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I Like What She's #Endorsing: The Impact of Female Social Media Influencers' Perceived Sincerity, Consumer Envy, and Product Type

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ABSTRACT

In an examination of influencer success, the current research draws from brand personality literature and identifies social media influencers (SMIs) as human brands. Specifically, this research examines how an influencer's perceived sincerity trait and consumer envy influence consumers' evaluations toward the influencer as well as brand endorsements across different product types. Data indicate that participants report a more favorable attitude toward a high-sincerity SMI, and envy was a significant moderator that enhanced participants' attitude toward a low-sincerity influencer. In addition, whereas brand attitude did not differ by influencers' sincerity levels for a symbolic product, the high-sincerity influencer was more effective in eliciting favorable brand attitude from participants when endorsing a utilitarian product. Implications of the findings are discussed with suggestions for future research.

KEYWORDS

Brand placements; envy; influencer marketing; sincerity; social media influencer

Social media allows users and brands to better reach and connect with desired audiences (Carah and Shaul 2016). Among the different social media platforms, Instagram has shown the most noteworthy growth, reaching 800 million monthly active users (Smith and Anderson 2018) and almost \$7 billion in mobile advertising revenue in 2018 (Statista 2018). Some users have become famous on Instagram through successful impression management and have become public figures with a staggering number of followers. The social media influencer (SMI) phenomenon has attracted marketers to turn their attention to these microcelebrities to promote their brands by placing them in the influencers' content (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017).

SMIs are "a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media" (Freberg et al. 2011, p. 90). SMIs actively broadcast their lives and closely interact with their followers to maintain social status as well as their brand identity (Marwick 2013). SMIs are regarded as digital opinion leaders, as their reputation often comes from being knowledgeable on a particular topic, such as beauty or fashion (Ki and Kim 2019). The credibility of SMIs as a product-

information source is extremely powerful as consumers perceive SMIs as more relatable and socially close compared with traditional celebrities (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017). In particular, women influencers have been dominating the influencer market. Reports indicate that SMIs are predominantly female (Chadha 2018; Duffy and Hund 2019); indeed, it has been shown that 84.6% of influencers who post sponsored content are women (Statista 2019). This is not surprising given that the biggest industries of influencer marketing are beauty and fashion (Driver 2018). Throughout this article the terms *influencer* and *SMI* are used interchangeably to refer to women brand endorsers.

Existing research on influencer marketing on social media have predominantly focused on endorsers' source credibility attributes and have demonstrated the positive impact of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Gong and Li 2019; Lou and Yuan 2019). Relatively little is known about the impact of endorsers' perceived personality discerned from their social media profiles on advertising effectiveness (Bekk and Spörrle 2010). This notion of perceived personality expressed via photos becomes especially important today, as consumers often encounter new

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influencers recommended by the platform's algorithm (Constine 2018). For example, Instagram recommends new content and influencers/posters for consumers to try viewing in the Search & Explore page based on their interests, including products and categories they currently like and follow (Instagram n.d.). And when consumers encounter a new influencer on social media, they judge the SMI's personality predominantly based on the visual content. Hence, this study seeks to understand whether an influencer's personality perceptions constructed through an SMI's account photos can meaningfully impact consumers' evaluation toward the influencer as well as the SMI's brand endorsements across different product types.

Specifically, this research examines how an SMI's perceived sincerity trait influences consumer evaluation of the influencer as well as their brand endorsements. The sincerity trait is of particular interest for the current research as it is a trait advocated by consumers and marketers as being important in SMIs (Marwick and boyd 2011; Marwick 2013). Portraying a sincere personality—one that is relatable, friendly, and down-to-earth—is underscored for successful relationship management with followers and effective brand endorsements (Duffy 2017). Popular press (e.g., O'Neil-Hart and Blumenstein 2016) and existing qualitative research (e.g., Marwick and boyd 2011; McRae 2017) repeatedly point to sincerity's importance, among other personality traits, but there is a dearth of empirical research testing its role and impact. This study extends existing research by investigating whether a more sincere-looking influencer is evaluated more favorably and impacts brand endorsements more positively compared to a less sincere-looking influencer. In addition, as social media platforms flourish with social comparison among users, as well with SMIs (Chae 2017), the roles of consumer envy and identification are explicated to better understand their functions in SMI evaluation.

Literature Review

Social Media Influencers As Human Brands and Their Brand Personality

In a way that is similar to how brands market themselves, SMIs benefit both commercially and socially by having a “unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interest of target audiences” (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017, p. 1). SMIs promote themselves by engaging in self-branding, always looking to attract new followers, maintaining relationships with existing

followers, and ultimately increasing social capital through a distinct and visible identity (Marwick 2013). Further, marketers assess the value of SMIs by their “return on influence,” which is based not only on number of followers but also on how frequently the SMI bonds with the audience, is perceived as real and relatable, and to what extent the SMI personality is aligned with the brand (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2016). Based on these characteristics, the present research conceptualizes SMIs as human brands. *Human brands* refer to individuals whose career, public appearance, and endorsements are carefully controlled not only to enhance their personal appeal but also to distinguish them from others (Thomson 2006). The notion of human brands has been prevalent in literature on celebrities—public figures with intangible assets that accumulate to construct a certain reputation and credibility (Thomson 2006).

The current study adapts the brand personality construct proposed by Aaker (1997) to examine how the brand personality of SMIs influence various consumer behaviors. Brand personality is defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker 1997). Of the five constructs of Aaker's (1997) brand personality (i.e., sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness), the focus of the current study is on the sincerity trait. A favorable SMI is one who is down-to-earth, real, and perceived as a friendlike figure (i.e., sincere; McRae 2017). Marwick and boyd (2011) state that “fans carefully evaluate the *sincerity* of celebrity's [social media] accounts” in determining whether the influencer is portraying a true, unedited persona (p. 149). Contents that are “staged, insincere, unethical, and exaggerated” are targets of criticism (McRae 2017, p. 14). This is especially true in a social space where individuals frequently experience upward social comparison while looking at other users' edited physical appearances (Lim et al. 2015), excessive positive self-presentation (Rui and Stefanone 2013), and boastful materialistic possessions (Sung, Kim, and Choi 2018).

