a link to the online questionnaire, which contained a short introduction explaining the purpose of the study, followed by several questions measuring different variables. Because this study was part of a larger research effort, not all variables were used in the present article. Completing the questionnaire took approximately 20 min.

3.2. Measures

Motivations for Following Social Influencers. The motivations used in the current study were based on previous research on motivations for using either Facebook (e.g., Joinson, 2008, pp. 1027–1036; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), Instagram (e.g., Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), or a variety of social media based on the UGT (Phua et al., 2017). Initially, 22 items were included. Examples of items are: "to share information about the vlogger"; "to search for information"; "because it is fun", "because it is cool"; "to help me relax". The importance of the motivations was measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = unimportant to 7 = important).

Social Identification. Social identification with the vlogger was measured using three items based on Leach et al. (2008). The scale has been developed for measuring identification in several situations (e.g. organizations, consumers groups; Postmes, Haslam, & Jans, 2013) and has been shown to be reliable in different contexts (Bartels, Van Vuuren, & Ouwerkerk, 2019; Bouman, Steg, & Zawadzki, 2020; Savela, Kaakinen, Ellonen, & Oksanen, 2021). An example item was: *I feel a bond with this vlogger*. The scale was reliable ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Online Advertisement Clicking. To measure respondents' ad-clicking behavior, we used the following question: "How often do you click on online advertisements this vlogger appraises?" (1 = never to 7 = often).

Buying Behavior. To measure buying behavior, we used the following question: "How often do you buy products that this vlogger mentions on his/her social media channels?" (1 = never to 7 = often). Although buying behavior is a broader concept, we followed the same procedure as Bergkvist and Rossiter (2007). They argue that a single-item measure often has the same predictive value as a multiple-item measure.

[1] Seven participants stated that they followed 100 or more social influencers. Those participants were not included in the calculations for the mean and standard deviations.

3.3. Data analysis

To investigate whether the six motivations could be distinguished, we first conducted Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) via SPSS AMOS 26.0 (Arbuckle, 2017). To test H1, in which we assumed that there would be differences in importance of motivations between ages, genders and education levels, we conducted a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs). To test which motivations would affect young adults' identification with social influencers and their resulting online advertisement clicking and buying behavior, we then conducted path analyses in SPSS AMOS 26.0. Finally, we used mediation analyses with bootstrapping in SPSS AMOS 26.0 to test the indirect and direct effects of the motivations on online advertisement clicking and buying behavior via social identification (H3a-b). We used the following fit indices: the ratio between chi-square and the degrees of freedom (Holbert & Stephenson, 2002), the goodness-of-fit index (GFI; Tanaka & Huba, 1984), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) and the root-mean-squared error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne & Cudeck, 1993). According to Bentler (1989) a ratio of the $\chi 2$ to degrees of freedom below 5 indicates a good model fit. Moreover, Hu and Bentler (1999) recommended using a value greater than 0.90 for GFI and TLI to evaluate model fit. Browne and Cudeck (1993) further argued that a value below 0.08 for the RMSEA indicates a reasonable fit, while models with an RMSEA greater than 0.1 do not fit.

4. Results

We first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in AMOS 26.0. Based on the CFA, 18 of 22 items loaded into the six different

Table 1
Variables in the study.

Variables in the study	Items
Motives (Joinson, 2008, pp. 1027–1036; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010)	
I follow social influencers …. .	
Information sharing	to share gathered information.
	to share information about my interests with others.
	to share information obtained that may be of interest to others.
Cool and new trend	because everyone does it.
	because it's cool.
	to join a group.
Relaxing entertainment	because I enjoy it.
	because it helps me relax.
	so that I can forget about school, work or other things.
	so that I can disconnect from my environment for a moment.
Companionship	so that I don't have to be alone.
	because sometimes there is no one else to talk to.
	because it makes me feel less lonely.
Boredom/habitual pass time	out of habit.
	because sometimes I have nothing better to do.
	for passing time, especially when I'm bored.
Information seeking	to search for information.
	to learn something new.
Social identification (Leach et al. (2008)	I feel a bond with X.
	I feel solidarity with X.
	I feel committed to X.
Advertisement clicking	How often do you click on online advertisements this vlogger appraises?
Buying behavior	How often do you buy products that this vlogger mentions on his/her social media channels?

