

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The mechanism by which social media influencers persuade consumers: The role of consumers' desire to mimic

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Abstract

We explore the mechanism through which social media influencers (SMIs) persuade consumers to adopt brands. Guided by the influence framework, we propose and test empirically SMIs' influence mechanism, which occurs in four principal stages: (a) a SMI's influence attempts (showcasing H1: attractive; H2: prestigious; H3 and H4: expert; H5: informative; and H6: interactive Instagram contents); (b) target consumers' attitudinal response to the influence exercised (evaluating the SMI as a H7: taste and H8: opinion leader); which, in turn, affects (c) the targets' desire to comply (the desire to mimic); and ultimately (d) their favorable behavioral outcomes (H9: social media word-of-mouth and H10: purchase intentions). On the basis of the survey data from 395 respondents, we used structural equation modeling to test our hypotheses and proposed model. We verified the robustness of our results using an ordered probit regression model and analyzed the mediating role of consumers' desire to mimic SMIs in the influence mechanism. Our results confirm that the five aspects of influencing posts affect consumers' attitudes positively and significantly, which in turn leads to positive behavioral outcomes through their desire to mimic SMIs. We discuss the results' important implications for both scholars and practitioners.

KEYWORDS

desire to mimic, influence mechanism, influencer marketing, instagram, purchase intentions, social media, social media influencers

1 | INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing, the practice of taking advantage of key influencers (e.g., social media influencers [SMIs]) to promote or endorse brands' products and services, is attracting increasing attention in both academia and business (Adweek, 2015; Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2018). In essence, SMIs are people who have established credibility with large social media audiences because of their knowledge and expertise on particular topics, and thereby exert a significant influence on their followers' and peer consumers' decisions. SMIs also can be defined as independent third-party endorsers who have developed sizeable social networks by sharing details about their personal lives, experiences, and opinions publicly

through texts, pictures, videos, hashtags, location check-ins, etc. (Chua, Luan, Sun, & Yang, 2012; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Notable SMIs include James Charles (beauty influencer), Chiara Ferragni (fashionista), and Michelle Lewin (fitness guru).

Partnerships with SMIs are becoming increasingly important in brands' marketing and promotion strategies for several reasons. First, compared with traditional celebrity endorsements, the average consumer finds that endorsements made in the context of SMIs' personal lives make brands more relevant (Audrezet et al., 2018; Glucksman, 2017). Consumers view SMIs as more accessible and credible than mainstream celebrities (De Veirman et al., 2017), and thus, a message an SMI communicates is considered more authentic and trustworthy than a similar message a celebrity communicates

(Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & De Ridder, 2011). Second, by collaborating with SMIs, brands can communicate easily with large audiences of target consumers. By having SMIs seed media with specific messages or post new product endorsements, brands can amplify their marketing messages, and increase target consumers' adoption of their products (De Veirman et al., 2017; Keller & Berry, 2003; Momtaz, Aghaie, & Alizadeh, 2011). SMI partnerships have been found to have tangible effects. For example, Mavrck's recent study showed that SMI-generated content is 6.9 times more effective than studio-shot content. Moreover, Influencer Marketing Hub (2019) reported that businesses are receiving \$5.20 on average for each \$1 spent on influencer marketing, and 92% of marketers judge influencer marketing to be effective, while 63% of marketers intend to increase their influencer marketing budgets in the coming year.

Despite marketing practitioners' increasing adoption of influencer marketing and its reportedly strong effects, academic research has yet to provide an holistic description of the way SMIs influence their online peers. To our knowledge, no research to date has provided an overarching mechanism of influence founded upon a solid theoretical framework that describes the way target audiences perceive, think, and behave in response to SMIs' influence attempts as a whole. Our study fills this void by addressing three issues that have been underexplored in the literature. First, although scholars have proposed distinct factors that make certain SMIs more suitable for brand partnerships, many have focused on peripheral traits, such as their number of followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014) or followees (De Veirman et al., 2017). Few have examined principal traits—what aspects or qualities of SMIs' social media contents enable them to amass a large number of followers. Second, although SMIs' contents consist of a constant stream of visual and verbal descriptions of their personal daily lives (Abidin, 2015), scholars have focused predominantly on one aspect of the attitudinal effect of SMIs' influence attempts—the verbal effect of opinion leadership (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018; Song, Cho, & Kim, 2017; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014); accordingly, less is understood about the visual effect of taste leadership, defined as an SMI's ability to exhibit and define what is esthetically appealing through her/his social media content (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2012). To provide a more holistic understanding of this phenomenon, we assign equal importance to both opinion and taste leadership in this study. Lastly, and most importantly, although peer consumers often regard SMIs as role models whose preferences, examples, and behaviors are worth mimicking (Forbes, 2016), few researchers have investigated whether peer consumers indeed feel inspired to mimic SMIs after exposure to their online content. We expect that peers' desire to mimic SMIs is what influences them to purchase endorsed (or posted) products, services, or brands. Therefore, we focus on identifying whether these consumers' desire to mimic SMIs plays the decisive role in affecting their purchase decisions.

Drawing on the influence framework (Scheer & Stern, 1992), we develop a theoretically sound, overarching conceptual model that describes which core qualities of SMIs' influence appeals affect target consumers' attitudes (i.e., evaluations of whether SMIs demonstrate

taste and opinion leadership), desire to comply (i.e., desire to mimic), and ultimately, behaviors. We also build upon the consumer's doppelganger effect theory (Ruvio, Gavish, & Shoham, 2013) and the megaphone effect theory (McQuarrie et al., 2012) to explain two key concepts of our study: conscious mimicry and taste leadership, and test our model empirically in the context of Instagram. We chose the Instagram platform for three reasons. First, a majority of brand marketers have cited Instagram as the most important social media channel for influencer marketing because of its photo-based and video-sharing services (Droesch, 2019; Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). Second, the platform has added more tools (e.g., "creator accounts" and "paid partnership" tags) recently that make influencer marketing more transparent and accountable (McDowell & Brooke, 2019). Third, Instagram's contents facilitate SMIs displays of their everyday lives both visually and verbally (Abidin, 2015), making it an ideal platform to test whether SMIs indeed can exert taste leadership in addition to opinion leadership via the content they create. Specifically, we seek to answer three research questions:

- (a) Do target consumers' positive perceptions that SMIs' influence appeals are visually attractive, convey prestige, showcase expertise, and are informative and/or interactive have positive attitudinal effects, such that they view SMIs as taste and opinion leaders?
- (b) Are target consumers' positive attitudes toward SMIs related positively to their compliance, that is, desire to mimic SMIs?
- (c) Does the desire to mimic SMIs have a positive effect on behavioral outcomes, both social (i.e., social media word-of-mouth [sWOM]) and nonsocial (i.e., intentions to purchase the same products, services, or brands SMIs endorse or post)?

In addressing these research questions, we seek to contribute to the extant literature in three ways. First, we extend the current literature by identifying specific qualities of SMIs' online contents that enable them to appeal to peer consumers and amass followers. Second, we test empirically whether SMIs' taste or opinion leadership or both serve as important criteria in peer consumers' evaluations of them. It may be more beneficial for marketing practitioners to collaborate with SMIs who exhibit either taste or opinion leadership depending on whether they wish to advertise a new branded product through SMIs' posts or seed a corporate message in SMIs' contents. Our study also investigates the specific (and distinct) contents that affect SMIs' taste leadership and opinion leadership respectively. Further, we believe we are the first to propose and demonstrate empirically whether peer consumers' desire to mimic SMIs plays a critical, mediating role in associating their positive attitudes toward them (i.e., viewing them as taste and opinion leaders) with behavioral outcomes (i.e., sharing SMIs' posts or purchasing the same products/services/brands SMIs endorse). By highlighting the role consumers' desire to mimic plays in their behavioral responses, we provide a more nuanced explanation of the way in which SMIs exert influence.

In the next section, we discuss our theoretical framework and present our conceptual model. We review relevant literature to

formulate our hypotheses before describing our data collection and analysis methods, and presenting our empirical results. In the final section, we discuss our findings and their implications for both scholars and managers, and suggest avenues for future research.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Influence framework

The conceptual framework we adopted for our study is Scheer and Stern's (1992) influence framework, which explains the power dynamic in a marketing context when an influencer persuades a target to engage in a specific action (e.g., to purchase a product). This dynamic is established in four principal stages: (a) an influencer's influence attempts; (b) a target's attitudinal response to the influence exercised; (c) the target's desire to comply, and ultimately (d) the target's behavioral outcomes (Scheer & Stern, 1992). In the first stage, an influencer decides which power resources to use in attempts to influence a target consumer. An SMI can exert influence through the way s/he controls power resources that the target consumer values (Tjosvold, Johnson, & Johnson, 1984). Such resources, which serve as the core components of power, include *attractiveness*, *prestige*, *expertise*, *information*, and *service* (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Gaski & Nevin, 1985). In our context, attractiveness is conceptualized as the extent to which Instagram content (e.g., usernames, profiles, texts, hashtags, location check-ins, hearts, comments, images, videos) is displayed in an appealing manner (Chattopadhyay & Laborie, 2005; Chua et al., 2012). Prestige is the extent to which Instagram content is perceived to be high quality (Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003), while expertise reflects the extent to which Instagram posts showcase knowledge (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Information is conceptualized as the extent to which Instagram content is informative, and service is the extent to which it is interactive.

