

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Unfaithful brands: How brand attachment can lead to negative responses to influencer marketing campaigns

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Abstract

The use of influencer marketing campaigns has increased exponentially in recent years as brands have embraced such campaigns in order to capitalize on the relationships that social media influencers (SMIs) have built with their followers as a means of increasing brand awareness and sales. Although influencer marketing is extensively utilized in practice, much is still unknown about the effects of these campaigns, including potential downsides and audience-level variables that could moderate their success. In the current research, we find that partnering with SMIs is perceived as a norm violation for consumers with a high brand attachment, negatively impacting consumption intentions. Across five studies, we show that social media posts originating from an SMI, as opposed to the brand, lead to lower purchase intentions and willingness to pay for consumers with a high brand attachment. Additionally, we consider several moderators to this effect, including the salience of the sponsorship and consumers' attachment to the SMI. We also provide process evidence by documenting that perceptions of a norm violation mediate these effects.

KEYWORDS

brand attachment, brand relationships, influencer marketing

INTRODUCTION

Online influencer marketing (OIM) involves brands partnering with social media influencers, that is, individuals or groups who have a network of followers on social media and are digital opinion leaders who exert significant social influence on their followers (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Gillin, 2008; Leung, Gu, & Palmatier, 2022; Scott, 2015) to promote their brands. In recent years, numerous brands, both new (e.g., Birdies Slippers) and established (e.g., Levi's), have embraced influencer marketing campaigns, seeking to capitalize on the relationships that social media influencers (SMIs) have built with their followers in hopes of increasing brand awareness and sales. For example, a popular social media influencer, Charli D'Amelio, partnered with Dunkin' in 2020 to promote her favorite drink, a cold brew coffee. Through the campaign, which included posts on Charli's

and Dunkin's social media accounts, Dunkin' saw a 45% increase in cold beverage sales and a 57% increase in app downloads (Lemon, 2022).

It is estimated that brands with strong influencer marketing campaigns can receive up to \$18 in earned media for every \$1 spent (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2019). The potential for such high returns has led such campaigns to become an important aspect of brands' digital marketing efforts. As such, spending on influencer campaigns has increased dramatically, with a global spend of \$16.4 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2023), doubling in just 3 years from the approximate \$8 billion spent in 2019 (Business Insider, 2021). However, while influencer marketing is a huge phenomenon in practice, academic research has only recently begun to investigate this type of campaign. There is still much that is unknown about the best way to utilize these campaigns, such as identifying potential downsides to these campaigns and considering their

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effectiveness with different audiences. Indeed, recent research has begun to identify moderators to the effectiveness of influencer campaigns (e.g., Belanche et al., 2021; Leung, Gu, Li, et al., 2022), including characteristics of the influencer (e.g., number of followers, type of content, and brand–SMI fit) and the influencer-generated content (e.g., positivity, frequency). This is critically important because, in the absence of such a nuanced understanding of when and how influencer marketing can be effective, brands may mistakenly focus on aggregate outcomes (e.g., awareness, intentions, and liking) without realizing the potential negative effects of these campaigns among some consumers. We extend this stream of research by looking at audience-level factors that could impact the success of influencer marketing campaigns and explore how influencer marketing campaigns may impact consumer–brand relationships. We argue that utilizing influencer marketing could be perceived as a norm violation of the psychological contracts held with the brand for consumers with a strong brand attachment (BA), which can subsequently decrease their purchase intentions and willingness to pay for the brand. We also consider two moderators to this effect—the salience of the SMI's sponsorship and consumer attachment to the SMI. We find that when the SMI's post is not sponsored by the brand, the negative effects of influencer marketing among high BA consumers are attenuated, suggesting that it is the sponsorship/payment accorded to the SMI (i.e., preferential treatment) that triggers negative reactions, not the SMIs themselves. Furthermore, we find that when consumers report high levels of attachment to the SMI, the negative effects of influencer marketing are attenuated, underscoring the importance of influencer selection for brands.

Our findings contribute to the literature on influencer marketing and social influence in several ways. While prior research on SMIs has found that the credibility and, hence, persuasiveness of messages originating from such influencers may be higher than similar messages from a brand (Edelman, 2019), our findings suggest potential downsides to the use of SMIs, such that consumers who feel highly attached to a brand may not be receptive to their use. This is an important finding since it provides an initial starting point in identifying audience-level moderators for the effectiveness of SMIs in digital marketing strategies. By documenting the negative effects of influencer marketing on consumers who are highly attached to a brand, our findings also hold significant implications for marketing practitioners and suggest that it is critically important to consider the impact of using SMIs on consumers who feel attached to a brand, particularly with regard to the selection of the SMI (i.e., connection to target consumers) and the salience of the SMI's compensation.