Sincerity is SMIs' unique selling point. Moreover, sincerity is a key quality by which influencers induce parasocial relationships with their followers (Tsai and Men 2017). *Parasocial relationship* refers to a viewer's illusory interpersonal connection with media personalities. It leads to feelings of intimacy with influencers, a sense of knowing them personally, and understanding their intrinsic attributes (e.g., motives, values) like real friends (Horton and Wohl 1956). Research indicates that media personalities who are framed as good and kind engender psychological

closeness from the audience (Knoll et al. 2015). Such illusory interpersonal connection leads to more positive evaluation toward media characters and influencers (e.g., Tsai and Men 2017).

As noted, while various industry reports (@Katieka 2016; O'Neil-Hart and Blumenstein 2016) and qualitative research (Duffy 2017; Marwick and boyd 2011; McRae 2017) suggest a more sincere personality induces favorable attitudes toward the influencer, limited empirical research tests this relationship. The current research examines this inference, assuming that consumers will be able to evaluate how sincere SMIs are by looking at their social media pictures. This premise is based on the notion that social media users disclose information about themselves frequently (Naaman, Boase, and Lai 2010), and information on social media, including pictures of the poster, are closely linked to personality traits (Back et al. 2010). Indeed, research suggests that personality is embedded in one's physical appearance; in other words, observers can accurately judge a person's personality based only on full-body photographs (Naumann et al. 2009), as well as facial information provided in a photo without any behavioral cues (Penton-Voak et al. 2006). Taken together, it is predicted that consumers will report more positive attitudes toward an SMI who is perceived to be highly sincere compared to an SMI with a low perceived sincerity trait. Hence, the following hypothesis is put forth:

H1: Consumers' attitudes will be more positive toward a social media influencer with high perceived sincerity compared to a social media influencer with low perceived sincerity.

Consumer Envy

As mentioned, much evidence suggests that the sincerity of SMIs may be an essential attribute behind consumers' favorable evaluations toward these social media stars (Marwick and boyd 2011; McRae 2017). However, more research is needed to illuminate why consumers are drawn into less friendly (i.e. low-sincerity) SMIs. Advancing further than the value of aesthetics and informativeness of SMIs' content for consumers (Connolly 2017), this study investigates the role of envy.

Envy is defined as an affect that "occurs when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it" (Parrott and Smith 1993, p. 906). It is further distinguished into two different types: benign envy and malicious envy. Benign envy focuses on the

emotion of admiration, which acts as a motivational force that spurs people to strive for self-improvement and self-enhancement (Lange and Crusius 2015). Benign envy is associated with more favorable thoughts about the perceived superior person and greater interest and desire for the envied person's possession (van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2009). On the other hand, malicious envy is the destructive side of envy, marked by a tendency to harm the envied person, to pull that individual down from his or her position and to harbor resentful thoughts (van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2009).

Consumer envy is considered a benign form of envy rather than malicious. When consumers see a celebrity or model in an advertisement and feel envious, their envy is not motivated by hatred but is focused on the desire to strive for a superior self (Belk 2008). Hence, advertisers frequently and purposefully stimulate envy to encourage consumers to desire to become like the picture-perfect model or celebrity through purchasing the advertised products (Berger 1990). Similarly, envy toward SMIs is likely to be a benign form of envy that is associated with feelings of awe and longing to become "like them" rather than envy that leads to antagonistic thoughts. Indeed, research indicates that envy toward SMIs is positively associated with perceptions of trustworthiness and social presence, illustrating envy as a positive affect associated with more favorable perceptions toward SMIs (Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu 2019).

Social comparison theory is a larger theoretical framework that delineates envy's positive impact on consumer evaluations. It suggests that individuals are motivated to engage in comparisons with others because individuals have an intrinsic need for self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Festinger 1954). While social comparison (i.e., upward comparison) is often associated with negative outcomes such as feeling inferior when comparing to similar others (Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006), findings also indicate that comparisons with celebrity endorsers and advertisement models are often aspirational (Choi and Rifon 2012). Indeed, Ki and Kim's (2019) findings illustrate the extent to which a consumer wishes to mimic an influencer has a positive effect on his or her intention to share an influencer's content and purchase the same product that the SMI owns. Chae (2017) also shows that female users who are frequently exposed to SMIs' posts and are more interested in their lives engage in greater social comparison, which in turn creates feelings of envy.

From this it can be inferred that highly envious consumers of an SMI with a low-sincerity image are likely to evaluate him or her more positively due to a greater tendency to regard the SMI as inspirational, compared to less-envious consumers. On the other hand, envy might not be a critical factor for evaluating a high-sincerity influencer because, regardless of envy, consumers are likely to hold a favorable attitude toward an agreeable person. Our second hypothesis summarizes this prediction:

H2: Envy will moderate the effects of an influencer's perceived sincerity level (high versus low perceived sincerity) on attitude toward the influencer.