Although an influencer controls the resources (i.e., content) of her/his influence attempts, their effects depend on the target's attitudinal evaluation during the second phase of the influence mechanism (Scheer & Stern, 1992). Power appeals based on the five principal components described above can be successful when a target consumer exhibits two primary attitudinal responses: *satisfaction* and *trust* (Scheer & Stern, 1992). For example, if target consumers perceive that an SMI's Instagram posts are visually attractive, convey prestige, showcase expertise, and are informative and interactive, they may evaluate her/him more favorably, thereby exhibiting satisfaction with the SMI as a taste leader (i.e., a person who knows what looks good) and trust in the SMI as an opinion leader (i.e., a person who offers good ideas, advice, and suggestions: Lyons & Henderson, 2005; McQuarrie et al., 2012).

After a target consumer develops positive attitudes in response to influence appeals, in the third phase, s/he decides whether or not to comply with the influencer's suggestions (Scheer & Stern, 1992). A consumer's *desire to comply* increases when s/he sees good reasons to engage in the behavior an influencer seeks. For example, a target

consumer may feel inspired to conform to the style, lifestyle preferences, or behaviors of those whom they consider to be appropriate role models (Ruvio et al., 2013). In this sense, the more positive a peer consumer's attitudes toward an SMI (i.e., as a role model who demonstrates taste and opinion leadership), the stronger the consumer's desire to comply. Compliance's role in the influence mechanism is conclusive, in that it affects the target consumer's behavioral decisions significantly (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975).

Favorable performance outcomes reflect target consumers' compliance (Scheer & Stern, 1992). For example, if they are inspired to follow an SMI's taste, fashion style, or lifestyle, they may exhibit a positive social outcome, such as sWOM, that is, liking, following, or sharing the SMI's posts. Further, they may display a positive, nonsocial behavioral outcome, such as an intention to buy the same fashion or lifestyle products the SMI showcased (i.e., purchase intentions).

2.2 | Consumer's doppelganger effect: Conscious mimicry

The consumer's doppelganger effect (Ruvio et al., 2013) also highlights the importance of the desire to comply—more precisely, the significant role of the desire to mimic—in influencing consumers' product decisions. This theory describes the phenomenon in which individuals mimic others' consumption behavior intentionally in response to a desire to look or behave like those they are modeling. Adopting a role model perspective, Ruvio et al. (2013) proposed theoretically and demonstrated empirically that a consumer doppelganger mimics the consumption behavior of people s/he views as consumption role models intentionally. Relationships with consumption role models either can be bidirectional (e.g., family members or peers) or unidirectional (e.g., celebrities or SMIs: Ruvio et al., 2013).

The act of mimicking either can be unconscious or conscious, depending on the context (Berger, 2016; White & Argo, 2011). In one line of research, scholars have suggested that both the mimicker and the mimicked typically do not perceive the mimicry (Berger, 2016; Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Lakin & Chartrand, 2003). Such unconscious (or automatic) mimicry has been identified in distinct contexts in which an individual imitates an interaction partner's facial expressions unwittingly (e.g., smiling: McIntosh, Reichmann-Decker, Winkelman, & Wilbarger, 2006), postural expressions (e.g., arm position: LaFrance & Broadbent, 1976), emotional expressions (e.g., sadness: Termine & Izard, 1988), or behavioral expressions (e.g., crying or laughing: Simner, 1971). However, in a more recent line of mimicry research, scholars have shown that mimicry can be a deliberate, conscious activity as well (Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006; Ruvio et al., 2013; White & Argo, 2011). Thus, mimicry is not always a spontaneous reaction to stimulation, but can be a premediated behavior designed to achieve the goal of becoming more like the individual being mimicked. Such conscious mimicry has been identified in diverse consumption contexts in which an individual adopts her/his consumption role model's fashion, clothing, or product/brand/store choices (Rogers, 2010; Ruvio et al., 2013; Viswanathan, Childers, & Moore, 2000).

Whether conscious or unconscious, mimicry plays an important role not only in influencing individuals' behavioral decisions, but also in the social behavior between the mimicker and the mimicked (Gueguen, Jacob, & Martin, 2009). Indeed, a number of researchers have proposed that mimicry affects interpersonal relationships (Chartrand & Dalton, 2009; Duffy & Chartrand, 2015; Stel & Vonk, 2010). For example, it helps the mimicker and the mimicked create harmonious interactions and empathy (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Lakin, Jefferis, Cheng, & Chartrand, 2003), generate rapport (Berger, 2016; Lakin & Chartrand, 2003), develop social glue (Berger, 2016), and express feelings of connection (Duffy & Chartrand, 2015), and liking (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Jacob, Guéguen, Martin, & Boulbry, 2011). In this respect, mimicry has an effect not only on individuals' nonsocial behaviors, but also on their social behaviors.

Merging the consumer's doppelganger effect theory and the influence framework, we propose that the conscious desire to mimic is a more specific mode of the desire to comply with respect to the mechanism by which an SMI influences a target consumer. Further, guided by the mimicry literature, we expect that a target consumer's desire to mimic an SMI will lead to favorable behavioral outcomes, both social (i.e., sWOM) and nonsocial (i.e., purchase intentions). Figure 1 illustrates our conceptual model, which is based on our theoretical framework.

2.3 | Megaphone effect: Taste leadership

The megaphone effect, a term McQuarrie et al. (2012) coined, describes the way social media enable individuals, whether celebrities or ordinary citizens, to win over audiences on social media by demonstrating their personal taste. The theory proposes that a social media user can use the megaphone effect to persuade a large number of followers if the esthetic taste that s/he is showcasing is

appreciated (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014). By demonstrating good taste (i.e., taste leadership), a regular social media user (i.e., average consumer) can become an SMI (i.e., a consumption role model) who is, or can be, imitated, and thus acquires the power to influence others (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014; McQuarrie et al., 2012).

Scholars define taste as an individual's sense of esthetics (Berlyne, 1974) or the presentation of esthetic objects (e.g., art, furniture, and fashion) that indicates whether s/he has sophisticated preferences (Bloch, 1995; Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). Consistent with predefined notions of taste, we conceptualize taste leadership as an SMI's ability to share actively what looks good, the latest trends and designs, or examples of high style and taste to peer consumers via Instagram posts.

3 | HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

In this section, we review the extant literature to which we referred to develop our hypotheses about which specific visual and verbal qualities of SMIs' influence appeals affect target consumers' judgments that SMIs are taste (H1-H3) and opinion leaders (H4-H6), respectively. We also review the existing literature to hypothesize the relations between target consumers' attitudes and their desire to mimic (H7 and H8) and between their desire to mimic and behavioral outcomes (H9 and H10).