We begin by reviewing relevant literature on social influence, brand attachment, and psychological

contracts to formulate our predictions. We then present the results from five empirical studies, followed by a summary of our findings and implications for future research.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

There has been a considerable amount of research exploring the influential impact of other people [e.g., celebrity endorsements (McCracken, 1989; Tripp et al., 1994), word of mouth recommendations (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Godes et al., 2005; Trusov et al., 2009), opinion leaders (Keller & Berry, 2003; Rosen, 2003), and market mavens (Feick & Price, 1987)]. Importantly, consumers tend to view information obtained from other people, as opposed to directly from a marketer, as more sincere and credible and are, therefore, more likely to be persuaded by such information (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Brooks, 1957; Lee & Koo, 2012). According to a study conducted by Nielsen (2012), 92% of consumers are more likely to trust the recommendation of a friend or family member than an advertising message, which can enhance their likelihood of making a purchase.

Realizing the power of opinion leaders, defined as unofficial leaders who can influence people's decisions about new products, practices, or ideas (Keller & Berry, 2003), many brands have incorporated them into their marketing campaigns by hiring someone to endorse their brand (e.g., celebrity spokesperson) or by encouraging their consumers to engage in WOM activities (e.g., referral programs and viral marketing campaigns). Such strategic decisions are commonly observed in the marketplace and are consistent with research that shows that the use of opinion leaders can be beneficial for brands in terms of awareness and sales (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009; Haenlein & Libai, 2013; Iyengar et al., 2015; Keller & Berry, 2003).

Social media and influencer marketing

The advent of social media has amplified the impact of peer–peer communications by allowing consumers to not only engage in WOM through in-person interactions but also via the Internet on social media sites (e-WOM), such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Yelp, in which consumers can instantly share their opinions with hundreds, if not thousands, of others (Chen et al., 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). This has led to the emergence of social media influencers (SMIs), a term applied to opinion leaders with an online platform through which they can influence their followers (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Gillin, 2008). SMIs are carefully cultivated online personas that seek to leverage their social capital among their followers for compensation ranging from commissions derived through affiliate marketing links, free products

and services, or a flat fee (Evans et al., 2017; Forrest & Cao, 2010).

A major factor contributing to the success of influencer marketing campaigns is that many SMIs are often perceived as normal consumers. By offering frequent narratives that provide glimpses into their daily lives, ranging from the mundane (e.g., grocery shopping) to the exciting (e.g., Caribbean vacations), SMIs are often seen as regular people and, therefore, as very similar to and relatable to their followers (Leung, Gu, Li, et al., 2022; Schouten et al., 2020). Thus, even though their followers may not personally know them, the perceived similarities with SMIs make their recommendations feel like those offered by a friend and, therefore, may be highly persuasive. Indeed, a survey found that 49% of Twitter users rely on SMI recommendations when making a consumption decision—which is only slightly lower than the 56% of users who reported that they rely on a friend's recommendation (Karp, 2016). It has also been reported that SMI posts can increase purchase intentions almost twice as much as brand posts (Digital Marketing Institute, 2019).

Initial research on the impact of influencer marketing has focused heavily on aspects of sponsorship such as sponsorship disclosure (Nelson et al., 2009; Tessitore & Geuens, 2013), the manner of disclosure (Evans et al., 2017), and what happens if the SMI objectively states that a post is not sponsored (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). Furthermore, research has considered characteristics of SMIs that could impact campaign success, such as SMI popularity (i.e., the SMI's number of followers; De Veirman et al., 2017), credibility (Hughes et al., 2019), and SMI-brand fit (Breves et al., 2019), and found that popularity, credibility, and high brand fit can all enhance SMI effectiveness in terms of their perceived opinion leadership as well as brand awareness and trial.