Identification and Envy

Relevant to the psychological process of envy is identification, which refers to how much consumers identify with or think of themselves as similar to the spokesperson (Bandura 1969). Bandura's social learning theory (1978) posits that the more people identify and perceive themselves as similar to a role model, the more likely they are to observe, adopt, and display behaviors learned from the role model. Factors that influence identification can range from simple demographic information, such as age and race (Reeves and Miller 1978), to more subjective elements, such as physical attractiveness and personality (Bandura 1969; Cohen 2001). Identification affects envy in that social comparison and feelings of envy heighten when the source of envy is perceived as similar and psychologically closer (Heider 1958). However, existing research on the relationship between envy and identification has predominantly been a one-way observation focusing on the effects of identification on envy (e.g., Etchegoyen and Nemas 2003; Liu, Wu, and Li 2019). As such, research overlooks the interaction effect of the two on subsequent outcomes. Given that the two constructs are not analogous and operate independently, it becomes relevant to examine how the two might interact to influence consumers' attitudes toward the influencer. Thus, the following research question is put forth:

RQ1: How will identification and envy interact to impact consumers' attitude toward the influencer?

Match between Product Type and Influencer Personalities

In spokesperson advertising, one of the key elements to think about is fit between spokesperson and product image (Erdogan 1999). To a large extent, product image hinges on the type or category of the product

(Ang and Lim 2006). Products can be characterized as having utilitarian and hedonic/symbolic attributes. Batra and Ahtola (1991) state that "consumers purchase goods and services and perform consumption behaviors for *two* basic reasons: (1) consummatory affective (hedonic) gratification (from sensory attributes), and (2) instrumental, utilitarian reasons" (p. 159). While products can have both instrumental and affective components, products that are used primarily to solve a specific problem (e.g., toothpaste) are high in utilitarian value (Baltas, Kokkinaki, and Loukopoulou 2017; Park and Moon 2003). On the contrary, products that are used to gratify sensual and self-expressive needs (e.g., perfume) are high in hedonic/symbolic values (Baltas, Kokkinaki, and Loukopoulou 2017).

Given the motives for using the two product types (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982), research shows that different types of products can also embody distinct personality traits (Ang and Lim 2006). Ang and Lim (2006) demonstrate that symbolic products (e.g., cologne and designer watches) are perceived as more sophisticated than sincere, while utilitarian products (e.g., toothpaste and mineral water) are perceived as more sincere than sophisticated. Examples of symbolic products include luxurious and sensory products including sports cars, designer clothing, and perfume, while examples of utilitarian products include inexpensive necessities including tissue, paper towels, and toothpaste (Baltas, Kokkinaki, and Loukopoulou 2017). The sensory characteristics of symbolic products make them a means of self-expression that extend consumers' self-concept and image (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). This is similar to Aaker's (1997) conceptualization of the sophistication trait, which represents a quality that individuals aspire to have and therefore reflects the ideal self. On the other hand, utilitarian products, which are purchased to gratify practical and need-based benefits (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982), are more likely to manifest sincerity as a defining personality trait. The sincerity trait, which refers to being down-to-earth, genuine, and real, is conceptualized as an actual human personality trait rather than an aspirational image, which is consistent with the practicability and relatability of utilitarian products.

Will influencers who look sincere be more effective endorsing sincere products? Research has utilized schema theory as a theoretical framework to support the match-up hypothesis, which suggests that when "the highly relevant characteristics of the spokesperson are consistent with the highly relevant attributes of

the brand” (Misra and Beatty 1990, p. 161) advertising effectiveness increases (e.g., McCracken 1989). Schema theory proposes that when individuals encounter a new stimulus, they utilize existing schema to process the information by making connections between the new stimulus and existing knowledge. During this process, characteristics that are congruent with existing schemas are more easily processed, whereas information that is inconsistent is often filtered out (Misra and Beatty 1990). For example, Misra and Beatty (1990) demonstrated that brand recall and affect was greater when Clint Eastwood, who was associated with ruggedness and toughness, endorsed a brand that had similar associations (Unitough jeans) compared to a brand with contrasting characteristics (Funnybone board game). In addition, Kamins (1990) showed that congruence between the product and the spokesperson’s physical attributes enhances endorser believability, suggesting that an effective match benefits not only the brand but also the endorser.

Based on schema theory, it is hypothesized that a match between influencer’s personality and product type will enhance consumers’ attitudes toward the brand and purchase intentions. More specifically, given that utilitarian products are perceived as a sincere product category, an influencer who is high in perceived sincerity level will be more effective endorsing the utilitarian product category compared to an influencer who is perceived to be less sincere. In addition, endorsement effectiveness will not vary for symbolic products because the two influencers do not differ on perceived sophistication level. Hence, the following hypotheses are put forth (see Figure 1):

H3a: An SMI’s perceived sincerity level will interact with product type on brand attitude.

H3b: An SMI’s perceived sincerity level will interact with product type on purchase intention.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and were compensated \$0.25 for participating. Only workers (participants) whose HIT (Human Intelligence Task) hit approval rate was greater than 95%, had number of HITs approved greater than 1,000, and resided in the United States were able to participate. The initial sample consisted of a total of 246 participants. Incomplete responses (answering less than 10% of the questionnaire) were dropped from the final sample, resulting in 234 for subsequent analysis. Participants were, on average, 34 years old ($SD = 9.53$) and the majority identified as Caucasian (71%), followed by African American (10%), Asian (7%), Hispanic (6%) and Native American (3%). In addition, most of the sample earned an annual household income between \$50,000 and \$74,999 (30%). Given that Instagram is the most preferred social media platform for influencers (Driver 2018) who are predominantly female (Chadha 2018), only female participants who use Instagram were included to minimize any confounding effects of platform and gender characteristics. In terms of Instagram behavior, most of the respondents accessed Instagram several times a day (33%) and spent an average of 2 hours and 10 minutes on the platform daily ($SD = 133.04$ minutes). In the sample, 89% indicated they were currently following at least one influencer on Instagram. Of those respondents, the average number of influencers followed was 15 ($SD = 15.00$).

