

## **The alchemy of fashion influencer brands: emergence, social identity and follower-based influencer brand equity**

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# **The Alchemy of Fashion Influencer Brands: Emergence, Social Identity and Follower-Based Influencer Brand Equity**

Abhilash Sugunan Nair & Ruth Marciniak

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## **Introduction**

Over time, it has become more evident that the use of influencers in fashion marketing communications is vital to success of the fashion brands. This chapter offers an exposition of fashion influencer brands including a definition and examination of the concept of influencer brands and development and expression of social identity and its role in the follower-based influencer brand equity ecosystem.

The chapter offers contributions to the research fields of branding and marketing. This chapter aims to achieve the following:

- Define concepts that explain and underpin the phenomena and emergence of influencer branding, these being, the brand and human branding
- Explain the concept of Follower-based Influencer Brand Equity (FIBE)
- Describe and evaluate how influencers' social identities drive the development of their Follower-based Influencer Brand Equity (FIBE)

## **The Brand Concept**

At the simplest level, a brand is defined as an identifier, which functions as an economic tool to support selling products. Perceived in this way, it serves to distinguish an organisation's product or service as distinct from competitors (Veloutsou & Guzmán, 2017). Whilst this definition is relevant, it is limited. Rather, a broader range of associations exist (Holt, 2003; Kotler and Keller, 2016; Moore & Reid, 2008). For example, beyond a brand functioning as a passive entity of a marketing transaction, it serves as a relationship partner, which as in any relationship, can add significant meaning to the life of a person (Fournier, 1998). Further,

beyond the individual, brands can be used to build communities, wherein interests are shared, and social relationships formed among a group of admirers of a particular brand (Ritch & McColl), 2021). Examples of successful fashion and lifestyle brand communities include Nike, Dove and Timberland (Kim and Sullivan, 2019) wherein the brand and its community is representative of a cultural asset. That is, the brand functions to bind people together and provide value (Holt, 2003). In addition, be symbolic of whatever the individual and community wishes the brand to be (Keller, 1993).

To support the view that brands are relationship builders and are used as vehicles to express values, of relevance to this chapter, is the notion of a brand as a personality. Aaker (1997) defines brand personality as a set of human characteristics that are attributed to a brand. For example, in contrast to fashion product related attributes such as dress cut, fit and colour, which are utilitarian brand features, personality related attributes such as daring, glamorous or cheerful serve the symbolic function of branding (Aaker, 1997). In doing so, personality traits linked to a brand supports consumers' self-expression, enables the development of a consumer-brand relationship and facilitates communication of the functional benefits of the brand (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2015). To illustrate, the Nike brand personified expresses confidence, furnishes a relationship of provocation, as evident in its strap line 'Just Do it', and communicates the functional benefit of competence.

### **Reasons to Brand**

Whilst unlike the bricks and mortar of a retail store, brands are intangible, and, they are much more valuable. Whilst a brand offers legal protection to a firm's unique products and services, from a consumer behaviour perspective, via the consumer-brand relationship, loyalty and trust is developed. Potential consequences of this being greater consumer-based brand equity (CBBE), defined as the commercial value derived from consumer perception of the brand name alone, as opposed to products and/or services (Wood, 2000; Keller, 1993). Potential consequences of greater brand equity are a greater willingness of the consumer to pay more for a product and make repeat purchases (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Imbuing brands with personalities through building an emotional attachment between the brand and consumer serves to further enhance brand equity.