motivations (see Table 1). The overall model, in which all six dimensions were correlated, indicated an acceptable fit ($\chi 2(120) = 2.72$; GFI = 0.916; TLI = 0.905; RMSEA = 0.065). The factor loadings ranged from 0.51 to 0.91, which were all significant ($p < .01$). Cronbach's alpha scores ranged from 0.72 to 0.86. Except for *cool and new trend*, the average variance extracted (AVE) by the items measuring a construct was greater than 0.50, suggesting that the dimensions reflected excellent discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Several authors have suggested that if an AVE is less than 0.5 but composite reliability (CR) is more than the acceptable level of 0.6, the convergent validity of the construct is still adequate (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2009; Lam, 2012). Table 2 shows the results of the CFA of the six motivations.

Finally, we investigated common method bias. First, we conducted a Harman's single factor test for the six motivations. The model did not fit ($\chi 2(135) = 14.36$; GFI = 0.603; TLI = 0.282; RMSEA = 0.180), indicating that the six motivations were perceived as distinct. To further test the independence of the six motivations, we conducted heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) for discriminant validity in AMOS 26.0 (Gaskin, James, & Lim, 2019). HTMT is a method for assessing discriminant validity in partial least squares structural equation modeling for model evaluation (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). Values between the six motivations were between 0.12 and 0.64. These values were below the cut-off value of 0.85 indicating discriminant validity between the motivations. The results indicated that young adults distinguished six different motivations for following social influencers.

To test H1, we investigated whether there was a difference in the importance of the motivations based on gender, education, and age. Table 3 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the sample.

To test H1a, we divided the participants in two age groups: adolescents (16–19 years old) and young adults (20–25). Levene's test of homogeneity of variances showed that only for the motive companionship were the variances unequal between both age groups (F (1,289) = 6,97, $p < .01$). However, Brown-Forsythe statistics did not show different results. Both age groups (16–19 and 20–25) mostly had the same primary motivations for following social influencers, except for *information seeking* (F (1,289) = 8.21, $p < .01$). For young adults (20–25) this motive was more important than for adolescents (16–19). Therefore, H1a was only confirmed for one motivation to follow a social influencer.

Table 2
CFA results on motivations.

Factors and items	Factor loading	Reliability (α)	Extracted Variance
Information sharing			
to share gathered information.	0.82	0.79	0.56
to share information about my interests with others.	0.81		
to share information obtained that may be of interest to others.	0.60		
Cool and new trend		0.72	0.46
because everyone does it.	0.67		
because it's cool.	0.66		
to join a group.	0.71		
Relaxing entertainment			
because I enjoy it.	0.66	0.8	0.52
because it helps me relax.	0.81		
so that I can forget about school, work or other things.	0.68		
so that I can disconnect from my environment for a moment.	0.68		
Companionship		0.86	0.68
so that I don't have to be alone.	0.92		
because sometimes there is no one else to talk to.	0.70		
because it makes me feel less lonely.	0.84		
Boredom/habitual pass time		0.76	0.56
out of habit.	0.51		
because sometimes I have nothing better to do.	0.82		
for passing time, especially when I'm bored.	0.86		
Information seeking		0.78	0.66
to search for information.	0.91		
to learn something new.	0.70		

Table 3
Demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 413).