A 2 (SMI’s perceived sincerity level: high versus low) \times 2 (product type: symbolic versus utilitarian) between-subjects design was conducted to test the hypotheses. Participants were told they would be observing a social media influencer’s Instagram content and would be asked to answer questions related to their observations. The survey consisted of five parts (see Main Experiment Stimulus for detailed descriptions of steps 2 and 4): (1) a prequestionnaire that asked about the participant’s general Instagram usage and current influencer following status, (2) first part of the stimulus that showed the participant photos of either a low-sincerity influencer or a high-sincerity influencer, (3) postquestionnaire that asked the participant to evaluate the influencer she saw, (4) second part of the stimulus that showed the participant a brand-endorsed post by the influencer that was

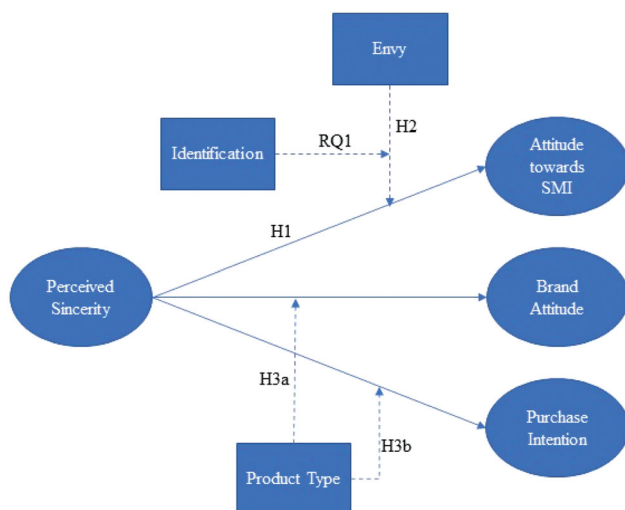


Figure 1. Conceptual model. SMI = social medial influencer.

either a utilitarian or symbolic product, and (5) a final postquestionnaire that asked the participant to evaluate the brand, purchase intention, and demographic questions.

Pilot Test

To select two influencers with contrasting perceived sincerity levels, a pilot test was conducted in which a total of 17 candidates' brand personality and attractiveness were compared. From Forbes's list of top influencers in the beauty and fashion category, only women influencers were selected to minimize gender effects (Forbes 2017a, 2017b). It was deemed appropriate to focus on fashion and beauty influencers given that they represent two industries that have a strong partnership with influencers on Instagram (Driver 2018). To compare personalities, 232 participants were randomly assigned to one of the 17 influencers and shown six photos of the influencer, taken from their actual Instagram accounts, and asked to evaluate the influencer's personality. Participants were given Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale, which consisted of 42 items (on a scale of 1 to 7) and assessed how much they thought each attribute represented the SMI. From the analysis, two influencers were selected who significantly differed in sincerity level, $F(15, 231) = 4.62, p < .001$. In addition to testing influencers' sincerity trait, the researchers made sure other personality dimensions (i.e., sophistication, excitement, competence, and ruggedness) and attractiveness levels did not differ between the two influencers ($ps > .05$).

The descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. An influencer with the account name Zoella (Zoe Sugg, beauty and fashion blogger, 28 years old) was selected as the high-sincerity influencer ($M = 5.45, SD = 0.96$) and Weworewhat (Danielle Bernstein, fashion blogger and designer, 26 years old) was selected as the low-sincerity influencer ($M = 3.42, SD = 0.85$).

Main Experiment Stimulus

Social Media Influencer

The purpose of the first stimulus exposure was to familiarize the participants with their randomly assigned influencer. During this exposure participants saw six photos of the influencer taken from her actual Instagram account. The presentation of photos was similar to how photos are displayed organically on Instagram. The researcher selected photos that were free of any identification of brands or products, and

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for pretest.

Influencer	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Sincerity				
High sincerity	5.45	.96	6.12	.000
Low sincerity	3.42	.85		
Sophistication				
High sincerity	5.63	.97	.79	.44
Low sincerity	5.37	.88		
Excitement				
High sincerity	5.61	.90	1.45	.16
Low sincerity	5.12	.95		
Competence				
High sincerity	5.07	.92	1.55	.13
Low sincerity	4.52	1.02		
Ruggedness				
High sincerity	3.31	1.14	.68	.50
Low sincerity	3.00	1.33		
Attractiveness				
High sincerity	4.40	.63	1.57	.13
Low sincerity	4.00	.76		

cropped out all other content including captions, comments, and likes. Each of the six photos was presented to the participant for six seconds and advanced automatically to the next. Next, after the six photos, three overhead shots of the Instagram account were shown. Each overhead shot was displayed for 10 seconds and advanced automatically to the next. The first overhead shot contained the number of posts, followers, and the number of people following the influencer (i.e., 5,201 posts, 1.1M followers, 392 following). These data were held consistent between both influencers. The remaining shots contained photos of the influencer, which included the six previously shown photos as well as six product photos (three utilitarian: hair dryer, planner, toothpaste; three symbolic: heels, watch, perfume). See the appendix for the stimulus.

Product Type

After participants became familiar with the influencer and evaluated the influencer in the first set of questions, they were presented with a second stimulus. The second stimulus was a close-up screenshot of one of the product photos that was contained in the overhead account screenshot (detailed previously). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two product types: utilitarian or symbolic. The utilitarian product post was about a toothpaste, while the symbolic product post was about a perfume (Ang and Lim 2006). Below the photo of the toothpaste post, a caption was included which said: "Staring at my teeth shine with my @brightsmiles toothpaste." For the perfume post, the caption read: "Savoring how good I smell with my @rousevo perfume." Both included a disclosure tag above the photo that read: "Paid partnership with brightsmiles/rousevo." To minimize

familiarity effects, fictional brands were used. See the [appendix](#) for stimuli.