## **Human Branding**

As much as a brand can secure an emotional attachment to a consumer, develop a relationship, and build brand equity for commercial purposes, humans can do so also. Human branding is defined as a person who has “brandable features, such as a unique personality or ability, and thereby becomes the subject of marketing communications efforts” (Ki et al., 2020, p.3) As much as a brand might secure a consumer-brand relationship, even more so, so can human branding. Celebrity endorsement is an example of this. An illustration being the Oscar winning actor Charlize Theron, who has endorsed the luxury fashion brand Dior for more than 16 years. It is estimated she earns £3.6 million per year through this partnership. In return, companies such as Dior obtains a persona, which in turn, gains favourable responses towards the brand, potentially triggering an intent to purchase (Burnasheva & Suh, 2020). To be an effective endorser, the person or, in the example above, celebrity, needs to, firstly, achieve a sense of intimacy or relatedness, secondly, communicate proficiency or competence with the target market of the brand, and thirdly, provide a sense of autonomy within the receiver of the endorsement i.e. the receiver is their own agent, rather than under the influence of the communication (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to theory underpinning human branding, if these three intrinsic psychological needs of relatedness, competence and autonomy are evident, an emotional bond is developed between the consumer and the human brand (Thomson, 2006). The consequence of this being attachment transfer, wherein the emotional bond the consumer has to a celebrity is transferred onto the brand (Illcic et al., 2016).

Whilst use of celebrity endorsement, the ‘face of the brand’, is extensive, going well beyond film stars to include athletes, singers, politicians, television and cultural personalities, limiting human branding to just celebrities is restrictive (Levesque & Pons, 2020). Khedler (2014) identifies human or personal branding when people make the effort to market themselves via their identity, their position e.g. trend expert and through their image. The use of social media, which has become a popular worldwide activity, has given rise to a new form of human branding, this being influencer branding.

## **Influencer Branding**

Ki et al. (2020) extends the literature on human brand theory to social media influencers as human brands, referred to in this chapter as influencer brands. According to Farivar et al. (2021, p. 1), influencers are “social media users who have received significant attention from other users and gained a sizable network of followers”. Most importantly, they are content generators who, through the content they produce, are of marketing value (Lou & Yuan, 2019). As Fertik (2020) points out, influencers are effective in successful marketing communications and are the preferred marketing communications tool when marketing via social media. Alternatively, a follower is someone who is interested in an influencer, typically using the influencer as a source of information (Farivar et al., 2021). In line with these definitions, influencer branding is about individuals who leverage their social media competences to engage and connect with their followers through brands to create sponsored content (Mediakix, 2019). Successful influencer branded content posted on platforms such as Instagram, You Tube and Tiktok leads to increased brand awareness, increase in traffic to the brands retail stores and potentially increased purchase intention. Ki et al. (2020) identify to be effective in influencer branding, the influencer needs to have a combination of ‘brandable persona-driven qualities’ and content curation skills, both of which are important elements of being an opinion leader. In the context of social media marketing, opinion leaders are defined as those who followers perceive to have relevant expertise, competence, and leadership in regards to the content they are posting (Koohikamali et al., 2015). Farivar et al. (2021) identify two stages in the influencer-follower relationship. Firstly, the establishment of the relationship. Explanations for motivating factors why someone may follow an influencer include reasons of enjoyment, pleasure enhancing and social identification (Nedra et al., 2019) Secondly, the influencer-follower relationship involves an element of persuasion. Reasons why someone may be swayed by an influencer are influencer’s attributes including physical and/or social attractiveness also the influencer’s perceived popularity (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Alternatively, examination of follower characteristics as motivating factors to follow an influencer include propensity to engage in online interaction and empathy with the influencer (Lou & Yuan, 2019). To summarise, the success of influencer branding includes influencer content value in terms of both information and entertainment; influencer attractiveness and credibility; influencer perceived expertise and trust (Munnukka et al., 2016). A further point to note is source similarity, that is the perceived affinity between the influencer and the follower in terms of demographic or

ideological factors such as ethical, environmental, and cultural interests. Close similarity between the influencer and the follower is cited as a reason why micro influencers (10,000-50,000 followers) achieve better engagement rates than macro influencers (500,000–1 million followers) (Elhers, 2021).