Age	16-19	64%
	20-25	36%
Gender	Male	27%
	Female	73%
Current education	High School student	53%
	Community College	5%
	BSc degree student	13%
	MSc degree student	28%
Number of Vloggers following [M(SD)]		7.84 (10.69)
Hours per day on social media [M(SD)]		3.44 (2.22)

For differences between women and men, Levene's test of homogeneity of variances showed that for the motives companionship (F (1,411) = 4,97, $p < .05$) and boredom/habitual pass time (F (1,411) = 7,92, $p < .01$), the variances were unequal between both groups. Again, Brown-Forsythe statistics did not show different results. ANOVAs showed that the motivations *relaxing entertainment* (F (1,411) = 6.21, $p < .05$), and *boredom/habitual pass time* (F (1,411) = 5.89, $p < .05$; following Brown & Forsythe, 1974) were more important for young women than for men. This partly confirms H1b. Finally, for differences in educational background, Levene's test of homogeneity of variances showed no differences for any motives. Therefore, we used ANOVA statistics to explain the difference in importance of all motives. There were differences in the importance of the motivations based on educational background for *boredom/habitual pass time* (F (7,405) = 2.33, $p < .05$) and *information seeking* (F (7,405) = 2.42, $p < .05$). University students found the motivations *boredom/habitual pass time* and *information seeking* more important than community college students, thus partially confirming H1b.

Table 4 further provides an overview of the descriptive statistics and correlations. In general, *relaxing entertainment* ($M = 4.87$; $SD = 1.26$) and *boredom/habitual pass time* ($M = 4.74$; $SD = 1.31$) were the most important motivations, while *cool and new trend* was the least important among young adults ($M = 1.81$; $SD = 0.99$). Buying behavior ($M = 2.26$; $SD = 1.61$) and online advertisement clicking ($M = 2.30$; $SD = 1.54$) were somewhat low. There was a strong positive relationship between young adults' online advertisement clicking and buying behavior ($r = .59$; $p < .01$). All motivations were positively related to social identification with the online social influencer. Moreover, social identification with the social influencer was positively related to online advertisement clicking ($r = 0.17$; $p < .01$) and buying behavior ($r = 0.24$; $p < .01$).

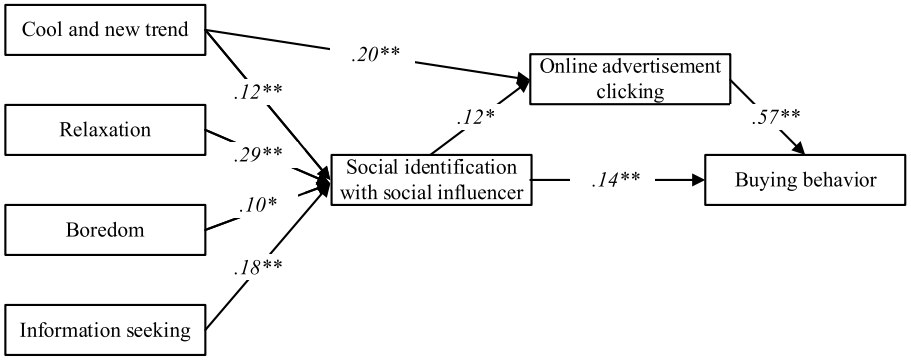
To test H2 and H3, we conducted structural equation modeling (SEM) in SPSS AMOS 26.0. We investigated which motivations had an influence on online advertisement clicking and buying behavior, and if social identification was a mediator between the six motivations and behavior. The model in which we removed all insignificant paths from the motivations to social identification fitted the data well ($\chi 2/df$ (7) = 2.71; GFI = 0.987; TLI = 0.925; RMSEA = 0.064).

The motivations *relaxing entertainment* ($\beta = 0.29$; $p < .01$), *cool and new trend* ($\beta = 0.12$; $p < .01$), *boredom/habitual pass time* ($\beta = 0.10$; $p < .05$) and *information seeking* ($\beta = 0.18$; $p < .01$) were directly related to social identification. Moreover, social identification was directly related to online advertisement clicking ($\beta = 0.12$; $p < .05$) and online buying behavior ($\beta = 0.14$; $p < .01$), while online advertisement clicking was also directly related to buying behavior ($\beta = 0.57$; $p < .01$). Fig. 1 shows the final model. The more young adults identify with the online social

Table 4
Means, standard deviations and correlations between motives, social identification and behaviors (N = 413).