Little research, however, has considered other factors, such as audience characteristics, that may impact the success of an influencer marketing campaign. We address this gap by focusing on how different types of audiences may respond more or less favorably to influencer marketing campaigns. As noted earlier, the integration of influencer marketing campaigns into brands' strategies has only recently become more commonplace, which raises the question of how current consumers will respond to such new strategies. We suggest that influencer campaigns, specifically those that use non-celebrity SMIs, are perceived as a violation of the norms of the consumer–brand psychological contract held by consumers with a strong attachment to the brand. This is because the compensation afforded to SMIs is interpreted as preferential treatment toward consumers who are perceived as very similar to themselves. These perceptions of a norm violation will subsequently have a negative impact on their consumption intentions toward the brand.

Brand attachment and psychological contracts

Brand attachment reflects the extent to which consumers feel emotionally attached or connected to a brand (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2005; Escalas, 2004). Consumers with a high brand attachment perceive a strong relationship with the brand (Sirgy, 1982) and may see aspects of themselves in the brand (Park et al., 2010). Research has found that consumers with a high brand attachment have more positive brand attitudes (Park et al., 2010), are more loyal (Ferraro et al., 2013), exhibit greater patience (Sprott et al., 2009), are more tolerant of negative brand information (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Fournier, 1998), and are more accepting of some brand failures (Cheng et al., 2012).

Consumers' expectations for brand relationships are often based on unwritten psychological contracts that outline the norms of the relationship (Guo et al., 2017) and reflect consumers' expectations about the promises made by a brand (Montgomery et al., 2018). Thus, consumers' psychological contracts are idiosyncratic perceptions based on their schema of the brand relationship and reflect consumers' expectations of how the brand ought to behave toward themselves and other consumers (i.e., relationship norms). Perceived breaches of such contracts have been shown to lead to negative effects on perceptions of fairness (Molm et al., 2003), satisfaction (Tekleab et al., 2005), and commitment (Ng et al., 2010). Consumers expect brands to abide by contractual norms, and if a brand deviates from these norms, such contract violations may lead consumers to feel upset with the brand and could negatively impact their consumption intentions (Aggarwal, 2004; Malhotra et al., 2017; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994).

Research has found that the type of psychological contract varies with how attached consumers are to the brand. Thus, consumers with a high BA hold contractual perceptions that differ from those of consumers with low BA (Montgomery et al., 2018), such that high (low) BA consumers' contracts tend to be relational (transactional) in nature, focusing on high levels of social (economic) exchange and promoting the brand's (self) interest (Guo et al., 2017). Furthermore, since high and low BA consumers have different expectations of the brand, an action by the brand may be viewed as a contractual transgression for high but not low BA consumers, leading to differential responses from such consumers. Indeed, prior work has found that perceived transgressions can elicit highly negative responses among high BA consumers, more so than lower BA consumers (Grégoire et al., 2009; Montgomery et al., 2018; Wan et al., 2011).

For example, research on loyalty programs (Steinhoff & Palmatier, 2016) finds that consumers may resent loyalty programs that reward other consumers differently than them, even though they realize that those greater rewards were likely justly earned. In a similar manner,

high BA consumers are likely to hold the norm that their brand will treat them in a fashion akin to its other, similar consumers (e.g., same promotions, loyalty rewards, customer service level, etc.), and any perceived violation of this norm will elicit negative responses. Thus, if Ann and Beth are both loyal Reebok customers, and Reebok sends a 20% off coupon to Beth, but not Ann, Ann may feel as though Reebok has violated their contract by treating Beth more favorably and therefore react negatively toward Reebok.

To validate our intuition that high versus low BA consumers hold different contractual expectations from the brand in terms of treatment relative to similar consumers, we conducted a study with 107 Cloud Research workers ($M_{\text{age}}=40.35$ years, 60.9% male). Participants completed a two-item Brand Attachment Scale ($r=0.93$; Park et al., 2010) and were then asked the extent to which they perceived the target brand, Starbucks, as promising to treat them like it would treat similar customers (details in MDA: Appendix S1). A regression analysis revealed the expected significant positive effect of BA ($\beta=0.099$, $SE=0.049$, $t(105)=2.031$, $p=0.045$), such that consumers with higher BA reported greater perceptions of the brand's promise to treat them equivalently to similar customers. Although these results are limited to a single expectation, they offer some preliminary evidence for our contention that high BA consumers hold expectations that are different from low BA consumers, specifically with respect to their treatment relative to similar others.