### **Understanding Influencer Brands**

The fashion industry, from both strategic and operational perspectives, is characterised by constant evolution and innovation as it serves to satisfy the complex needs and wants of modern consumers. One of the key outcomes of the evolving sectoral dynamics, as mentioned earlier, is the surfacing of influencer brands who can act as a decisive intermediary in consumer decision making process as today's consumers are more reluctant to engage with a brand only generated overt online advertisements (Paço & Oliveira, 2017; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). In place of single sponsorships or one-off alliances that they traditionally did, influencer brands have begun realising the importance of the reciprocal interdependence with their stakeholders and they now venture to establish long-term strategic collaborations with other product/service brands (Erz & Christensen, 2018). Influencers even take over the roles of ambassadors and product designers for third-party brands. Notwithstanding the rapid proliferation of influencer brands in the fashion sector, the availability of strategic or scholastic intelligence on their specificities or their measurable impact is limited (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Jun & Yi, 2020). Even from the marketers' perspective, given the intricate nature and the early lifecycle stage of influencer brand marketing, they are still experimenting by trial-and-error in search of the most effective management and marketing strategies, for example, co-creating content co-branding, offering more autonomy and developing referral programmes to boost engagement (Erz & Christensen, 2018; Rakuten Marketing, 2019; Baker, 2019).

The concept of influencer brands is still in its nascency as a distinctive academic domain and no systematised body of empirical knowledge exists on the impact of influencer brands on their followers in the long run. Even marketing practitioners struggle to understand, plan, manage, measure and predict the overall impact of social media campaigns involving influencer brands. Vanity metrics (likes, comments, shares, number of followers etc.), to a certain degree, support marketers to estimate to what extent the followers take influencers'

recommendations on board, however such metrics can effortlessly be manipulated and exaggerated; and they do not explain how influencer-follower interactions can be translated into long-term sustainable brand relationships (Levin, 2020).

### **From Consumer Based Brand Equity to Follower-Based Brand Equity**

Beyond the surface-level Return on Investment (ROI)-based metrics, product/service brands develop (and sustain) certain sensory, affective, behavioural and intellectual (unique and / or individualised) impact on consumers. As indicated above, in marketing that overall impact is called Consumer Based Brand Equity (CBBE). Interpreted in that respect, influencer brands could also develop Follower-based Brand Equity through strategic brand management which can facilitate influencer brands, marketers and academics to develop a structured understanding of the authentic and comprehensive impact (and meaning) of influencer brands' interactions with their followers.

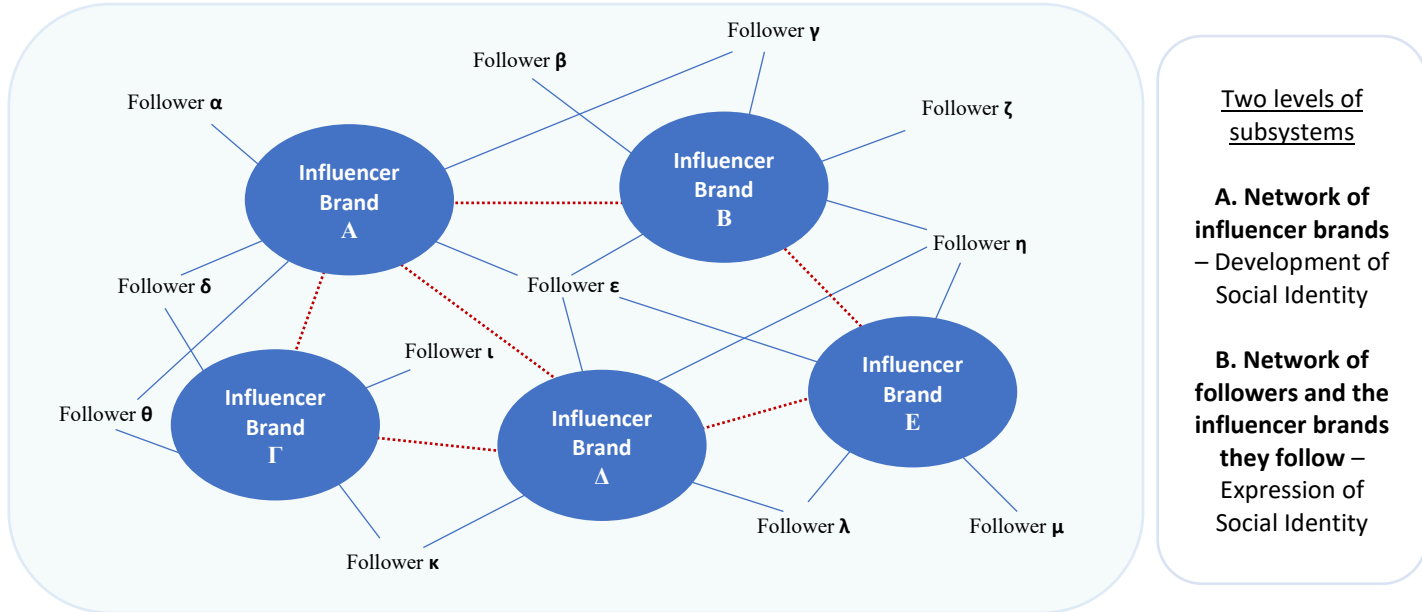
### **The Follower-based Influencer Brand Equity (FIBE) Ecosystem**