3.1 | Causal factors that affect attitudes toward SMIs as taste leaders

Findings in the literature have suggested that influence appeals that are visually attractive (H1), convey prestige (H2), and/or showcase an SMI's expertise (H3) are likely to affect a target consumer's

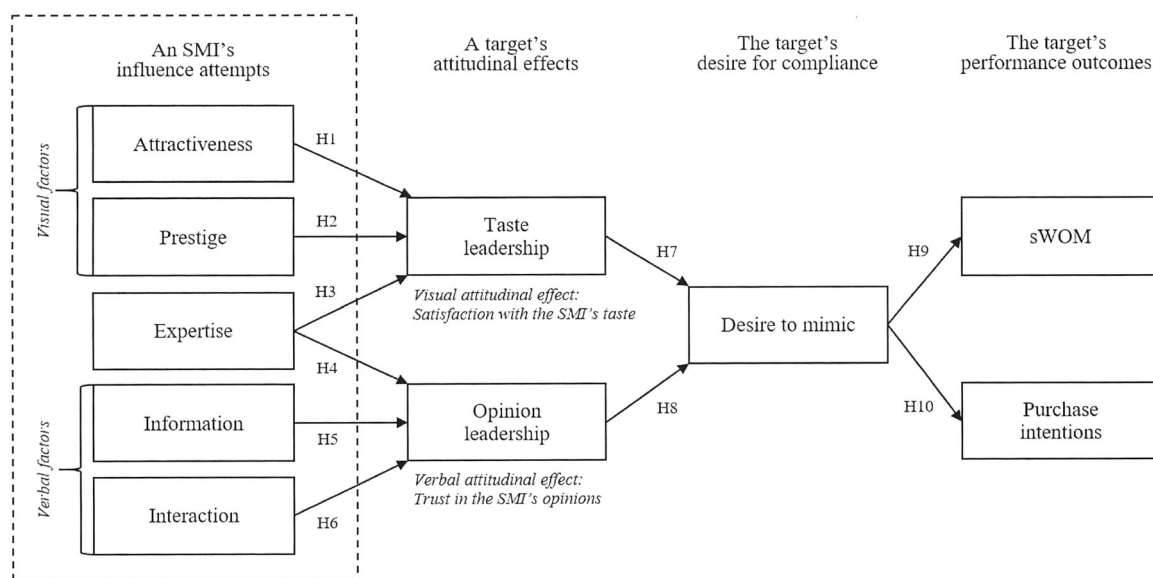


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model: SMIs' mechanism of influence over target consumers. SMI, social media influencer; sWOM, social media word-of-mouth

evaluation that the SMI is a taste leader. We provide detailed rationales for each hypothesis in the sections that follow.

3.1.1 | Attractiveness and taste leadership

We propose that attractiveness is an important visual quality of an influence appeal that affects a target consumer's belief that an SMI is a taste leader. According to Patzer (1983), attractiveness refers to the degree to which a source is perceived as visually attractive or esthetically appealing (Patzer, 1983). In our study, attractiveness is conceptualized as the degree to which a target consumer perceives an SMI's Instagram content to be visually or esthetically appealing. Because taste is associated with an individual's preferences for, and/or judgments of, esthetic objects or designs (Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012), visually and esthetically appealing Instagram content can influence whether viewers evaluate an SMI as someone with good taste. Indeed, if an SMI identifies objects with good esthetic design and posts them on social media, s/he is seen as having good taste (McQuarrie et al., 2012; Sibley, 1959). Taste, in this sense, is a function of visual sensitivity (Krishna, Elder, & Caldara, 2010). Therefore, a target consumer who perceives that an SMI's Instagram content is esthetically appealing is likely to develop a favorable attitude toward the SMI and view her/him as a taste leader.

H1: *The extent to which a target individual identifies an SMI's Instagram content as visually appealing influences her/his attitude toward the SMI, such that s/he perceives that the SMI demonstrates taste leadership (i.e., can be an example of a taste leader).*

3.1.2 | Prestige and taste leadership

In our context, prestige is the extent to which an SMI's Instagram content is perceived as conveying relatively high status (Steenkamp et al., 2003). Previous studies have identified prestige's significant effect on taste leadership (Bourdieu, 1984; Hoyer & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). For example, in the art context, prestige has been demonstrated empirically to be an important factor that affects individuals' esthetic appreciation and judgment, and thus, taste leadership (Chapman & Williams, 1976). Evidence has shown that individuals provide similarly high ratings of pictures that socially prestigious (i.e., elite) groups rate highly (Farnsworth & Beaumont, 1929). McQuarrie (2015) confirmed that whether or not one's esthetic taste is good depends on whether those with higher social standing appreciate it. Indeed, individuals born with high-ranking status are better at discerning esthetic appeal (McQuarrie, 2015), and Gronow (2002) went so far as to say that taste is a factor that distinguishes high-status individuals from others. For example, an SMI who does not have sufficient status to attend luxury fashion shows or wear designer brand clothing may not be perceived to demonstrate taste leadership in fashion. Therefore, we propose:

H2: *The extent to which a target individual identifies that an SMI's Instagram content conveys prestige influences her/his attitude*

toward the SMI, such that s/he perceives that the SMI demonstrates taste leadership (i.e., can be an example of a taste leader).

3.1.3 | Expertize and taste leadership

We propose that expertize is another critical quality that affects taste leadership because experts in a particular field define good taste (Holbrook, 2005). According to McQuarrie et al. (2012), expertize is the quality of having more knowledge and/or experience (in making product choices or decisions) than do others. From an esthetic perspective, people with more experience and knowledge have better standards and are able better to identify what is esthetically pleasing or visually appealing, and thus demonstrate better esthetic taste (Kirk, Skov, Christensen, & Nygaard, 2009; McQuarrie et al., 2012). The same holds true for SMIs. When an SMI shares professional knowledge of, or brand experiences with, fashion, food, or home decor on social media, audiences are likely to deem such knowledge or experiences not just as personal statements, but as displays of sophisticated taste (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014). For example, Donna Kim is an SMI known as a beauty expert whose taste and esthetic judgments about beauty products are important to her followers (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). In this respect, it is reasonable to expect that the more an SMI's content is perceived to feature expertize, the more the SMI is deemed to exert taste leadership. Thus:

H3: *The extent to which a target individual identifies that an SMI's Instagram content showcases expertize influences her/his attitude toward the SMI, such that s/he perceives that the SMI demonstrates taste leadership (i.e., can be an example of a taste leader).*

3.2 | Causal factors that affect attitudes toward SMIs as opinion leaders

Although few researchers have examined SMIs' taste leadership role, several have explored their opinion leadership role (Alves, Fernandes, & Raposo, 2016; Casaló et al., 2018; Lahuerta-Otero & Cordero-Gutiérrez, 2016; Song et al., 2017). According to Lyons and Henderson (2005), opinion leadership is an SMI's ability to influence the attitudes or behaviors of her/his audience via WOM communication. Given this definition, we expect that influence appeals that showcase an SMI's expertize (H4) and feature informative (H5) and interactive (H6) content affect a target consumer's attitude toward an SMI as an opinion leader. We provide rationales for H4–H6 in the sections that follow.

3.2.1 | Expertize and opinion leadership

SMIs with greater expertize have been found to demonstrate better opinion leadership than those with less expertize (Li & Du, 2011; Xiong, Cheng, Liang, & Wu, 2018). In today's social media landscape,

opinion leaders are emphasizing their expertise more than ever (Park, 2013). As a new type of opinion leader, SMIs play a WOM generator/communicator role similar to that traditional opinion leaders played, by remaining abreast of what is new and sharing this information via their social networks (Wei & Meng, 2016); however, the ways in which they exert opinion leadership differ from those of traditional opinion leaders. Although traditional opinion leaders rely predominantly on their socioeconomic status or political standing to exercise opinion leadership, SMIs exert influence by drawing upon their own expertise, perspectives, and judgments (Chang & Ghim, 2011; Park, 2013). Accordingly, we expect that the more a target individual perceives that an SMI's content showcases expertise, the more likely s/he is to perceive the SMI as an opinion leader. Thus, we propose the following:

H4: *The extent to which a target individual identifies that an SMI's Instagram content showcases expertise influences her/his attitude toward the SMI, such that s/he perceives that the SMI demonstrates opinion leadership (i.e., can be an example of an opinion leader).*

3.2.2 | Information and opinion leadership

The extent to which an appeal is informative is another important quality that affects whether an SMI's target audience views her/him as an opinion leader. According to Hwang and Shim (2010), social media are platforms that provide users with opportunities to become opinion leaders if they are able to provide information that attracts public attention. Peer consumers today view SMIs as trusted sources of information (Bailey, 2005; Chu & Kim, 2011; De Veirman et al., 2017) because they provide information not only about a product/service's features or quality, but also reviews that detail their personal experiences using it (Alhidari, Iyer, & Paswan, 2015; Alsulaiman, Forbes, Dean, & Cohen, 2015; Liljander, Gummerus, & Söderlund, 2015). By sharing both functional and personal information on social media, SMIs post more informative content about products and brands than do noninfluencers, and thus, are more likely to exert opinion leadership (Lin, Bruning, & Swarna, 2018). Accordingly, we propose:

H5: *The extent to which a target individual identifies an SMI's Instagram content as informative influences her/his attitude toward the SMI, such that s/he perceives that the SMI demonstrates opinion leadership (i.e., can be an example of an opinion leader).*

3.2.3 | Interaction and opinion leadership

We propose that interaction is another principal quality that affects individuals' trust in SMIs' opinions (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Chung & Cho, 2017). As opinion leaders, it is important for SMIs to communicate and interact with mass audiences because they serve as information brokers between the media (or brands) and the public (Meng & Wei, 2015). Maximizing interaction is more important to