With influencer campaigns, SMIs promote a brand with which they have partnered via their social media platforms in exchange for compensation (e.g., free products or a fee), which must be prominently disclosed due to FTC guidelines (Federal Trade Commission, 2019) and self-regulation by media platforms (e.g., Instagram requires a "paid partnership" disclosure for sponsored posts). Such compensatory arrangements may

be perceived as though the SMI is unfairly receiving preferential treatment, thereby leading to perceptions of a contractual norm violation by high BA consumers and negatively impacting their consumption intentions. On the other hand, low BA consumers, who perceive a transactional, exchange-based brand relationship with the brand may find it acceptable for the brand to partner with an SMI because they recognize the transactional nature of the relationship (i.e., the SMI receives compensation and/or free products in exchange for leveraging their social capital to drive business to the brand). The payment made to the SMI by the brand should not be viewed as a norm violation by these consumers, and hence there should be no negative impact of using the SMI on their purchase and payment intentions. Thus, we predict that consumers with high, but not low, BA will respond negatively to sponsored SMI campaigns. Our conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

Since our predictions pertain to the lowered receptivity to influencer campaigns among high BA consumers, it is important to have a suitable baseline campaign condition to compare against influencer marketing. We, therefore, conducted an exploratory study to examine how influencer posts would compare with posts containing the same content but posted by the brand (brand post) versus a regular, unpaid consumer (consumer testimonial) versus advertising from the brand (social media, as well as a traditional print ad). Our expectation was that the SMI post would fare worse than all of these other forms of promotion among high BA consumers since only the SMI post ought to be viewed as a norm violation to high BA consumers.

The study was a 2 (BA: measured) \times 5 (Source: Brand post vs. SMI post vs. Brand print ad vs. Brand social media ad vs. Consumer testimonial), between-subjects study with 750 Cloud Research workers. Levi's was our target brand, and willingness to pay for a pair of Levi's

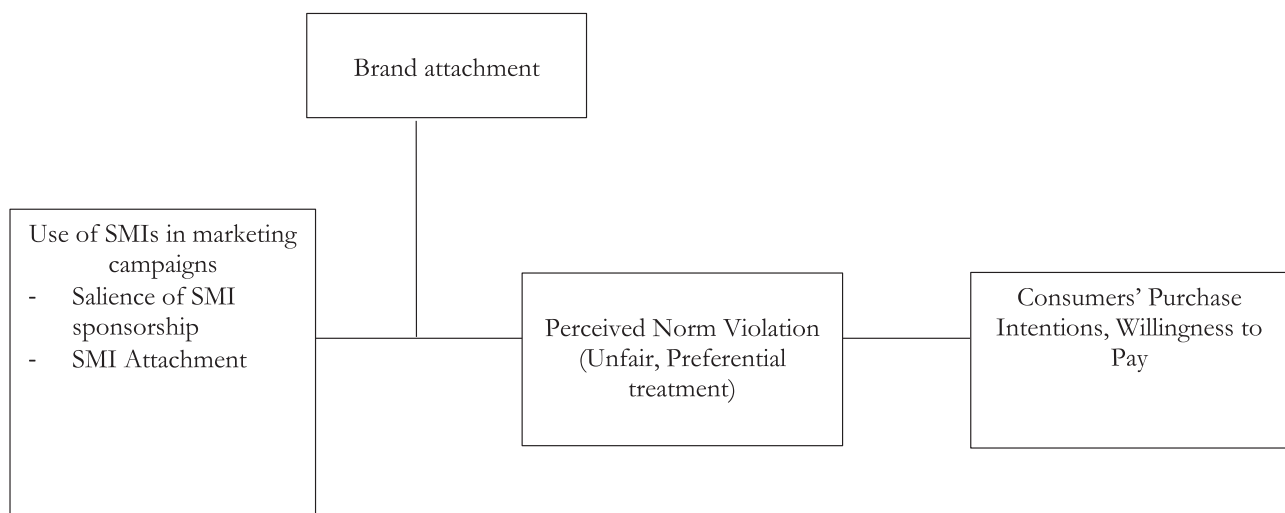


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

jeans was our dependent variable. Details of the study are contained in the MDA: Appendix S1 (MDA Study 1), but in line with our expectations, we found that the SMI post condition elicited lower WTP among high BA consumers as compared to the other conditions ($M_{\text{brandpost}} = \$68.48$, $M_{\text{SMI}} = \$54.08$, $M_{\text{branddigitalad}} = \65.60 , $M_{\text{consumer}} = \$63.29$, $M_{\text{print}} = \$64.22$; all p 's < 0.04), with no such significant differences noted among low BA respondents (all p 's > 0.16). Thus, SMIs appear uniquely different from paid, owned, and earned media in that they appear to lead to less favorable responses among consumers who reported being highly attached to the brand.