Follower-based Brand Equity or FIBE can be defined as *a set of subjective variables developed in followers' minds that enable influencer brands to secure a favourable perceptual position in the market*. In other words, the commercial value derived from consumer perception of the influencer, as a human brand, as opposed to the products and/or services they might communicate on social media. Understanding the development of FIBE would require a holistic evaluation of the socio-psychological ecosystem that the influencer brands and their followers coexist.

**Figure I** represents a simulative FIBE ecosystem that the influencer brands and their followers coexist in. The FIBE ecosystem consists of two sub-systems. The dotted lines symbolise the first subsystem of intergroup interactions (between fellow influencer brands – the reference group) which drive the **development** of influencers' *social identity*, i.e. an individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group. These interactions foster certain unique and personalised (brand) assets and associations (Thomson, 2006; Osorio et al., 2020; Jun & Yi, 2020). The solid lines represent the second subsystem of intragroup (with followers) exchanges through which influencers **express** their social

identities (Bandura, 1971; Stets et al, 2000; Davis et al., 2019; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Osorio et al. 2020).

**Figure I:** The FIBE ecosystem of influencer brands and their followers



The networking efforts of individual influencers with other influencers (in subsystem A) with the intention of reciprocity, like a snowball effect, shape their social identity which enable them to make sense of the ecosystem and develop their commercial attitudes and choices (Delisle & Parmentier, 2016; Erz & Christensen, 2018). This subsystem also accelerates the development of influencers’ cultural capital (a unique voice and a distinctive personal style) that can cause a differential effect on the followers’ minds by developing a set of functional, symbolic and emotional variables (Delisle & Parmentier, 2016). These variables are subjective in nature and are rooted in influencers’ social identity. This chapter, as illustrated in **figure II**, explains how influencers’ social identities are translated into their FIBE.