SMIs than to traditional opinion leaders, because their interactions with online peers shape their influential power primarily (Wang & Li, 2016), and numerous studies have confirmed interaction's significant effect on the development of positive attitudes (Chen, Griffith, & Shen, 2005; Sicilia, Ruiz, & Munuera, 2005; Wu, 2005). For example, Sicilia et al.'s (2005) experimental study showed that consumers process ad information more thoroughly and develop more favorable attitudes when exposed to an interactive versus a noninteractive website. Therefore, in our context, we presumed that the more interactive Instagram content is perceived to be, the more likely a target individual is to process an SMI's opinions thoroughly and thus perceive that the SMI exerts greater opinion leadership. Therefore, we propose:

H6: *The extent to which a target individual identifies an SMI's Instagram content as interactive influences her/his attitude toward the SMI, such that s/he perceives that the SMI demonstrates opinion leadership (i.e., can be an example of an opinion leader).*

3.3 | Effects of individuals' attitudes on their desire to mimic SMIs

We also expect that the extent to which individuals develop positive attitudes toward an SMI as a taste (H7) and/or opinion leader (H8) influences the extent to which they feel inspired to mimic the SMI positively, as attitude has been found to be a significant predictor of mimicry (Bourgeois & Hess, 2008; McHugo, Lanzetta, & Bush, 1991; Stel & Vonk, 2010). For example, Leighton et al., (2010) demonstrated empirically that individuals who are primed with words that promote prosocial attitudes (e.g., affiliate, friend, cooperate, together) exhibit greater mimicry than those primed with words that promote antisocial attitudes (e.g., rebel, independent, individual, disagreeable). Moreover, when people develop positive attitudes about individuals, they exhibit a strong desire to doppelgang, that is, mimic their consumption behavior consciously, particularly when those individuals are consumption role models (Ruvio et al. (2013). A role model can be anyone with whom a person comes in contact who has the potential to influence others, either directly (e.g., family) or indirectly (e.g., SMIs: Bandura & Walters, 1977). People rely both on visual and verbal cues when they choose a role model to mimic (Sims & Brinkman, 2002). When either visual or verbal cues signal that an individual is a leader, people tend to identify the individual as a role model whose example or behavior is desirable to follow (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009; Weimann, 1994). In this respect, when an SMI is appreciated as a consumption role model who demonstrates taste or opinion leadership, individuals may feel inspired to doppelgang him/her (De Veirman et al., 2017). Accordingly, we propose:

H7: *The extent to which a target individual perceives that an SMI demonstrates taste leadership (i.e., can be an example of a taste leader) has a positive effect on her/his desire to mimic the SMI.*

H8: *The extent to which a target individual perceives that an SMI demonstrates opinion leadership (i.e., can be an example of an opinion leader) has a positive effect on her/his desire to mimic the SMI.*

3.4 | Effects of desire to mimic on performance outcomes

We expect that a target consumer's desire to mimic an SMI has positive effects on behavioral outcomes, both social (H9: sWOM) and nonsocial (H10: purchase intentions). We base our hypotheses on findings in the literature, as detailed in the sections that follow.

3.4.1 | Desire to mimic and sWOM as a social behavioral outcome

Findings from a number of previous studies have suggested that mimicry affects social behavioral outcomes (Chartrand & Dalton, 2009; Duffy & Chartrand, 2015; Lakin et al., 2003). Specifically, mimicry has a significant effect on the development of a strong interpersonal relationship between the mimicker and the mimicked by fostering empathy, liking, and sharing (Chartrand & Dalton, 2009). For example, LaFrance and Broadbent (1976) showed that the extent to which a student mimics an instructor's arm position reflects the degree to which the student feels a close relationship with her/him. Indeed, mimicry creates harmonious interactions and empathy between the mimicker and the mimicked (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Lakin et al., 2003), which results in greater liking or sharing between them (Bourgeois & Hess, 2008; Lakin et al., 2003). Social media enable online peers to express their affinity and empathy toward SMIs more directly than before, just by clicking the heart-shaped button below content and/or by sharing it with others (Chen, Chen, Chen, & Yu, 2013; Kim & Johnson, 2016). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the greater a target consumer's desire to mimic an SMI, the more likely s/he is to exhibit sWOM by liking or sharing the SMI's content. Hence, we propose:

H9: *The extent to which a target individual is inspired to mimic an SMI has a positive effect on sWOM as a social behavioral outcome.*

3.4.2 | Desire to mimic and purchase intentions as a nonsocial behavioral outcome

Mimicry also affects nonsocial behavioral outcomes, such as consumers' decisions (Jacob et al., 2011; Tanner, Ferraro, Chartrand, Bettman, & Baaren, 2007). Social interaction between two people, whether highly central to a consumer's choice (e.g., when negotiating with a salesperson in a retail store) or more peripheral (e.g., when browsing in a store among other shoppers), often plays a critical role in purchase decisions (Tanner et al., 2007). Specifically, Jacob et al. (2011) demonstrated empirically that sales clerks who mimic customers' verbal and/or nonverbal expressions consciously

generate more sales than those who do not. We expect that this phenomenon also occurs in the social media context. Specifically, we assumed that the stronger a target consumer's desire to mimic an SMI, the more s/he will imitate the SMI's consumption choices by demonstrating intentions to buy the same products, services, or brands the SMI endorsed or posted. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H10: *The extent to which a target individual is inspired to mimic an SMI has a positive effect on the target individual's intentions to purchase the same products, services, or brands the SMI endorsed (or posted) as a nonsocial behavioral outcome.*

4 | METHODS

We adopted a quantitative survey research method to test our conceptual model and the hypotheses proposed, and describe our data collection and analysis techniques in detail in the sections that follow.

4.1 | Data collection

We collected data for our study via a web survey using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform. To create our survey instrument, we adopted measurement items that were validated in previous studies and modified them to fit our study context. To ensure clarity and relevance to our constructs, we invited six academic experts (i.e., two in social media research and four in consumer behavior research) at a major university in the south-eastern United States to evaluate the scale items and made minor revisions based on their feedback and suggestions. Our final survey instrument appears in Table 1. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The questionnaire was distributed to panels of MTurk Masters and responses were obtained from individuals living in the United States. Following a recommendation from the two social media research experts, we limited survey participation to individuals between the ages of 18 and 49 years. We also limited participation further to those who use Instagram as one of their top three social media platforms to ensure familiarity with our study's context. At the beginning of the survey, each respondent was asked to read the definition of an SMI carefully and to name one of her/his favorite SMIs on Instagram. This name then was embedded in the remainder of the questionnaire. Survey items measured the extent to which each respondent perceived that: (a) the SMI's Instagram contents are visually attractive, convey prestige, showcase expertise, and are informative and interactive; (b) the SMI demonstrates taste and opinion leadership; and (c) s/he wishes to mimic the SMI and intends to engage in sWOM and purchase items the SMI endorsed (or posted).

TABLE 1 Measurement model

Construct	Items	SL	CR
Attractiveness	I find (SMI's name)'s Instagram contents good-looking	0.900	0.919
	I find (SMI's name)'s Instagram contents attractive	0.926	
	I find (SMI's name)'s Instagram contents visually appealing	0.841	
Prestige	I find that (SMI's name)'s Instagram contents are prestigious	0.818	0.879
	I find that (SMI's name)'s Instagram contents are upscale	0.914	
	I find that (SMI's name)'s Instagram contents have high status	0.788	
Expertize	When looking at (SMI's name)'s Instagram, I find s/he is experienced	0.863	0.875
	When looking at (SMI's name)'s Instagram, I find s/he is an expert	0.807	
	When looking at (SMI's name)'s Instagram, I find s/he is qualified	0.840	
Information	I look at (SMI's name)'s Instagram posts and messages because I find them informative	0.796	0.858
	I find (SMI's name)'s Instagram contents informative	0.934	
Interaction	I feel that (SMI's name) would talk back to me if I send a private message	0.907	0.955
	I feel that (SMI's name) would talk back to me if I post a comment	0.888	
	I feel that (SMI's name) would respond to me quickly and efficiently if I send a private message	0.921	
	I feel that (SMI's name) would respond to me quickly and efficiently if I post a comment	0.904	
	I feel that (SMI's name) would allow me to communicate directly with him/her	0.877	
Taste leadership	(SMI's name) takes the lead in sharing what looks good with his/her followers through Instagram	0.775	0.846
	(SMI's name) is one of the first people to find the newest trends and designs that other people tend to pass over	0.791	
	When worn or used by (SMI's name), the product becomes a look, a style, an exhibition of taste	0.846	
Opinion leadership	(SMI's name) shares a great deal of information via his/her Instagram	0.838	0.755
	(SMI's name) often gives his/her followers advice and suggestions via Instagram	0.717	
Mimicry desire	I aspire to the lifestyle of this social media influencer (SMI's name)	0.748	0.887
	Inspired by this social media influencer (SMI's name), I want to be as stylish as him/her	0.925	
	Inspired by this social media influencer (SMI's name), I want to be as trendy as him/her	0.866	
	Inspired by this social media influencer (SMI's name), I want to have a lifestyle more like him/her	0.702	
Social media WOM	I will share some of the postings of (SMI's name) on my Instagram	0.872	0.854
	I would pass on some of the postings of (SMI's name) along using other forms of social media	0.854	
Purchase intention	In the future, I am likely to try one of the same products that (SMI's name) endorsed or posted on his/her Instagram	0.921	0.912
	In the future, I am likely to try one of the same services (e.g., travel or beauty services) that (SMI's name) endorsed or posted on his/her Instagram	0.798	
	In the future, I am likely to try one of the same brands that (SMI's name) endorsed or posted on his/her Instagram	0.917	

Abbreviations: CR, composite reliability; SL, standardized loadings; SMI, social media influencer; WOM, word-of-mouth.