Having documented initial evidence for the differences between SMIs and other media avenues, in our subsequent studies, we focus on comparing SMI posts with brand posts because that allows us to test for our predicted effects while keeping the platform (Instagram), content, and format identical, but simply changing the source of the content to be the SMI versus the brand, which offers a more conservative test of our predictions. Furthermore, marketers often make the decision to offer content via influencers or their own social media accounts, rendering this choice to be realistic and commonplace.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We conducted five studies to test our predictions using Instagram as our social media platform. Instagram has over 1 billion users who can post pictures or videos to share with their followers and who actively engage with these posts through likes or comments (Instagram, 2020). Importantly, consumers are highly accustomed to seeing influencer marketing posts on Instagram (Schomer, 2019) given the prevalence of brands using Instagram (79%) compared with Facebook (46%) or Twitter (24%).

We establish the basic effect that SMI posts, compared to brand posts, lead to lowered purchase intentions/WTP for consumers with a high BA (measured BA—studies 1, 3–5; manipulated BA—study 2). Next, we provide process evidence by documenting that a perceived norm violation mediates the effects of an SMI post on willingness to pay for the brand (study 3). We also consider two moderators to our findings by showing that these effects hold only when the brand's sponsorship of the SMI is salient (study 4) and only among consumers who report lower perceptions of attachment toward the SMI (study 5).

We measured respondents' age and gender, along with their self-reported social media usage (e.g., Instagram account and usage) but did not find any significant differences across these variables, and hence do not discuss them further. We used an attention check question (MDA: Appendix S1) across all studies and dropped respondents who failed this attention

check. Additionally, we also dropped respondents who took more than 2 SD from the mean time taken by all respondents to complete each survey (Malhotra, 2008; Read et al., 2022; our results do not change materially if we do not exclude these respondents—MDA: Appendix S1). We note the exact number of drops in each study. Stimuli and pretests for all studies are reported in the MDA: Appendix S1.

STUDY 1: SMIS DECREASE INCENTIVE-COMPATIBLE WTP

Design and procedure

This study was conducted with a sample of 302 Cloud Research participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 37$ years, 63.6% male). The independent variables were BA and post source (brand vs. SMI), while the dependent variable was an incentive-compatible measure of WTP. In this study, participants evaluated a real brand (Target), but a fictional product line (Target Denim).

Respondents were first informed that they would be evaluating a social media post about Target and were provided with some general information about the brand, and then completed the two-item BA scale (Target is a part of me and who I am; I feel that I am personally attached to Target; 1—strongly disagree, 7—strongly agree, $r = 0.94$; Park et al., 2010). Participants then viewed the Instagram post, which featured a man and a woman both wearing a pair of jeans (MDA: Appendix S1) and was presented as posted by either Target or the SMI, “lifewithsam.” The picture, text, and two of the three hashtags (#targetdenim; #ad) featured in the post were consistent across conditions. The only difference between the two posts was the third hashtag—the brand post included #targetbrand, whereas the SMI post included #lifestyleblogger. Thus, the number of hashtags remained consistent across conditions but differed in the specific text to further identify the account that was posting. Furthermore, the selection of hashtags was deliberately chosen to be subtle and to minimize the differences between the brand and SMI conditions; thus, both conditions signaled the word “ad.” After viewing the post, participants reported their WTP and completed the social media usage, demographic, and attention check measures.

In order to provide participants with a real, consequential decision, we used an adapted version of the BDM lottery method (Becker et al., 1964—see MDA: Appendix S1 for details), which has been used in prior research in marketing (Fuchs et al., 2015). At the end of the study, participants were informed that to eliminate the collection of personally identifiable information, chosen lottery winners would be bonused \$25 (reflecting the full lottery prize amount) to their MTurk account.

Results

Fifty-nine participants were dropped for failing the attention check or due to their completion time ($M=325.11$ s, $SD=380.07$; $\text{Drops}_{\text{Check}}=46$, $\text{Drops}_{\text{Time}}=9$, $\text{Drops}_{\text{both}}=4$), leaving a final sample of 243, with no significant difference in the dropout rate across conditions ($p=0.23$).