Variables	*M*	(SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Behavior											
1. Buying behavior	2.26	1.61	–								
2. Online Advertisement clicking	2.30	1.54	.59**	–							
Social identification											
3. Id. with social influencer	3.57	1.56	.24**	.17**	–						
Motives											
4. Information sharing	3.25	1.38	.24**	.21**	.27**	–					
5. Relaxing entertainment	4.87	1.26	.08	.12**	.40**	.16**	–				
6. Cool and new trend	1.81	.99	.16**	.24**	.24**	.31**	.16**	–			
7. Companionship	1.95	1.21	.06	.04	.21**	.16**	.27**	.40**	–		
8. Boredom/habitual pass time	4.74	1.31	-.02	.11**	.31**	.16**	.48**	.25**	.22**	–	
9. Information seeking	3.68	1.58	.21**	.20**	.27**	.37**	.13**	.24**	.15**	.15**	–

* = correlations significant at p < .05, ** = correlations significant at p < .01; 7-Point Likert scales.



Note. *p < .05, **p < .01

Fig. 1. Final model with all significant paths. Note. *p < .05, **p < .01

influencer, the more they will show online advertising clicking and the more frequent their online buying behavior, confirming H2a and H2b.

In step 2, to further investigate the direct and indirect relationship between the motivations that were related to social identification and online advertisement clicking and buying behavior (H3a-H3b), we conducted mediation analyses in AMOS 26.0 using bootstrapping. Since several authors have stated that analysis of mediation no longer requires evidence of a direct association between the independent and dependent variables (e.g., Hayes, 2009, 2013; Shrout & Bolger, 2002), we conducted the analyses for all six motivations. Table 5 shows the results of these analyses.

The motivations *information sharing, information seeking* and *cool and new trend* were directly and indirectly via social identification related to online advertisement clicking. *Relaxing entertainment, companionship*, and *boredom/habitual pass time* only had indirect relationships with online advertisement clicking via social identification. H3a, in which we assumed that **s**ocial identification with the online social influencer mediates the relationship between young adults' motivations and online advertising clicking, was thus mostly confirmed.

The motivations *information sharing* and *information seeking* were directly and indirectly via social identification related to online advertisement clicking. *Cool and new trend*, *relaxing entertainment*, *companionship* and *boredom/habitual pass time* only had indirect relationships with buying behavior via social identification. Thus, H3b, in which we assumed that **s**ocial identification with the online social influencer mediates the relationship between young adults' motivations and buying behavior, was also mostly confirmed.

Table 5
Direct and indirect effects of motives on online advertisement clicking and buying behavior.

Models	Direct Effect	Indirect effect	Result
Information sharing → SIT → online advertisement clicking	.18**	.03**	Partial mediation
Information seeking → SIT → online advertisement clicking	.15**	.03**	Partial mediation
Cool and new trend → SIT → online advertisement clicking	.30**	.04*	Partial mediation
Relaxing entertainment → SIT → online advertisement clicking	.06(ns)	.07**	Full mediation
Companionship → SIT → online advertisement clicking	-.00(ns)	.04**	Full mediation
Boredom/habitual pass time → SIT → online advertisement clicking	.06(ns)	.05**	Full mediation
Information sharing → SIT → buying behavior	.21**	.05**	Partial mediation
Information seeking → SIT → buying behavior	.14**	.05**	Partial mediation
Cool and new trend → SIT → buying behavior	.10(ns)	.08**	Full mediation
Relaxing entertainment → SIT → buying behavior	-.02(ns)	.12**	Full mediation
Companionship → SIT → buying behavior	.01(ns)	.06**	Full mediation
Boredom/habitual pass time → SIT → buying behavior	-.11(ns)	.10**	Full mediation

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01; SIT = social identification with social influencer.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the motivations that young adults have for following social influencers, while determining how those motivations may relate to young adults' identification with those social influencers. The study also investigated the link between the

motivations for following social influencers and young adults' identification, online advertisement clicking and buying behavior.