A total of 591 respondents completed the survey. After filtering out invalid responses that provided the names of mainstream celebrities (e.g., Justin Bieber, Kim Kardashian) or the names of ordinary Instagram users with a small number of followers (i.e., fewer than 1,000), our final data set included 395 valid responses. The respondents' gender was distributed fairly evenly: 55.2% female and 44.8% male. The majority of respondents was Caucasian (67.3%), followed by Asian (11.9%), African-American (9.1%), Hispanic (7.3%), and Other (2.8%). In addition, the majority of respondents was single or never married (57.2%), earned a bachelor's degree (45.8%), and worked full-time (70.9%). Finally, their incomes also were distributed fairly evenly: \$40,000–\$59,999 (24.1%), followed by \$60,000–\$79,999 (20%), \$20,000–\$39,999 (19.5%), etc.

4.2 | Data analysis

First, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate whether our measurement items reflected the latent constructs in

our model. Then, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques with the maximum likelihood method to test our hypotheses and evaluate our structural model's fit. Third, we conducted robustness checks to validate our empirical results further by testing our hypotheses using the ordered probit regression model. Lastly, we analyzed the mediating role of the desire to mimic in SMIs' influence mechanism.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Measurement model evaluation

The results of our measurement model evaluation showed a satisfactory model fit: $\chi^2_{359} = 841.17$ ($p = .000$), $\chi^2/df = 2.34$, NFI = 0.91, incremental fit index [IFI] = 0.95, Tucker-Lewis Index [TLI] = 0.94, comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.95, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.06. To validate our measurement instrument further, we tested both convergent and discriminant

TABLE 2 Correlation matrix

Variable of interest	ATT	PRE	EXP	INF	INT	TL	OL	MIMIC	sWOM	PI
ATT	1.000									
PRE	0.534	1.000								
EXP	0.597	0.459	1.000							
INF	0.397	0.326	0.649	1.000						
INT	0.004	0.121	0.072	0.287	1.000					
TL	0.537	0.544	0.448	0.291	0.136	1.000				
OL	0.375	0.293	0.628	0.799	0.329	0.485	1.000			
MIMIC	0.416	0.500	0.404	0.295	0.227	0.582	0.389	1.000		
sWOM	0.137	0.298	0.286	0.317	0.245	0.295	0.341	0.402	1.000	
PI	0.350	0.340	0.365	0.417	0.328	0.433	0.454	0.599	0.399	1.000

Abbreviations: ATT, attractiveness; AVE, average variance extracted; EXP, expertize; INF, information; INT, interaction; MIMIC, desire to mimic; OL, opinion leadership; PI, purchase intentions; PRE, prestige; sWOM, social media WOM; TL, taste leadership.

validity. As shown in Table 1, our instrument demonstrated convergent validity, as the composite reliabilities of all constructs exceeded 0.70, and all standardized factor loadings also exceeded the threshold of 0.70 (see Table 1). Moreover, our instrument demonstrated discriminant validity. First, all correlations across constructs were below the threshold of 0.85 (Brown, 2006; Kenny, 2012b), as shown in Table 2. Second, the average variance extracted (AVE) values were larger than the shared variances between all possible pairs of constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), except for that between opinion leadership (0.61) and information (0.64: see Table 3). However, because the correlation between opinion leadership and information was 0.80 (below the 0.85 threshold), this was not problematic (Kenny, 2012a).

5.2 | Hypothesis tests

As Table 4 shows, the fit indices for our structural model were satisfactory: $\chi^2_{385} = 1075.15$ ($p = 0.000$), $\chi^2/df = 2.80$, IFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92, CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.07. Further, all of the hypothesized

relations were supported statistically. Respondents' perceptions of the extent to which influence appeals are visually attractive (H1) and convey prestige (H2) were related significantly and positively to their evaluations that SMIs are taste leaders (H1: $\beta = .27$, $p < .001$; H2: $\beta = .36$, $p < .001$). Moreover, respondents' perceptions of the extent to which influence appeals showcase expertize were associated significantly and positively to their evaluations that SMIs both are taste leaders (H3: $\beta = .14$, $p < .05$) and opinion leaders (H4: $\beta = .24$, $p < .001$). Respondents' perceptions of the extent to which SMIs' Instagram posts are informative (H5) and interactive (H6) also were related significantly and positively to their evaluations that SMIs are opinion leaders (H5: $\beta = .60$, $p < .001$; H6: $\beta = .15$, $p < .001$). Further, there were significant and positive relations between respondents' attitudes—that is, their evaluations that SMIs are taste (H7) and opinion leaders (H8)—and their desire to mimic SMIs (H7: $\beta = 0.50$, $p < .001$; H8: $\beta = 0.24$, $p < .001$). Lastly, there was a positive and significant association between the desire to mimic and positive behavioral outcomes—specifically, sWOM (H9: $\beta = 0.43$, $p < .001$) and purchase intentions (H10: $\beta = 0.61$, $p < .001$).

TABLE 3 Average variance extracted and discriminant validity

Variable of interest	ATT	PRE	EXP	INF	INT	TL	OL	MIMIC	sWOM	PI
ATT	0.792									
PRE	0.285	0.708								
EXP	0.356	0.211	0.701							
INF	0.158	0.106	0.421	0.753						
INT	0.000	0.015	0.005	0.082	0.809					
TL	0.288	0.296	0.201	0.085	0.018	0.647				
OL	0.141	0.086	0.394	0.638	0.108	0.235	0.608			
MIMIC	0.173	0.250	0.163	0.087	0.052	0.339	0.151	0.664		
sWOM	0.019	0.089	0.082	0.100	0.060	0.087	0.116	0.162	0.745	
PI	0.123	0.116	0.133	0.174	0.108	0.187	0.206	0.359	0.159	0.775

Note: Diagonal entries show the AVE by the construct and off-diagonal entries represent the variance shared between constructs.

Abbreviations: ATT, attractiveness; AVE, average variance extracted; EXP, expertize; INF, information; INT, interaction; MIMIC, desire to mimic; OL, opinion leadership; PI, purchase intentions; PRE, prestige; sWOM, social media WOM; TL, taste leadership.

TABLE 4 Structural model evaluation and hypotheses tests

Hypothesis	Structural path	Standardized regression weight (Sig.)	SE	Result
H1	Attractiveness → taste leadership	0.271***	0.085	Supported
H2	Prestige → taste leadership	0.361***	0.058	Supported
H3	Expertize → taste leadership	0.135*	0.069	Supported
H4	Expertize → opinion leadership	0.238***	0.077	Supported
H5	Information → opinion leadership	0.602***	0.066	Supported
H6	Interaction → opinion leadership	0.149***	0.027	Supported
H7	Taste leadership → desire to mimic	0.496***	0.083	Supported
H8	Opinion leadership → desire to mimic	0.238***	0.070	Supported
H9	Desire to mimic → sWOM	0.433***	0.069	Supported
H10	Desire to mimic → purchase intentions	0.613***	0.048	Supported
Fit statistics				
$\chi^2(df)$	1075.152 (385) ($p < .001$)			
χ^2/df	2.793			
IFI	0.925			
TLI	0.915			
CFI	0.925			
RMSEA	0.067			

Abbreviations: CFI, comparative fit index; IFI, incremental fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; TLI, Tucker-Lewis Index.