WTP

A regression analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 1; Hayes, 2013) with post source as the independent variable, BA as the moderator, and WTP as the dependent variable revealed a simple effect of BA ($\beta=1.38$; $SE=0.18$; $t(239)=7.49$; $p=0.000$), such that participants with a higher BA reported a higher WTP and a significant BA \times Post source interaction ($\beta=-0.53$; $SE=0.25$; $t(239)=-2.11$; $p=0.035$, $R^2=0.27$). A spotlight analysis (± 1 SD from the mean, $M_{\text{BA}}=3.94$, $SD=1.97$) revealed that participants with a high BA reported a significantly lower WTP for a pair of Target Denim jeans after seeing a post made by the SMI ($M_{\text{SMI}}=\$18.52$) as opposed to a post by the brand ($M_{\text{brand}}=\$21.05$; $\beta=-2.52$; $SE=0.70$; $t(239)=-3.61$; $p=0.000$). There was no significant difference in WTP for participants with a low BA ($M_{\text{brand}}=\$15.62$, $M_{\text{SMI}}=\$15.19$; $\beta=-0.432$; $SE=0.70$; $t(239)=-0.62$; $p=0.54$). A floodlight analysis revealed that the effect of post source was significant for participants who scored higher than 3.13 on the BA scale (58.43% of participants; $B_{\text{JN}}=-1.05$; $SE=0.53$, $p=0.05$).

Discussion

The results of this study confirm our prediction that highly attached consumers respond negatively to the use of SMIs by their preferred brands. When presented with an incentive-compatible WTP measure, high BA consumers were willing to pay less for the brand after viewing an Instagram post made by an SMI as opposed to the brand.

However, it is possible that it is not, as we argue, that SMI posts *decrease* consumer intentions, but rather brand posts can *increase* consumer intentions. Therefore, in our next study, we included a control condition in which participants were not exposed to any social media post but only asked to report their intentions. Additionally, a limitation of study 1 is that the measurement of BA allows for the possibility that variables other than BA (e.g., brand familiarity, knowledge, etc.) could explain our results. Therefore, in our next study, we sought to replicate these effects by manipulating BA toward a fictitious brand, using a

different product category—technology. Furthermore, we measured purchase intentions as our main dependent variable rather than WTP to increase the generalizability of our findings.

STUDY 2: SMIS LOWER PURCHASE INTENTIONS AS COMPARED TO A CONTROL (NO-POST) CONDITION

Design and procedure

This study was conducted with 407 Cloud Research participants ($M_{\text{age}}=40.9$ years; 41.8% male). The independent variables were BA (low vs. high) and the source of the post (control [no social media post] vs. SMI post vs. brand post), and the dependent variable was purchase intentions (willing/inclined/probability of purchasing; $\alpha=0.95$).

Participants were first introduced to a fictional electronics brand, Kanna, that supposedly manufactured various electronic products, including televisions, cameras, and headphones. High (low) BA was manipulated by asking participants to imagine that they had purchased many (occasionally purchased) products from Kanna, that they did (did not) feel that Kanna was a part of them, and that they did (did not) have a strong personal attachment to Kanna. A pretest confirmed the effectiveness of this manipulation (MDA: Appendix S1).

Next, participants either proceeded directly to the dependent measures (control) or were asked to evaluate a social media post about Kanna. Participants in the brand (vs. SMI) condition were shown an Instagram post by the official Kanna account (vs. the SMI account—“lifewithsam” was a paid partnership with Kanna). The picture and text were consistent across both posts, but the SMI post included a disclaimer that the post was part of a “paid partnership with Kanna” and included a few additional hashtags at the end of the text (#sponsored; #ad, #blogger; and #lifestyleblog). After viewing the post, participants reported their purchase intentions and the same social media usage, demographics, and attention check measure as in Study 1.

Results

Nineteen participants failed the attention check or were outliers based on the time taken to complete the study ($M=159.81$ s, $SD=106.13$; $\text{Drops}_{\text{Check}}=5$, $\text{Drops}_{\text{Time}}=14$) and were dropped from the analysis, leaving a final sample of 388. An analysis across experimental conditions revealed no significant difference in the dropout rate across conditions ($p=0.29$).