5.1. Motivations for following social influencers

First, our results revealed that young adults have six motivations for following social influencers, *namely information sharing, information seeking, cool and new trend, relaxing entertainment, companionship*, and *boredom/habitual pass time*. These findings are consistent with an earlier study on the motivations for Facebook users by Smock et al. (2011). Additionally, the motivations *information*, *entertainment*, and an *escape from daily life* in a UGT by Katz et al. (1974) also applied to following social influencers. Specifically, our findings show that *information sharing* and *information seeking* are separate motivations for following social influencers. Moreover, the UGT motivations *entertainment* and *escape from daily life* appear to manifest in the motive *relaxing entertainment* in this study. Those motivations, combined with *pleasure*, *relax*, and *shut down the outside world,* may suggest escapism when following social influencers.

We found that the most important motivations for following influencers were *relaxing entertainment* and *boredom/habitual pass time*, two motivations which can be seen as rather similar. This suggests that young adults follow social influencers to be entertained – for example by watching funny sketches (Lokithasan, Simon, Jasmin, & Othman, 2019) – and to pass the time. Lokithasan et al. (2019) found that videos that are entertaining immediately grab users' attention and influence their decision to keep watching. Furthermore, young adults prefer to watch content that is creative as well as informative. This is also in line with our findings, which show that *information seeking* was the third most important motive for following social influencers. Previous research stated that people follow social influencers to gain knowledge, expertise, and practical information about products and services (Chae, 2018; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), which is also line with what we find in the current study.

However, our results show that *companionship* and *cool and new trend* were the least important motivations for following social influencers. This suggests that young adults do not necessarily follow social influencers because it is 'cool' or because they seek companionship. Although previous research suggests that one of the most unique qualities of social influencers is the fact that young adults can view them as their friends (Chae, 2018), our findings show that this is not one of the main reasons to follow influencers. Furthermore, although previous research suggests that following influencers has a certain social standing, our results show that young adults do not follow these influencers to fit in with a social group, or because it is 'cool'. Previous research suggests that young adults may share social influencer content as a form of identity construction (Khamis et al., 2017). By sharing social influencers' posts, young adults show that they follow these influencers; and they attempt to fit into their social group that follows these influencers as well. Although our study indeed identifies this as a motive to follow social influencers, it is not the most important one.

Our findings also show that the motivations to follow social influencers differ depending on age, gender and education, as suggested by our first hypothesis. First, we found that the motive *information seeking* was a more important motive for young adults (aged 20–25) than adolescents (aged 16–19). This is in line with previous research, which suggests that younger people are less likely to use social media platforms for informational purposes, and more likely to use these platforms for entertainment (Kircaburun et al., 2020). Furthermore, the motivations *relaxing entertainment* and *boredom/habitual pass time* were more important for young women than for men. Previous research shows that when it comes to social media use, women and men show different participatory behaviors, which is in line with the present research. However, in contrast to previous research, our findings show that young women show more passive motivations for following social influencers. When it comes to social media use, earlier studies show the opposite: women tend to be more active social media users than men (Khan, 2017; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Our findings show that young women appear to have more intrinsic motivations for following social influencers: mainly to satisfy some form of personal or internal motivation, such as enjoyment. In contrast, young men have a more extrinsic motive for following influencers: namely, for approval or some other external reward that may come from helping others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, these findings need to be interpreted cautiously, since our sample was highly skewed towards females.

Finally, our findings show the importance of educational background. Specifically, university students found the motivations *boredom/habitual pass time* and *information seeking* to be more important than community college students. Studies show that when people follow influencers to obtain practical information, they typically have particular interests and look for specific information relevant to them (Chae, 2018). Our findings add to this research by revealing that more highly-educated young adults are more likely to follow influencers to satisfy their need for practical information and to pass the time.