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

* $p < .05$

5.3 | Robustness test

We tested the robustness of our results further using the ordered probit regression model, which can overcome two of SEM analysis' major drawbacks. First, it can account for the level of agreement indicated in Likert-type scales, which in our case ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). While SEM analysis treats Likert-type scale items as cardinal measures, the ordered probit regression model treats them as ordinal measures. Second, the SEM approach cannot test hypotheses that include binary dummy demographic variables (e.g., gender, ethnicity, education, etc.); however, the ordered probit regression model can evaluate equations that include both latent (i.e., constructs of interest in our conceptual model) and observed (i.e., control) variables simultaneously.

We present the ordered probit regression model as a latent variable model. Let y_i^* be a latent variable ranging from $\omega'_c(d, s)$. The structural model is defined as:

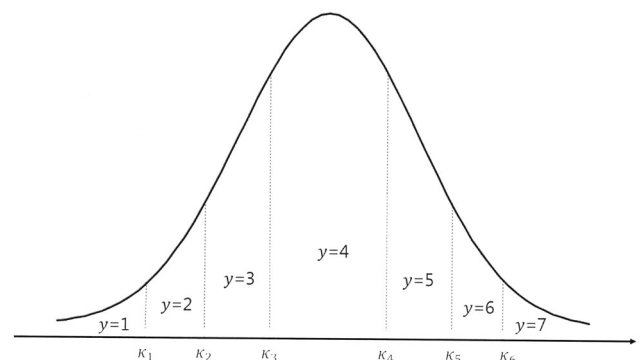
$$y_i^* = x_i\beta + \mu_i,$$

in which i denotes the individual survey respondent and μ is the error term. Further, suppose that respondents indicate agreement to a survey item on the 7-point scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Disagree, 4 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 5 = Somewhat Agree, 6 = Agree, and 7 = Strongly Agree. The response categories observed (y_i) are associated with the latent variable according to the following equation:

$$y_i = \begin{cases} 1 & \Rightarrow \text{if } \kappa_0 = -\infty \leq y_i^* < \kappa_1 \\ 2 & \Rightarrow \text{if } \kappa_1 \leq y_i^* < \kappa_2 \\ 3 & \Rightarrow \text{if } \kappa_2 \leq y_i^* < \kappa_3 \\ 4 & \Rightarrow \text{if } \kappa_3 \leq y_i^* < \kappa_4 \\ 5 & \Rightarrow \text{if } \kappa_4 \leq y_i^* < \kappa_5 \\ 6 & \Rightarrow \text{if } \kappa_5 \leq y_i^* < \kappa_6 \\ 7 & \Rightarrow \text{if } \kappa_6 \leq y_i^* < \kappa_7 = \infty \end{cases},$$

in which κ_1 through κ_6 are the thresholds. y_i^* cannot be observed directly; only the ranges in which it falls can be observed (Figure 2). The models can be expanded to more general cases of J ordinal categories as follows:

$$y_i = m \text{ if } \kappa_{m-1} \leq y_i^* < \kappa_m \text{ for } m = 1 \text{ to } J.$$

**FIGURE 2** Distribution of latent variable, y_i^*

The probability that individual respondent i will choose outcome m ($y_i = m$) for given values of $x_i\beta$ where y_i^* falls between κ_{m-1} and κ_m is:

$$\begin{aligned}\Pr(y_i = m) &= \Pr(\kappa_{m-1} \leq y_i^* < \kappa_m) \\ &= \Pr(\kappa_{m-1} \leq x_i\beta + \mu_i < \kappa_m) \\ &= \Pr(\kappa_{m-1} - x_i\beta \leq \mu_i < \kappa_m - x_i\beta) \\ &= F(\kappa_m - x_i\beta) - F(\kappa_{m-1} - x_i\beta)\end{aligned}$$

in which $F(\bullet)$ is the cumulative distribution function of μ . In the ordered probit regression model, $F(\bullet)$ follows the standard normal distribution with a mean of 0 and variance of 1. We estimated two groups of parameters: β coefficients corresponding to independent variables (x), and $(J - 1)$ thresholds (i.e., $\kappa_1, \dots, \kappa_{J-1}$). We estimated these parameters by maximizing the log likelihood function of $\Pr(y_i = m)$. The coefficient sign of β was interpreted to determine whether the latent variable (i.e., y_i^*) increased with the independent variable. If β is positive, then an increase in x decreases the probability of being in the lowest category ($y_i = 1$), while it increases the probability of being in the highest category ($y_i = J$).

As shown in Table 5, our robustness test confirmed that the results related to all of our hypotheses were statistically significant. Moreover, the results of this in-depth test documented a set of thought-provoking findings. First, as shown in Step 1 (see Table 5), among our pre-selected causes, the factor that affected target individuals' attitudes toward SMIs as taste leaders most strongly was attractiveness ($\beta = .6237$), followed by prestige ($\beta = .4830$) and expertize ($\beta = .4393$). Among the factors that affected attitudes toward SMIs as opinion leaders, expertize ($\beta = .5894$) showed the strongest effect, followed by information ($\beta = .4718$) and interaction ($\beta = .1946$). Second, in Step 2, in which we tested the effects of target consumers' attitudes on their desire to mimic SMIs, our results showed notably that SMIs who exerted taste leadership ($\beta = .4215$) triggered a stronger desire on target individuals' part to mimic them compared to those who exemplified opinion leadership ($\beta = .3963$); this finding supports our study's uniqueness in highlighting SMIs' role as taste leaders as well as opinion leaders. Lastly, in Step 3, which tested the desire to mimic's effects on performance outcomes, we found that targets' desire to mimic had a much stronger effect on their purchase intentions ($\beta = .6212$) than on their sWOM ($\beta = .3822$) behavior; this implies the key role target individuals' desire to mimic plays in adopting products, services, or brands SMIs endorse.

5.4 | Mediation test

We tested further the key mediating role of the desire to mimic in the influence mechanism of SMIs over online peers. We evaluated the mediation effects of respondents' attitudes on their behavioral outcomes via the desire to mimic through bootstrapping ($n = 5,000$) with a 95% confidence interval. As Table 6 shows, all indirect effects were significant ($p < .001$), and all path coefficients fell within the confidence intervals of the bootstrapped results. These

results confirm the key mediating role the desire to mimic plays in associating target individuals' positive attitudes with their actual behaviors.

6 | DISCUSSION

Our study explored the mechanism that facilitates SMIs' exertion of influence over peer consumers. Specifically, we drew upon the influence framework to provide a holistic structure of the procedural paths target consumers undergo in response to SMIs' influence attempts. In doing so, we documented that the mechanism by which SMIs influence target consumers occurs in four principal stages: (a) a SMI's influence attempts; (b) target consumers' attitudinal response to the influence exercised, which, in turn, affects (c) the targets' desire to comply, and ultimately, (d) their favorable behavioral outcomes. According to our SEM analysis results using survey data from 395 participants, influence attempts SMIs made—showcasing attractive, prestigious, expert, informative, and interactive contents on Instagram—were related positively, both with respect to visual and verbal aspects, to target consumers' attitudinal responses in evaluating SMIs as taste and opinion leaders, respectively. In turn, consumers' positive attitudes affected their desire to mimic SMIs and influenced their behavioral outcomes of sWOM and purchase intentions. These relations held true when we conducted a robustness check via the ordered probit model, which treated the Likert-type scale items as ordinal measures and controlled the effects gender, ethnicity, marital status, education, employment, and income have on the relations proposed. Further, our mediation analysis verified the critical mediating role consumers' desire to mimic SMIs plays in relating their positive attitudes toward SMIs to favorable behavioral responses. These findings provide significant implications both for scholars and practitioners, which we discuss in the sections that follow.