Measurement

Independent Variables

Perceived sincerity. The sincerity factor in Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale was used to measure perceived sincerity of the influencer as a manipulation check. The scale consisted of a total of 11 items anchored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*; $\alpha = .93$, $M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.23$). Example items include down-to-earth, family oriented, honest, sincere, real, and friendly.

Product type. As a product-type manipulation check, items were adapted from Park and Moon (2003) and anchored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*). This measure assessed how utilitarian and symbolic toothpaste and perfumes are. Participants were asked about their purchase decision when buying either a toothpaste or a perfume (i.e., based on which product they were randomly assigned). To measure the product's utilitarian trait, participants indicated how much their purchase decision was made "logically," "objectively" and "primarily on the product's functional perspective" ($\alpha = .76$, $M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.24$). To measure the symbolic trait, items included "primarily based on feeling," "reflects my personality," and "is made based on appearance, taste, touch, smell or sound" ($\alpha = .78$, $M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.44$).

Moderating Variables

Envy. To measure how envious participants felt toward the influencer, the seven items used by Appel, Crusius, and Gerlach (2015) were adapted and anchored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*). Example items include "I envy the life of the influencer," "My life is inferior to the influencer's," and "I feel inspired by the influencer" ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.48$).

Identification. Items from the identification factor of Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) Audience-Persona Interaction (API) scale was adapted and measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*). Items included "This person reminds me of myself," "I have the same qualities as this person," "I seem to have the same belief or attitudes as this person," and "I have the same problems as this person" ($\alpha = .90$, $M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.44$).

Dependent Variables

Attitude toward the influencer. Participants indicated their attitude toward the influencer with five 7-point semantic differential items ($\alpha = .93$, $M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.44$). Items included *Unpleasant/Pleasant*, *Boring/Interesting*, *Unfavorable/Favorable*, *Negative/Positive*, and *Bad/Good*.

Brand attitude. Attitude toward the brand was assessed using Bruner's (1998) scale that asks participants to indicate their feelings toward the brand on a 7-point semantic differential scale. The items were *Unpleasant/Pleasant*, *Boring/Interesting*, *Negative/Positive*, *Bad/Good*, *Unappealing/Appealing*, *Unattractive/Attractive*, and *Dislike/Like* ($\alpha = .97$, $M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.39$).

Purchase intention. An established scale was used to assess the likelihood participants would purchase the product in the influencer's post (Bearden, Lichtenstein, and Teel 1984). Four items on a 7-point semantic differential scale (*Unlikely/Likely*, *Improbable/Probable*, *Uncertain/Certain*, and *Definitely not/Definitely*) were used to measure purchase intention ($\alpha = .96$, $M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.94$).

Control Variables

Familiarity with the influencer. To control for preexisting knowledge of the influencer, participants were asked to indicate how familiar they are with the influencer on a 5-point scale (1 = *Not at all familiar* to 5 = *Extremely familiar*; $M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.01$).

Influencer involvement. Consumers might differ in how much they rely on SMIs as sources of information and enjoyment (Thomson 2006). Therefore, level of involvement with SMIs was controlled by asking participants how relevant influencers are to them using 7-point semantic differential items (*Unimportant/Important*, *Irrelevant/Relevant*, *Doesn't matter to me/Matters to me*, *Insignificant to me/Significant*, *Not useful/Useful*; $\alpha = .95$, $M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.60$). Participants were also provided with the following definition of SMIs before answering:

Social media influencers are people who have built a reputation for being knowledgeable on a particular topic. They can range from industry experts, bloggers, to ordinary users. They became famous through their social media accounts—which makes them different from traditional celebrities such as Hollywood singers, actors and/or entertainers. Influencers usually have a very high number of followers and frequently

update their social media accounts. (Carrillat and Ilicic 2019)

Product involvement. Product involvement was controlled when testing hypothesis 3, given the distinct uses and motives associated with each product type (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). The same scale used to measure influencer involvement was utilized ($\alpha = .97$, $M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.82$).

Data Analysis

To test hypotheses 1 through 3, general linear model (GLM) analysis was used to examine the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables. To test research question 1, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. As presented in Table 2, the controlled variables (i.e., respondents' age, influencer familiarity, and involvement with the influencer) were entered in Block 1, while the independent variables of interest and their interaction terms were entered in Block 2. A cross-product variable was created for testing the interaction term between envy and identification.

Results

Manipulation Check

To determine whether the manipulations worked, independent sample t tests were performed to assess the perceived sincerity manipulation and product type manipulation. In line with the pilot test, participants perceived the high-sincerity influencer as more sincere than the low-sincerity influencer, $t(232) = 4.91$, $p < .001$. In addition, the product-type manipulation was successful based on the two scales used for measuring utilitarian traits and symbolism traits (Park and Moon 2003). Toothpaste ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.12$) was significantly higher in utilitarian traits compared to perfume ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.28$), $t(232) = 3.95$, $p < .001$. In addition, perfume ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.36$) was significantly higher in symbolic traits compared to toothpaste ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.38$), $t(232) = -4.91$, $p < .001$.

Hypotheses Testing

After controlling for the effects of respondent's age ($F = .60$, $p = .44$), SMI familiarity ($F = .11$, $p = .75$), and SMI involvement ($F = 78.35$, $p < .001$), as hypothesized in hypothesis 1, attitude toward the SMI was more positive for the high-sincerity influencer

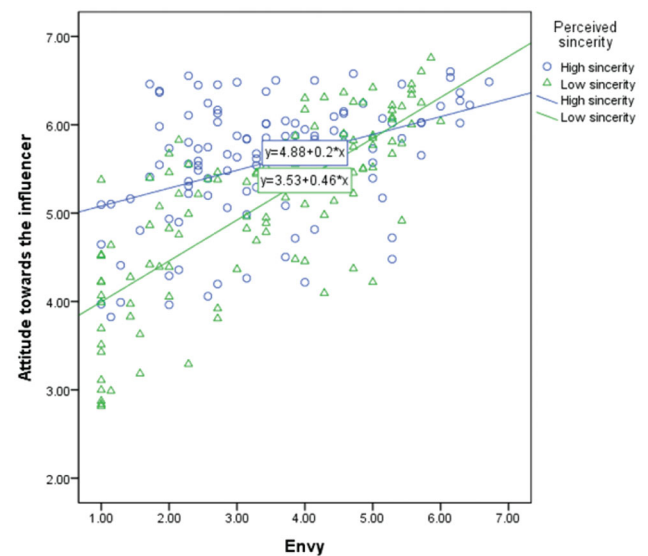


Figure 2. Effect of social media influencer (SMI) sincerity level and envy on attitude toward the SMI.