**Figure II:** FIBE Formation

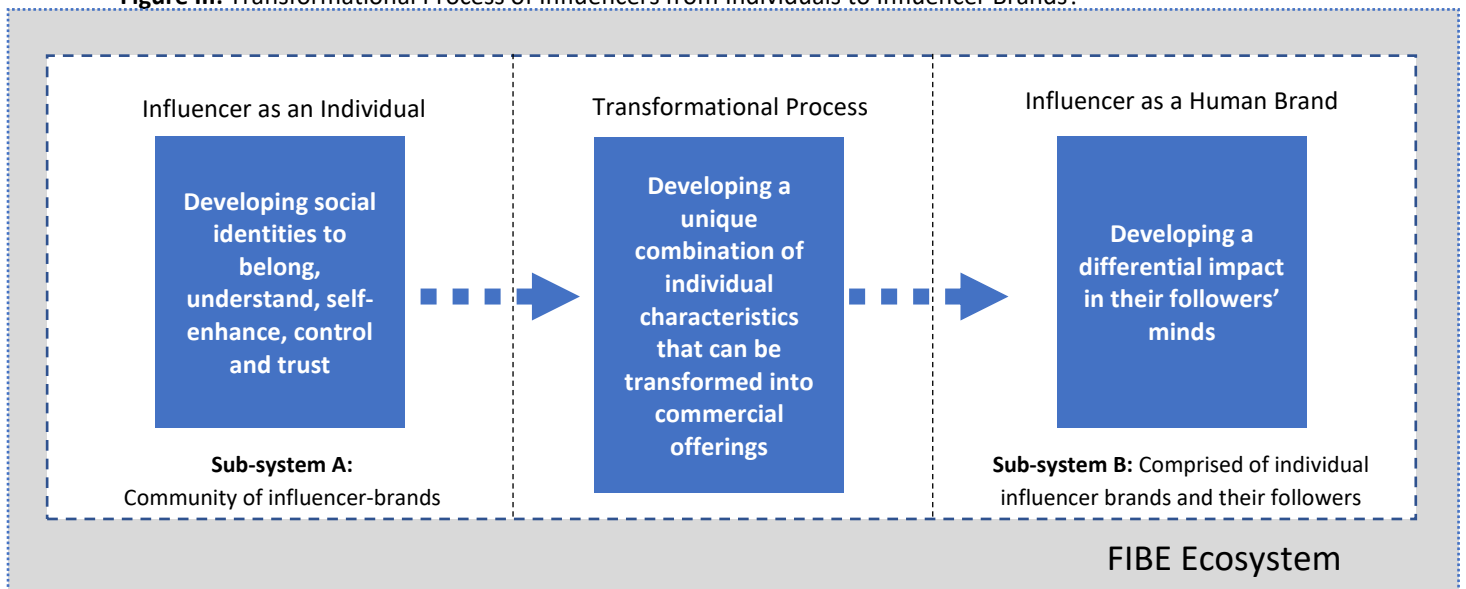




### Individuals to Influencer Brands: Social Identity and FIBE Formation

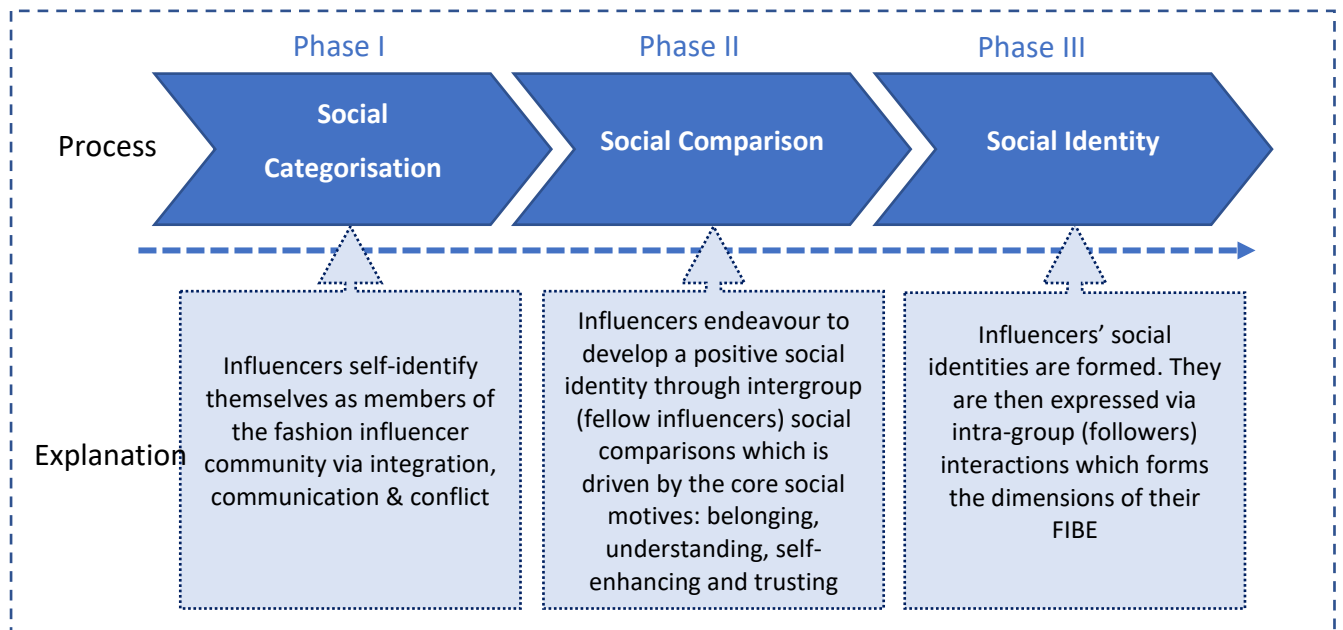
As individual influencers become human brands, to be influencer brands, their self-concept embarks on a journey of transformation (**figure III**) where they negotiate, re-interpret and adapt their identities through different stakeholders. During this process, they actively seek informal validation from their fellow influencers in the form of sharing each other's contents, commenting on each other's pages and co-creating value. As sketched out in **figure III**, as an individual influencer is being transformed into a human brand, they develop a set of unique traits that can be converted into commercial offerings. Even though primarily developed in subsystem A, those traits help influencer brands to secure a favourable perceptual position in subsystem B.