6.1 | Implications for scholars

Our study offers several noteworthy contributions to the literature. First, our research contributes to Scheer and Stern's (1992) influence theory by extending the scope of its application of the power dynamic between sales agents and end consumers in a traditional marketing context to a digital marketing context where the dynamic is between SMIs and peer consumers. This is an important contribution because, to the best of our knowledge, we are the first to apply this theoretical framework to explain the mechanism by which SMIs serve as taste leaders as well as opinion leaders, both of which lead to consumers' desire to mimic them and, in turn, purchase the same products, services, or brands they endorse. Although previous studies have identified SMIs' possible motivations that make influencer marketing more (or less) effective, most of them have focused on a single role of SMIs (i.e., opinion leaders), either through experimental or survey research (Braatz, 2017; De Veirman et al., 2017; Evans et al.,

TABLE 5 Robustness test results from the ordered probit regression model

Step Hypotheses	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3			
	H1	H2	H3	H4	H5	H6	H7	H8	H9	H10
Dependent variables	TL	TL	TL	OL	OL	OL	MIMIC	MIMIC	sWOM	PI
Independent variables										
ATT	0.6237*** (0.067)									
PRE		0.4830*** (0.049)								
EXP			0.4393*** (0.057)	0.5894*** (0.061)						
INF					0.4718** (0.047)					
INT						0.1946*** (0.035)				
TL							0.4215*** (0.048)			
OL								0.3963*** (0.053)		
MIMIC									0.3822*** (0.045)	0.6212*** (0.050)
Control variables										
Gender (reference = male)	0.0537 (0.114)	0.1900* (0.113)	0.0637 (0.114)	0.2724** (0.118)	0.2862** (0.118)		0.1099 (0.113)	0.0436 (0.113)	-0.0489 (0.112)	0.3405*** (0.114)
Ethnicity (reference = others)										
AA	0.1801 (0.364)	0.2188 (0.363)	0.2348 (0.363)	0.9106** (0.369)	0.9470** (0.370)		0.1527 (0.360)	-0.0342 (0.361)	0.2877 (0.356)	-0.1782 (0.365)
CAU	-0.0105 (0.324)	0.1579 (0.324)	-0.1799 (0.325)	0.6161* (0.325)	0.7404** (0.327)		0.9379*** (0.325)	-0.1042 (0.323)	0.2389 (0.317)	-0.3200 (0.327)
NA	0.3644 (0.541)	0.0982 (0.540)	0.0413 (0.538)	0.4777 (0.546)	0.5260 (0.545)		0.5353 (0.540)	0.2509 (0.536)	0.5594 (0.548)	-0.2154 (0.545)
API	0.1634 (0.354)	0.3010 (0.354)	0.0265 (0.353)	0.3577 (0.356)	0.5149 (0.357)		-0.0790 (0.350)	-0.2212 (0.350)	0.1778 (0.346)	0.1024 (0.355)
HIS	0.0711 (0.375)	-0.0259 (0.375)	-0.0393 (0.374)	0.6122 (0.377)	0.5232 (0.378)		0.2304 (0.371)	-0.0321 (0.371)	-0.0041 (0.366)	-0.1695 (0.377)
Marital status (reference = separated, divorced, widowed)										
MAR	0.1413 (0.261)	0.1708 (0.262)	0.0300 (0.261)	0.6881*** (0.267)	0.6027** (0.268)		-0.0889 (0.260)	-0.3174 (0.262)	0.5526** (0.260)	0.7262*** (0.266)
(Continues)										

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

Step Hypotheses	Step 1			Step 2						Step 3		
	H1	H2	H3	H4	H5	H6	H7	H8	H9	H10		
Dependent variables	TL	TL	TL	OL	OL	OL	MIMIC	MIMIC	sWOM	PI		
SG	0.1722 (0.259)	0.2090 (0.260)	0.1241 (0.259)	0.5305** (0.264)	0.5783** (0.266)	0.4975* (0.262)	0.1460 (0.258)	0.0048 (0.259)	0.2414 (0.257)	0.5177** (0.263)		
Education	-0.0546 (0.056)	-0.0101 (0.056)	-0.0426 (0.056)	0.0561 (0.058)	0.0456 (0.058)	0.0219 (0.057)	0.0218 (0.056)	-0.0122 (0.056)	-0.0185 (0.055)	0.0048 (0.056)		
Employment (reference = do not work)												
WFT	0.2077 (0.167)	0.0699 (0.167)	0.2030 (0.167)	0.2065 (0.173)	0.1409 (0.173)	0.0371 (0.171)	-0.1016 (0.167)	-0.0642 (0.166)	0.4076** (0.165)	-0.0833 (0.167)		
WPT	-0.2230 (0.201)	-0.4318** (0.202)	-0.2344 (0.200)	0.0437 (0.208)	0.0180 (0.207)	-0.1604 (0.205)	0.0583 (0.201)	-0.0544 (0.200)	0.1929 (0.198)	-0.2129 (0.201)		
Income	0.0035 (0.030)	0.0173 (0.030)	-0.0080 (0.030)	0.0128 (0.031)	0.0392 (0.031)	0.0125 (0.030)	-0.0101 (0.030)	-0.0167 (0.029)	-0.0472 (0.030)	0.0545* (0.030)		
Thresholds parameters												
κ_1	1.1766* (0.645)	0.1032 (0.586)	-0.1100 (0.595)	1.9512*** (0.641)	0.8941 (0.624)	-0.6175 (0.578)	-0.0855 (0.547)	-0.5267 (0.538)	0.6073 (0.522)	1.1368** (0.541)		
κ_2	1.5828** (0.623)	0.5522 (0.557)	0.2653 (0.570)	2.4963*** (0.590)	1.5802*** (0.548)	-0.0137 (0.504)	0.3215 (0.529)	-0.1248 (0.520)	1.1763** (0.516)	1.7247*** (0.529)		
κ_3	2.4621*** (0.612)	1.4210*** (0.541)	1.0744* (0.555)	2.8824*** (0.580)	2.0492*** (0.536)	0.3684 (0.491)	0.9818* (0.520)	0.5301 (0.511)	1.5350*** (0.514)	2.3015*** (0.526)		
κ_4	3.2838*** (0.612)	2.2414*** (0.539)	1.8682*** (0.553)	3.5930*** (0.579)	2.8210*** (0.535)	1.0192** (0.485)	1.7299*** (0.520)	1.2649** (0.510)	2.1215*** (0.514)	3.3393*** (0.532)		
κ_5	4.2427*** (0.622)	3.2136*** (0.547)	2.7756*** (0.559)	4.6975*** (0.590)	3.9587*** (0.546)	2.0061*** (0.488)	2.7077*** (0.526)	2.2241*** (0.516)	2.7512*** (0.517)	4.5056*** (0.545)		
κ_6	5.2929*** (0.636)	4.2921*** (0.561)	3.7919*** (0.571)	5.9123*** (0.609)	5.1644*** (0.562)	3.1002*** (0.497)	3.7823*** (0.540)	3.2439*** (0.526)	3.5878*** (0.528)	5.4935*** (0.562)		
Observations	395	395	395	395	395	395	395	395	395	395		
Goodness of fit	$\chi^2(13) = 103.03$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.084$	$\chi^2(13) = 115.82$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.004$	$\chi^2(13) = 73.57$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.094$	$\chi^2(13) = 129.44$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.060$	$\chi^2(13) = 138.07$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.118$	$\chi^2(13) = 63.16$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.126$	$\chi^2(13) = 89.21$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.058$	$\chi^2(13) = 65.32$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.071$	$\chi^2(13) = 85.34$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.052$	$\chi^2(13) = 186.75$ Prob > $\chi^2 = 0.000$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.061$		

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Log likelihood test of the hypothesis that all coefficients are jointly equal to zero are rejected at $p < .1$. Categorical control variables: AA, equal to 1 if African-American and 0 otherwise; API, equal to 1 if Asian or Pacific Islander and 0 otherwise; CAU, equal to 1 if Caucasian and 0 otherwise; HIS, equal to 1 if Hispanic and 0 otherwise; NA, equal to 1 if Native American and 0 otherwise; MAR, equal to 1 if Married and 0 otherwise; SG, equal to 1 if single and 0 otherwise; WFT, equal to 1 if full-time worker and 0 otherwise; WPT, equal to 1 if part-time worker and 0 otherwise. Abbreviations: ATT, attractiveness; EXP, expertise; INF, information; INT, interaction; MIMIC, desire to mimic; OL, opinion leadership; PI, purchase intentions; PRE, prestige; sWOM, social media WOM; TL, taste leadership.

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

TABLE 6 Mediation effects of attitudes on behaviors via mimicry

Path	Standardized indirect effect	Bootstrap SE	Bias corrected 95% confidence interval	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
Taste leadership → sWOM	0.215***	0.038	0.148	0.296
Taste leadership → Purchase intentions	0.304***	0.043	0.221	0.394
Opinion leadership → sWOM	0.103***	0.033	0.047	0.179
Opinion leadership → Purchase intentions	0.146***	0.043	0.069	0.239

Abbreviations: sWOM, social media word-of-mouth.

*** $p < .001$

2017). For example, De Veirman et al.'s (2017) study examined whether SMIs' number of followers (moderate vs. high) affects their ascribed opinion leadership in an experimental setting; however, the principal qualities that allow SMIs to build up followers in the beginning and enable them to exercise opinion leadership were not explored fully. Further, while Lou and Yuan's (2019) survey study examined whether SMIs' informative and entertainment value, expertize, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity have significant effects on target consumers' trust in SMIs' opinions, they overlooked another critical role SMIs play (i.e., taste leaders), which is associated more with their visual than verbal influence. This is a surprising omission, given that recent studies have theorized and advocated the megaphone effect by which SMIs exert influence on consumers through the display of quality taste judgments and taste leadership (Audrezet et al., 2018; De Veirman et al., 2017; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; McQuarrie et al., 2012, 2015). Our research filled this void by verifying empirically that online peers did indeed evaluate SMIs who showcase certain social media contents both as taste and opinion leaders; this finding was documented in two steps of our rigorous analyses, SEM and the ordered probit model analyses.