Purchase intentions

An ANOVA with BA (high vs. low) and post source (control vs. brand post vs. SMI post) as the independent variables and purchase intentions as the dependent variable revealed main effects of both BA ($F(1, 382)=104.57, p=0.000$) such that those with high BA ($M_{\text{highBA}}=5.49, SD=1.32$) indicated they were more likely to purchase Kanna headphones than those with a low BA ($M_{\text{lowBA}}=4.14, SD=1.29$) and post source ($F(2, 382)=4.86, p=0.008$), such that those who viewed the SMI post ($M=4.51, SD=1.52$) were less likely to purchase Kanna headphones than those who viewed either the brand post ($M=5.02, SD=1.32$) or no post ($M=4.95, SD=1.53$). Importantly, we also found a significant interaction between brand attachment and post source ($F(2, 382)=3.60, p=0.028, R^2=0.24$). Replicating our previous results within the high BA conditions, purchase intentions were significantly lower for the SMI versus brand post conditions ($M_{\text{SMI}}=5.0, SD=1.65$ vs. $M_{\text{brand}}=5.61, SD=0.99$; ($F(1, 382)=7.31, p=0.007$)). Furthermore, purchase intentions were also significantly lower in the SMI post versus control condition ($M_{\text{SMI}}=5.0, SD=1.65$ vs. $M_{\text{control}}=5.87, SD=1.14$; ($F(1, 382)=14.16, p=0.0002$)), but not between the brand post and control conditions ($F(1, 382)=1.40, p=0.24$). No differences in purchase intentions based on post source were observed for those with low BA ($M_{\text{SMI}}=4.07, SD=1.24, M_{\text{brand}}=4.30, SD=1.32, M_{\text{control}}=4.08, SD=1.33$, all p 's > 0.30).

Discussion

The results of this study replicate our previous findings within a different product category using a fictitious brand and document the negative impact of SMI posts relative to both a brand post and a control condition. Specifically, this study provides evidence that SMI posts can decrease purchase intentions for consumers who have a high BA with the brand. Thus, there were no differences in purchase intentions between the brand and control (no post) conditions, but both conditions elicited significantly higher intentions than the SMI condition among participants with a high BA.

In our next study, we replicate and extend our findings by having respondents view a post from an SMI whom they either already followed or were interested in following to further generalize our findings since, in real life, consumers select the SMIs they follow. Additionally, we explore the mediating effects of perceptions of a norm violation and negative affect (e.g., envy and resentment). That is, in partnering with an SMI, the brand will be perceived to be offering unfair, preferential treatment to the SMI, constituting a contractual norm violation, and thereby leading to increased negative affect and less favorable responses among high BA consumers.

STUDY 3: MEDIATING ROLE OF NORM VIOLATIONS AND AFFECTIVE REACTIONS USING REAL SMIS

Design and procedure

This study was conducted with 443 participants using Cloud Research ($M_{\text{age}}=38.2$ years, 58.6% male). Dove was the target brand, the independent variables were BA ($r=0.91$) and post source (brand vs. SMI), while the dependent variables were purchase intentions ($\alpha=0.95$) and perceived norm violations (three-item scale, e.g., "The Instagram post made me feel that Dove violated the principles of our relationship"; $\alpha=0.98$). Additionally, we included a measure of negative affect ($\alpha=0.95$) to assess the emotional responses to the use of SMIs and to test whether their use leads to greater feelings of negative emotions such as envy, jealousy, and resentment.

At the beginning of the study, participants were informed that they would be evaluating a social media post about Dove and were then provided with some general information about the brand. After reading this information, participants completed the BA scale and were shown an Instagram post promoting a new product—Dove exfoliating body scrub, supposedly from either the brand or an SMI with whom they were told Dove had a partnership. In order to allow for the self-selection of SMIs, we provided respondents with a list of nine SMIs, selected for being notable SMIs in the space of beauty care products (MDA: Appendix S1), and asked them to click on the Instagram profile of one of these nine SMIs who they currently followed or were interested in following. Subsequently, respondents in the SMI condition saw a post from their chosen SMI about the Dove body scrub. Like in our earlier studies, the picture and text featured in the posts remained consistent across conditions, but the SMI posts included a disclaimer that the post was part of a "paid partnership with Dove." In order to reduce the salience of our manipulation, we did not use any specific hashtags to cue the sponsored nature of the post. After viewing the post, participants reported their purchase intentions, perceptions of a norm violation, and negative affect, and completed measures of their social media usage, demographics, and the attention check.

Results

Thirty-two participants were dropped based on the attention check and/or response time (more than 2 SDs from the mean time taken, $M=275.08$ s, $SD=278.34$; Drops_{Check}=15, Drops_{Time}=16, Drops_{both}=1), leaving a final sample of 411, with no significant difference in the dropout rate across conditions ($p=0.59$).