**Figure III:** Transformational Process of Influencers from Individuals to Influencer Brands?



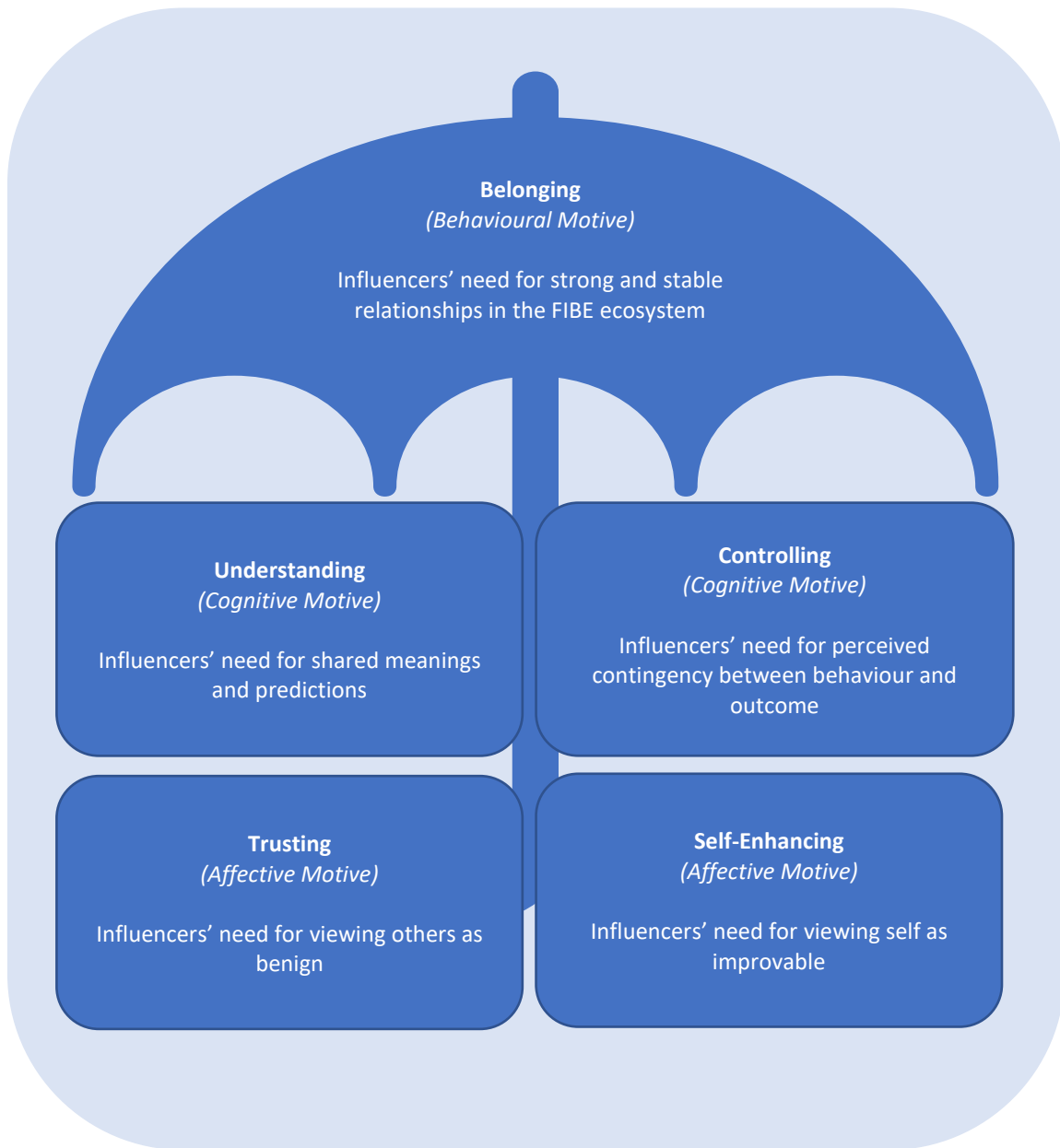
To clarify this further, influencers' social identity formation in the FIBE ecosystem can be identified as a three-phase sequential process, as illustrated in **figure IV**, involving social categorisation, social comparison and finally the development of their social identity (Stets et al, 2000; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