5.2. Young adults' motivations and online behavior

Our second hypothesis suggested that the more young adults identify with the online social influencer, the more they will show online advertising clicking behavior and the more frequent their buying behavior. Hypothesis 2 was confirmed. This is in line with previous literature that found social identification with a celebrity to be an important predictor of online buying behavior and buying intentions (Jin & Phua, 2014; Loureiro & Sarmento, 2019). In addition to these previous studies on celebrities, in the context of online social influencers, social identification can also be an important explanation for young adults' online behaviors. Based on our analyses, we further conclude that, for all six motivations, identification with a social influencer plays an important role in explaining their online behavior toward that social influencer. Social identification had a mediating or partial mediating effect for all motivations on online advertisement clicking and buying behavior, confirming H3. This mediating role of identification is consistent with earlier studies in the context of branding. These studies also find that social identification is an important mediator between attitudes and behavioral intentions (He & Li, 2011; Kim, Han, & Park, 2001; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Stokburger et al., 2012; Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013). The current study extends those previous results by explaining the critical role of identification with social influencers in the relationship between young adults' perceived motivations for following social influencers and their online behavior. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) argue that identification with a brand can lead to a kind of psychological attachment, which may result in a commitment to the brand. Our results point to the potential for young adults to become emotionally attached to social influencers, leading to advertisement clicking and buying behavior.

Although the motive *boredom/habitual pass time* was not directly correlated with young adults' buying behavior, we found that social identification fully mediated this relationship. Specifically, people who follow social influencers out of boredom or to pass the time, are more likely to buy the products they endorse because they socially identify with the influencers. In line with previous research, we expected boredom to be positively related to people buying products online (e.g., Vazquez et al., 2020). Research shows that consumers have several reasons to shop online, including experiential motivations (entertainment-seeking) and goal-oriented motivations (for a specific purchase; Kukar-Kinney & Close, 2010). Alleviating boredom is an experiential motive people may have to shop online, and this results in different online behavior compared to goal-oriented shopping. For experiential shoppers, the endorser of a product may play a more important role in their intention to buy a product than, for instance, the actual features or the price of the product. For these consumers, online shopping is an entertaining and experiential activity, and not merely a

goal-oriented activity to obtain a specific product or service. Merely viewing products, browsing from page to page and placing different products in a virtual shopping cart can be a form of entertainment for online consumers. Previous research has shown that young adults often browse Instagram or YouTube for product reviews and frequently purchase items just because they are recommended by social influencers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Marwick, 2015). Our research adds to this by showing that this mainly concerns people who follow these influencers out of boredom. Thus, improving the entertainment value of online shopping through the use of endorsers like social influencers with whom people strongly identify may alleviate boredom and increase young adults' buying behavior.

5.3. Theoretical and practical implications

This study has several implications for theory and research on what motivates young adults to follow social influencers and determines their online buying behaviors. First, our findings have implications for the UGT, which can be extended to following social influencers. Previously, the UGT was frequently applied to various media types, such as mass media (Wu et al., 2010), and more recently, social media (e.g., Khan, 2017; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Our findings show that the UGT can be applied to explain what motivates young adults to follow social influencers. More specifically, our findings extend the theory's five main gratifications: *information*, *entertainment*, *social interaction*, *personal identity*, and *escape from daily life* to include *cool and new trend*. Our findings show that, when it comes to following social influencers, young adults are motivated mainly by *entertainment, boredom,* and *information seeking* and *sharing.* These motivations are consistent with the original UGT motivations *entertainment*, *escape from daily life* and *information*. This suggests that we can conclude that these gratifications, originally applied to (social) media use, also apply to following social influencers. Furthermore, when it comes to following influencers, the motive *information* is split into *information sharing* and *information seeking* which are both important, yet separate, motivations for following influencers.

Moreover, this study adds to the few previous studies on the link between UGT and social identification (Phua et al., 2017). We found that young adults have certain motivations to satisfy specific needs in following a social influencer and, therefore, can be seen as active online communicators instead of passive addressees. Also, in the relationship between young adults and social influencers, the UGT helps explain social identification with social influencers and subsequent positive online behavior of young adults toward those influencers and the brands they are promoting.