($M = 5.54$, $SE = .10$) compared to the low-sincerity influencer ($M = 5.15$, $SE = .10$), $F(1, 227) = 13.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported. As predicted by hypothesis 2, a significant interaction effect was detected for envy and SMI sincerity level on attitude toward the influencer, $F(1, 227) = 7.53$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. As shown in Figure 2, for the high-sincerity SMI, envy did not influence respondents' attitude toward the SMI, in that attitude was predominantly positive regardless of respondent envy. However, for the low-sincerity SMI, those who reported greater envy indicated a more positive attitude while those with lower envy had a less favorable attitude. Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Turning to research question 1, explaining 46% of the variance in attitude toward the SMI, the multiple linear regression indicated the model was statistically significant, $R = .68$, $F(6, 227) = 32.57$, $p < .001$. Further, data indicated a significant interaction between envy and identification for attitude toward the SMI ($\beta = -.14$, $t = -2.69$, $p < .001$). As shown in Figure 3, for participants with low identification scores, envy positively enhanced their attitude toward the influencer, whereas for those with high identification scores, envy did not have an effect. Details can be found in Table 2.

As hypothesized in hypothesis 3a, the interaction effect of SMI sincerity level and product type on brand attitude was significant ($F(1, 225) = 5.83$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$) after controlling for respondent's age ($F = 2.39$, $p = .12$), SMI familiarity ($F = .86$, $p = .36$), SMI involvement ($F = 5.78$, $p < .05$), product

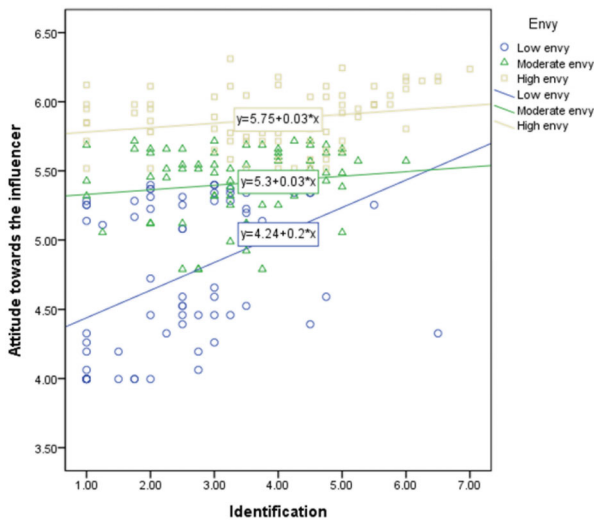


Figure 3. Effect of envy and identification on attitude toward the social media influencer (SMI).

Table 2. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting attitude toward the SMI.

	Block 1 β	Block 1 β
Age	.02	.02
SMI familiarity	.06	-.07
SMI involvement	.57**	.41**
Envy		.09
Identification		.36**
Envy \times Identification		-.14*
R^2	.35	.46
Adjusted R^2	.34	.45
F	40.51***	32.57***
ΔF		16.46***
ΔR^2		.12

Note. SMI = social media influencer.

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$.

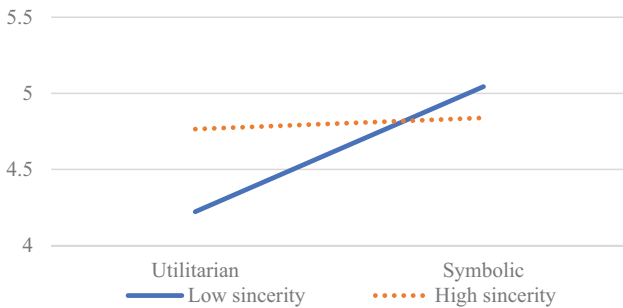


Figure 4. Effect of social media influencer (SMI) sincerity level and product type on attitude toward the brand.

involvement ($F = 26.92$, $p < .001$), and envy ($F = 7.61$, $p < .01$). As shown in Figure 4, respondents indicated more favorable brand attitude when a high-sincerity influencer endorsed a utilitarian product ($M = 4.77$, $SE = .16$) compared to a low-sincerity influencer ($M = 4.22$, $SE = .16$). Attitude did not differ between the two influencers for the symbolic product ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.84$, $SE = .16$; $M_{\text{low}} = 5.04$, $SE = .16$). For

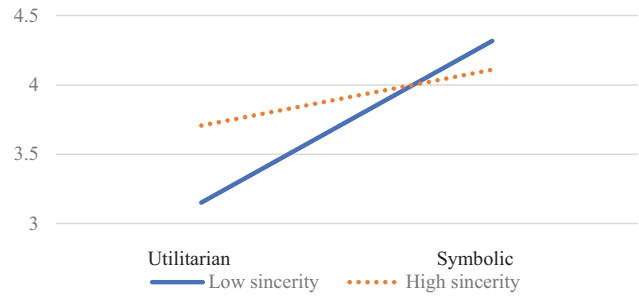


Figure 5. Effect of social media influencer (SMI) sincerity level and product type on purchase intention.

hypothesis 3b, the interaction effect of SMI sincerity level and product type on purchase intention approached significance (utilitarian product: $M_{\text{high}} = 3.71$, $SE = .21$, $M_{\text{low}} = 3.15$, $SE = .21$; symbolic product: $M_{\text{high}} = 4.11$, $SE = .22$; $M_{\text{low}} = 4.32$, $SE = .21$), $F(1, 225) = 3.45$, $p = .065$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ (see Figure 5).