**Figure IV:** Influencers' Social Identity Formation (Modified from: Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019)



Essentially, the first two cognitive steps, i.e., social categorisation and social comparison, coupled with a thrust to achieve a positive social identity steer an influencer brand's actual social identity. Fiske (2010) identified five core social motives (**Figure V**) that develop an individual's social identity which can explain the fluctuations in beliefs, attitudes or behaviours driven by interpersonal exchanges. These social motives can therefore be used to elucidate an influencer brand's social identity within the FIBE ecosystem.

**Figure V:** The Core Social Motives (Adapted from Fiske, 2010)



Out of the five core social motives, 'belonging' is the primary driving factor of influence; or as illustrated in **figure V** the 'umbrella' motive that covers the other four motives. 'Understanding' urges individuals to make sense of the social situation that they are in and 'controlling' propels individuals to be effective in responding to different social stimuli. Both 'understanding' and 'controlling' motives channel adaptability of individuals in relation to the group dynamics. The remaining two motives. i.e., 'trusting' and 'self-enhancing' are affective in nature, and they also ensure how well individual members fit into their social groups (Fiske,

2010). None of these singlehandedly develops individuals' social identity; rather, identity is constructed through the gratification of multiple motives (Ormiston & Wong, 2008). Studies have confirmed that these motives are crucial for an individual's survival as a member of a collective setting and at times, individuals are even willing to maintain a less positive identity to fulfil these motives (Brewer et al, 1993; Anderson et al., 2006; Ormiston & Wong, 2008). **Table I** summarises how these five core social motives develop influencer brands' social identities within the FIBE ecosystem.

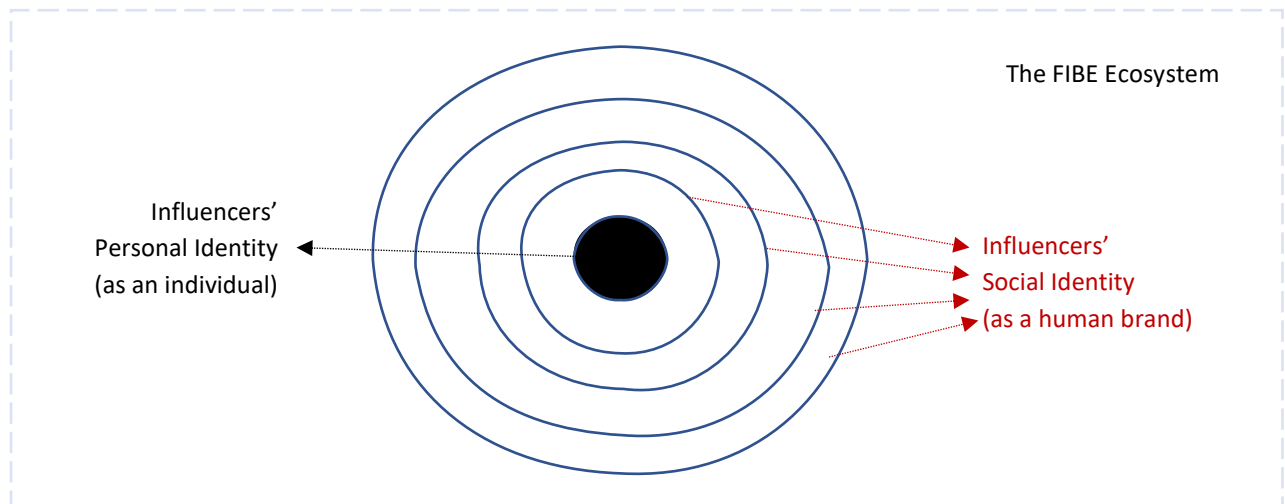
**Table I:** FIBE Ecosystem & Five Core Social Motives (Adapted from Ormiston and Wong, 2008; Fiske, 2010)