Finally, our findings may be significant for both parents and policymakers focused on protecting children's and young adults' interests. Specifically, our research showed that the content social influencers post impacts young adults, who often go on to buy the products these influencers endorse. Previous research has shown that children and teens spend considerable time watching social influencer content, during which they encounter influencer marketing practices (De Veirman et al., 2017; Folkvord, Bevelander, Rozendaal, & Hermans, 2019). Our findings show that young adults look up to social influencers, identify strongly with them, and view them as their peers, which explains why they go on to buy the products endorsed by them. Following these influencers is, for the most part, socially motivated. Young adults follow social influencers to pass the time and to be entertained, and view them as an important source of information, which makes them highly influential. Previous research also shows that members of online communities build pseudo relationships with each other, which largely explain why they become influenced (Zafar, Qiu, & Shahzad, 2020). Social influencers must also consider this influence when endorsing products to their, often young, followers. Our findings reinforce the need for social influencer product endorsements to be recognizable and include a clear disclosure. Young adults must be able to recognize influencer marketing content as advertising, and develop the appropriate skills to respond and adapt.

5.4. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Despite its findings about what motivates young adults to follow social influencers and buy the products or services they promote, this study is not without limitations. First, we used convenience sampling in this study, which means our sample may not be generalizable to all young adults in the Netherlands. Although convenience samples are common in this line of research, there are some limitations associated with this sampling method, including the nonrandom selection of participants (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). More specifically, the majority of respondents were female rather than male. This, in turn, can impede our ability to make general inferences about all young adults in the Netherlands. We chose this sampling method because our study is one of the first to investigate the motivations young adults have to follow social influencers. However, this does mean that our findings and conclusions need to be interpreted cautiously.

Second, when responding to certain motivations, the respondents may have been affected by social desirability. For example, questions about the motivations *cool and new trend* and *companionship* may have been more difficult to acknowledge, compared to *information seeking*. Young adults, and especially adolescents, may be reluctant to admit they experience peer pressure, which may motivate them to follow specific influencers or to feel lonely. Previous research showed that peer pressure is an important stressor in adolescence, primarily among girls (Moksnes, Bradley Eilertsen, & Lazarewicz, 2016). Furthermore, adolescents are particularly vulnerable in the area of companionship (Danneel, Maes, Vanhalst, Bijttebier, & Goossens, 2018), but there is a risk of underreporting when using self-reporting measures to identify undesirable feelings related to peer pressure or companionship. Although social identification was shown to play an essential role in all motivations for young adults' online behavior, social desirability may have affected our results if respondents reported what they thought others consider to be favorable, rather than their real motivations for following social influencers.

Third, because this study is cross-sectional, our findings cannot predict if and how young adults' motivations for following social influencers change over time. Adolescence is a significant developmental period characterized by many changes, including changes to the most meaningful relationships adolescents will have: their parents and peers (Danneel et al., 2018). In adolescence, individuals gain more autonomy and develop higher expectations for the relationships they have with their peers. Furthermore, the social media environment is continuously changing, a factor that may affect the findings in the current study. Adolescents may, at some point, outgrow individual influencers or develop other motivations for following influencers. Previous research shows that an individual's social context – being alone or with others – can affect or change their choices of media and the motivations for those choices over time (Wang, Tchernev, & Solloway, 2012). Ungratified motivations for social media choices accumulate over time, and are a factor in future social media use. Those ungratified motivations grow larger and predict increasing social media use in the future (Wang et al., 2012). Future research could investigate how young adults' motivations for following social influencers change over time, and the effects of that change.

Finally, there may be other motivations young adults have for following social influencers not presented here. Future research could extend our findings by interviewing young adults to identify what motivates them to continue to follow social influencers online, thereby determining whether their motivations differ depending on gender or age. In doing so, a more diverse, relational (instead of functional) sample of the motivations for following social influencers could be created.

Author contribution

Emmelyn A. J. Croes: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Jos Bartels: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106910.

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