Second, our research contributes more insights to the literature by revealing specific qualities of SMIs that appear to influence the extent to which online peers view them as taste versus opinion leaders. Our findings showed that the greater the extent to which a peer consumer perceived that an SMI's Instagram content is visually appealing, conveys prestige, and showcases expertize, the more s/he perceived that the SMI demonstrated good taste. Interestingly, our ordered probit regression results reveal that attractiveness was the strongest quality that affected online peers' attitudes toward SMIs as taste leaders, followed by prestige and expertize. On the other hand, the greater the extent to which a consumer recognized that the SMI's content showcased expertize, and was informative and interactive, the more s/he believed that the SMI demonstrated opinion leadership. Specifically, among the three qualities, expertize was found to be the strongest factor that affected target consumers' attitudes toward SMIs as opinion leaders, followed by information, and interaction. These findings suggest that consumers rely heavily on the attractiveness cue in a SMI's contents when evaluating whether s/he demonstrates taste leadership, while they respond strongly to the expertize cue when evaluating the SMI's opinion leadership. Again, these findings underscore that visual

criteria associated with taste leadership and verbal criteria associated with opinion leadership are equally important when evaluating SMIs.

Third, and most importantly, our study provides initial insight into the literature by proposing consumers' desire to mimic as the decisive response that links their positive attitudes toward SMIs to positive behavioral outcomes (e.g., sharing SMIs' posts or purchasing the products/services/brands they endorse). Our empirical demonstration of these attitudinal effects (i.e., evaluations of SMIs as taste and opinion leaders) on individuals' desire to mimic, which, in turn, leads to social and nonsocial behavioral outcomes, provides a more nuanced understanding of SMIs and the consumer decision-making process. In addition, our mediation results, which documented the bridging role the desire to mimic plays in the influence mechanism, highlights that SMIs should be viewed not simply as taste or opinion leaders, but more holistically as individuals whose taste and opinions both inspire consumers to mimic. Specifically, our ordered probit regression results indicated that, compared with SMIs' opinion leadership, their taste leadership motivated consumers to mimic SMIs more strongly. These findings again support the significant megaphone effect SMIs exercise over consumers (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014). Our ordered probit regression results revealed further that consumers' desire to mimic SMIs was associated more positively with their nonsocial behavior of purchase intentions than their social behavior of sWOM. These findings underscore the effect SMIs have in influencing consumers' adoption of products, services, or brands, and demonstrate the significant effect influencer marketing has on consumers. In further support, among the ten relations (hypotheses) proposed and tested, our ordered probit regression results showed that the relation between individuals' desire to mimic SMIs and their intentions to buy products, brands, or services SMIs endorsed had the second highest coefficient, after that between individuals' perception that an SMI's Instagram content was visually appealing and their evaluations of the SMI as a taste leader. These findings suggest that target consumers' desire to mimic a SMI is associated closely with their doppelgänger behavior of mimicking the SMI's product, service, or brand choices intentionally to be more like the SMI; this confirms that the consumers' doppelgänger effect (Ruvio et al., 2013) extends to the online context. Our findings indicate further the significance of online peers' desire to mimic in the discussion of influencer marketing.

Accordingly, in light of these novel findings, we suggest the need to redefine the consumer decision-making process to fit today's marketing practices better. We suggest that consumers may no longer engage in the traditional complex decision-making process of recognizing a need, searching for information, and evaluating alternatives (Engel, Kollat, & Blackwell, 1968). In this new digital marketing era replete with diverse social media platforms, consumers instead may make purchase decisions more rapidly, motivated simply by their aspirations to model those whom they encounter in an online space (without direct one-to-one interaction) who exhibit good taste and opinions. Thus, while the traditional consumer decision-making process is more deliberate, the new digital era seems to be associated more with consumers' instantaneous decision-making derived from their hedonic need to be more like someone who inspires them. Particularly, given that SMIs' taste leadership was associated more strongly with consumers' desire to mimic than opinion leadership, the consumer decision-making process seems to have evolved from one that is cognitive to more affective in nature. This suggests that both academic researchers and market practitioners should focus to a greater extent on esthetically and visually pleasing elements when discussing digital communication strategies. In the next section, we provide some guidance for practitioners.

6.2 | Implications for practitioners

Our study offers some noteworthy implications for marketing practitioners and advertising managers who are planning and executing influencer marketing strategies. First, because specific qualities of SMIs' influence appeals trigger target consumers' attitudinal and/or behavioral changes, we suggest that marketing practitioners focus on the content of SMIs' social media posts when evaluating potential partnerships, rather than the number of followers they have accumulated, as fame may not translate necessarily into influence over audiences' attitudes or behaviors. To identify the SMIs most likely to achieve the best results, practitioners should examine the extent to which their posts have visual appeal, convey prestige, showcase expertize, are informative, and promote interaction. For example, although some Instagram influencers with online gaming expertize (e.g., El Rubius) have amassed more than 50 million followers, they may not be the ideal individuals to seed corporate messages or endorse branded products. Instead, collaborating with SMIs who have the ability to showcase visually attractive, prestigious, or informative Instagram content, albeit fewer followers, would yield better marketing effects.

Second, we identified specific qualities of SMIs' posts that affected target individuals' evaluations of them as taste and/or opinion leaders. Therefore, marketing practitioners may consider partnering with different SMIs depending on their influencer marketing campaigns' specific goals. It may be useful to take advantage of different SMIs depending on whether marketers want to create more buzz about corporate initiatives (e.g., CSR campaigns), or publicize products just launched. If the goal is to maximize the

adoption of new products, particularly in the fashion or cosmetic industries, which focus on esthetics (e.g., the launch of Chanel's new perfume, No. 5L'Eau), we recommend collaborating with SMIs who post visually appealing, apparently sophisticated Instagram content that showcases expertize. On the other hand, if the goal is to maximize coverage of corporate initiatives (e.g., Sprint's #LiveUnlimited campaign), marketers may wish to partner with SMIs who post informative, interactive content that showcases expertize.

Most notably, because online peers' desire to mimic SMIs triggered their intentions to purchase the same products, brands, or services SMIs endorse, marketing practitioners should evaluate potential SMIs more holistically by determining whether others aspire to the same style, taste, and lifestyle. The more an SMI displays a desirable lifestyle, high fashion style, or the newest trends on her/his social media, the more likely s/he is to inspire online peers' desire to mimic, which has significant effects on behavioral outcomes, both social and nonsocial and is the ultimate goal of marketing practitioners who devise influencer marketing strategies.

6.3 | Avenues for future research

Although our study provides noteworthy contributions to both the literature and business, it has some contextual and methodological limitations that provide opportunities for future research. First, our conceptual model and hypotheses were tested on the Instagram platform, not in other social media platforms. It would be interesting for future studies to examine whether the results of our research hold true on other social media venues (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, etc.); if not, it is necessary to determine the way our results differ with respect to significance and/or effect sizes depending on distinct social media platforms. Second, although we provided an overarching influence framework that can be generalized across SMIs with distinct expertize (i.e., beauty influencer, fashion influencer, and others), it would be interesting to explore further whether SMIs are viewed to a greater extent as taste or/and opinion leaders depending on their expertize in a specific area. In addition, having revealed the important role consumers' desire to mimic SMIs plays in the influence mechanism between SMIs and peer consumers, another interesting future study would be the investigation of the way consumers' desire to mimic SMIs interacts with different SMI types (e.g., megainfluencers, macroinfluencers, microinfluencers, which are segmented based upon the size of their following), and whether, and if so, in what way, such interaction effects affect differently (or similarly) the relation between the desire to mimic and sWOM and purchase intentions. Third, given the high coefficient values in the relation between individuals' desire to mimic SMIs and their intentions to buy products, brands, or services SMIs endorsed, a future study should examine whether consumers' desire to mimic SMIs is more (or less) related to certain product or service types. Further, it also would be interesting to investigate whether consumers' desire to mimic influences their consumption behavior in response to appeals in other marketing channels that employ digital technologies. For example, investigating whether online

consumers' desire to mimic a digital avatar influences their purchase decisions positively may help practitioners develop unique and effective marketing strategies. Overall, investigating the role of consumers' desire to mimic in other contexts involving digital marketing strategies could yield important insights that maximize brand marketing efforts in the current environment.

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