Core Social Motive	Relevance in the FIBE Ecosystem
Belonging	Self-identification and belonging as members of the wider influencer community is essential for individual influencers' very own existence, without which they would not have a social identity.
Understanding	Influencers attempt to fulfil their 'understanding' motive via constant interactions with other influencers to make sense of the FIBE ecosystem and self-verify that they are on the right lines.
Controlling	Controlling refers to how effortlessly individual influencers can fit into or be recognised as a fellow influencer brand by their peers. Individuals in a collective setting prefers stability and control as a lack of control would unsettle their social and psychological survival, which would force them to work towards securing the required 'shared' meanings to restore control. These efforts require a significant investment in time and therefore not every individual influencer can afford to become an influencer brand.
Self-enhancing	Individual influencers in the FIBE ecosystem are expected to demonstrate the need for being treated as respected members of the wider influencer community; and they also engage in activities to improve their personal and social identities. Influencers' ongoing efforts such as sharing information and insights with others; developing and disseminating creative and novel ways of engagement; and reinforcing own authenticity and expertise via active and transparent communication enhance their self-concept and help them achieve a positive identity (Ormiston & Wong, 2008).
Trusting	In the FIBE ecosystem, the motive of trusting is expected to encourage individual influencers to work in harmony; to carry out their activities in ethical and organic manner; and to make their positive identity creation process easier.

### How does social identity influence FIBE?

Influencers' social identities are expressed via intra-group (followers) interactions. **Figure VI** is a simple schematic representation of influencers' personal and social identities.

**Figure VI:** Influencers' Personal and Social Identities (Adapted from Brewer, 1991)



The solid central circle denotes an influencer's identity as an individual, and the outer concentric circles represent their social identity as an influencer brand. Borrowing Brewer's (1991) words, "*social identities are categorisations of the self into more inclusive social units that depersonalise the self-concept, where I becomes we*" (p.476). The 'social identity' circles in **figure VI** also demonstrate the contextuality of the social identity concept where each circle outward offers a frame of reference for social comparison. For example, at the level of an individual influencer's identity, the most immediate frame of reference for social comparison would be other influencer brands. In this context, the activities, interests, ideas and achievements of other influencers would shape that individual influencer's self-concept. The role these reference group members to regulate the conduct of others by establishing and reinforcing values and norms is decisive (Huang et al., 2015).

Based on Brewer's (1991) conceptualisation of identities and Fiske's (2010) evaluations, it can be interpreted that being driven by the five core social motives of *belonging, understanding, controlling, self-enhancing and trusting*, influencers develop their social identities that act as frames of reference for their social comparison and the subsequent process of *making sense of the world*. Whilst making every effort to *belong* in the community, they also reshape their identity to achieve distinctiveness. Their attempts to attain and sustain distinctiveness facilitate the development of certain individualised features that differentiate an individual influencer from another; and make them a unique influencer brand. This differential effect can be evaluated along the lines of the FIBE concept. In that sense, FIBE can be interpreted as

*the impact of the subjective perception of influencers' social identity outcomes in their followers' minds.*

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a framework for the FIBE ecosystem. A future research agenda with the aim of advancing knowledge in this area proposes to investigate the antecedents and consequences of follower-based influencer brand equity ecosystem.

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