Discussion

Summary of Results

A primary goal of this research was to examine the role that perceived sincerity trait plays in influencer success. Consistent with literature on parasocial relationships (e.g., Chung and Cho 2017; Lee and Watkins 2016), results demonstrated that consumers tend to hold more favorable attitudes toward an SMI with a high perceived sincerity trait. Further, SMI envy significantly moderated this effect (see Figure 1). For the low-sincerity influencer, participant envy positively enhanced attitude toward the influencer, whereas envy did not impact participants' evaluation of the high-sincerity influencer. This finding corroborates literature on aspirational social comparison with celebrities (Choi and Rifon 2012) and influencers (Chae 2017).

Data also indicated that for those who highly identified with the influencer, consumers' envy did not influence their attitude toward the influencer (see Figure 2). However, for respondents with low identification, higher envy led to more favorable attitudes. It is interesting to note that when identification was high, consumers' envy did not influence attitude, possibly suggesting envy's subsidiary role compared to identification. According to Cohen (2001), media scholars often attribute identification as feelings of similarity, affinity, and likability. It is defined as an experience of imaging the self in the shoes of the media character and experiencing the world through the influencer's eyes (Cohen 2001). On the other hand, envy is an emotion that invokes a desire to be

like the envied person. This way, identification is a more powerful psychological process that can override certain affects like envy (Bandura 1978).

Regarding sincerity's impact on brand endorsements, our findings showed that the attributes of a high-sincerity influencer match that of utilitarian products. More specifically, attitude toward the brand for the utilitarian product was more positive when endorsed by a high-sincerity influencer compared to a low-sincerity influencer. For the symbolic product, SMI sincerity levels did not seem to impact brand attitude given that the two influencers did not vary in levels of sophistication, as shown in the pretest results. Similar patterns emerged for purchase intention but were not statistically significant. Our findings corroborate previous studies that demonstrate when the attributes of the celebrity endorser and product fit, it leads to better advertising effects (Choi and Rifon 2012; Kamins 1990; Misra and Beatty 1990). For example, Choi and Rifon (2012) show that consumers evaluate the ad more favorably when physically attractive celebrities (e.g., Julia Roberts and Drew Barrymore) endorsed a perfume compared to a personal digital assistant. Knoll and Matthes (2017) further evidences the matchup hypothesis on a meta-analytic level, illustrating that congruent endorsements lead to significantly greater effect sizes than incongruent ones.

Theoretical Implications

Personality research has shown that individuals express their true, everyday personalities on social networking sites, which can be discerned by a third-person observer through various cues from a profile including photos, vocabulary usage, and online interactions with others (Back et al. 2010). The current research extends this stream of literature by demonstrating the concrete effects of perceived online personality in consumer behavior. Indeed, it is one of the first to empirically show that personality perceptions constructed through SMI account photos can meaningfully impact consumers' evaluations toward the influencer as well as their brand endorsement. In addition, by adapting Aaker's (1997) brand personality construct to the sincerity trait, the *celebrity as human brand* perspective is underscored (Thomson 2006). Such application of human branding is especially meaningful in the current media landscape, where technology affords users to engage in self-branding practices that closely align with marketing strategies

implemented by real brands (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017).

The current research is one of the first to investigate the impact of SMIs' perceived sincerity on consumer behavior. The sincerity trait, which reflects a brand as being down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, and cheerful, is closely associated with characteristics that attribute a SMI as approachable and relatable, attributes that make SMIs appealing (Marwick and boyd 2011). Moreover, in line with Tsai and Men's (2017) finding in which a chief executive officer's sincere communication style on social networking sites promotes parasocial interaction and positive evaluations of the associated company, our findings suggest that a sincere appearance displayed through an influencer's photos also trigger similar responses.

This research also contributes to the growing scholarly attention on envy toward social media influencers (e.g., Chae 2017; Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu 2019). Chae (2017), for instance, identified the positive link between greater involvement with social media influencers' daily lives and feelings of envy. More recently, Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019) suggested that envy toward SMIs is benign as it coexists with perceptions of trustworthiness and social presence. The current study corroborates this observation by demonstrating that envy triggers positive responses toward influencers who appear unfriendly, inhospitable, and less sincere. This may be suggestive of users' intentions to engage in vicarious experiences from viewing the luxurious lives of social media influencers, shedding light into various motives users have for following them.

Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, this study provides several strategic insights into influencer marketing on social media. SMI marketing has brought not only numerous opportunities for marketers but also an "authenticity crisis" with poor strategic planning (Smith 2017). Indeed, a survey conducted by OnePoll showed that 43% of the respondents often thought influencers were inauthentic (Smith 2017). Part of the reason consumers may feel an influencer is inauthentic is when the product being promoted does not fit the individual's lifestyle, personality, and overall identity (Moulard, Garrity, and Rice 2015). In light of this authenticity crisis, our findings offer empirical evidence regarding the importance of the influencer's perceived personality and not solely his or her area of expertise or number of followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). For both influencers

and marketers, it is essential to think about how the influencer is perceived in terms of brand personality and be more critical about agreeing to endorse something or selecting a potential endorser, given that a mismatch between personality and product type might end up making both the influencer and the brand seem disingenuous.

In addition, when consumers lack information to match the spokesperson's and brand's characteristics (i.e., low brand familiarity), inferences are likely to be made based on attributes associated with the product type rather than the brand. Hence, the current data should prove especially useful for less well-known brands aiming to raise brand awareness through influencer marketing. For example, biopharmaceutical companies, such as Celgene, that are less well-known compared to more mainstream medical brands are partnering with influencers to promote their brands. According to our findings, partnering up with an influencer who is recognized as more sincere will lead to more positive evaluations for such utilitarian products.

For SMIs, as suggested by these data, inducing followers' envy and level of identification may increase more favorable responses. Accordingly, influencers should be more strategic in manipulating the context and theme of their social media posts that could elicit benign envy from the followers. This type of envy may in turn lead to more favorable purchase behavior as suggested by Liu, Wu and Li (2019), who demonstrate that for consumers with low self-esteem, benign envy triggers intention to visit the travel destination that was shared by a similar other on social media. One way to maintain consumer envy is by frequently sharing experiential purchases (e.g., travel), which has been found to trigger more envy than material purchases on social networking sites (Lin, van de Ven, and Utz 2018).

Limitations

While this research opens a range of important theoretical and managerial insights, it is not without limitations. First, the manipulation of influencer's sincerity level was done using two different individuals. Although data did indicate a successful match for attractiveness as well as other personality traits ($ps > .05$) between the two influencers, while significantly differentiating the sincerity level, future research should try replicating the study using a single person. Using only one SMI would eliminate any unknown source differences. Second, this study

examined consumers' perceptions and the subsequent effects of an influencer they were not familiar with, indicated by the low familiarity score ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 1.04$). Given that consumers obtain product-related information predominantly from the influencers they follow and with whom they have an ongoing relationship, future research should explore the extent to which a preexisting relationship between the consumer and SMI play a role in affecting consumers' perceptions. Third, to minimize differences, the current study employed only photos when presenting each influencer. On social media, perceptions of personality do not depend solely on visual elements but are determined in combination with verbal descriptions. Hence, in addition to the visual elements, future research would be well served to include verbal descriptions and other affordances as the building blocks of influencer personality. Fourth, as can be seen from the low effect sizes for some of the results, future research should incorporate other variables that may play a role in influencing consumers' evaluations of SMIs and their brand endorsements. Finally, while the sincerity trait was chosen as the focus of this study because it is a highly demanded quality of SMIs (Marwick 2013), future research should delve into other brand personality traits to further explicate and differentiate the role of sincerity from other attributes.

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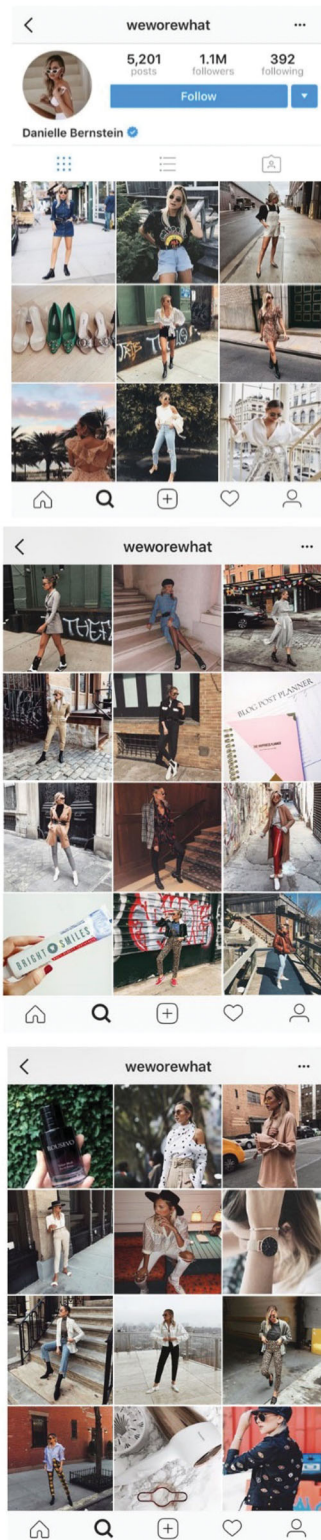
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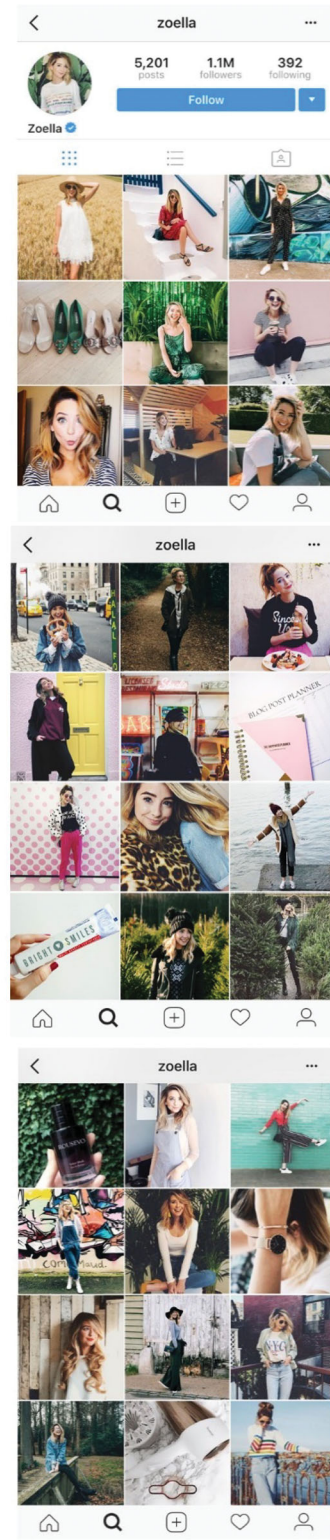
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Appendix



Low-sincerity influencer



High-sincerity influencer



Utilitarian product



Symbolic product