Purchase intentions

A regression analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 1; Hayes, 2013) with post source as the independent variable, BA as the moderator, and purchase intentions as the dependent variable revealed a simple effect of BA ($\beta=0.69$; $SE=0.05$; $t(407)=13.58$; $p<0.001$), such that participants with a higher BA reported greater purchase intentions, and, more importantly, a significant BA \times Post source interaction ($\beta=-0.16$; $SE=0.08$; $t(407)=-2.05$; $p=0.04$, $R^2=0.39$). A spotlight analysis (± 1 SD from the mean, $M_{BA}=3.12$, $SD=1.74$) revealed that participants with a high BA were significantly less likely to purchase the Dove body scrub after seeing the post made by the SMI ($M_{SMI}=4.98$) as opposed to the brand ($M_{brand}=5.51$; $\beta=-0.52$; $SE=0.19$; $t(407)=-2.72$; $p=0.007$). No differences in purchase intentions based on the source of the post were observed for participants with a low BA ($M_{SMI}=3.15$; $M_{brand}=3.12$; $\beta=0.03$; $SE=0.19$; $t(407)=0.19$; $p=0.85$). Additionally, a floodlight analysis revealed that the effect of post source was significant for participants who scored higher than 3.25 on the BA scale (57.42% of participants; $B_{JN}=-0.26$; $SE=0.13$, $p=0.05$).

Norm violations

A regression analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 1; Hayes, 2013) with post source as the independent variable, BA as the moderator, and norm violation perceptions as the dependent variable revealed a simple effect of BA ($\beta=0.38$; $SE=0.04$; $t(407)=7.83$; $p<0.001$), such that participants with a higher BA reported greater perceptions of a norm violation, a simple effect of post source ($\beta=-0.60$; $SE=0.26$; $t(407)=-2.24$; $p<0.025$), such that norm violation perceptions were perceived to be higher in the SMI post condition as compared to the brand post condition, and, importantly, a significant BA \times Post source interaction ($\beta=0.24$; $SE=0.07$; $t(407)=3.23$; $p<0.001$, $R^2=0.30$). A spotlight analysis revealed that participants with a high BA reported significantly greater norm violation perceptions after seeing the post made by the SMI ($M_{SMI}=3.03$) as opposed to the brand ($M_{brand}=2.45$; $\beta=-0.59$; $SE=0.19$; $t(407)=3.15$; $p=0.002$). No such significant differences based on post source were observed for participants with a low BA ($M_{SMI}=0.84$; $M_{brand}=1.11$; $\beta=-0.26$; $SE=0.18$; $t(407)=-1.44$; $p=0.14$). Additionally, a floodlight analysis revealed that the effect of post source was significant for participants who scored higher than 3.54 on the BA scale (37.46% of participants; $B_{JN}=0.26$; $SE=0.13$, $p=0.05$).

Negative affect

A similar regression analysis (Model 1; Hayes, 2013) with negative affect as the dependent variable revealed

a significant main effect of BA ($\beta=0.257$; $SE=0.04$; $t(407)=6.80$; $p<0.001$) such that negative affect increased with BA, and importantly, a significant BA \times Post source interaction ($\beta=0.176$, $SE=0.06$; $t(407)=3.01$; $p=0.002$). A spotlight analysis (± 1 SD from the mean) revealed that participants with high BA experienced significantly more negative affect after seeing a post made by an SMI ($M_{SMI}=2.50$) as opposed to a post made by the brand ($M_{brand}=1.95$; $\beta=0.552$; $SE=0.14$; $t(407)=3.83$; $p<0.001$). No differences in negative affect based on the source of the post were observed for participants with low BA ($M_{SMI}=0.99$; $M_{brand}=1.05$; $\beta=-0.06$; $SE=0.14$; $t(407)=-0.444$; $p=0.65$). Additionally, a floodlight analysis indicated that the effect of post source was significant for participants who scored higher than 2.86 on the BA scale ($B_{JN}=0.199$; $SE=0.101$, $p=0.05$).

Mediation

In order to assess whether the interactive effects of the post source and BA on purchase intentions are being driven by perceptions of a norm violation, we conducted a mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 7) with post source as the predictor variable, BA as the moderator, purchase intentions as the dependent variable, and norm violation perceptions as the mediator. A bootstrap analysis with 5000 resamples showed support for mediation (index of moderated mediation=0.0778, 95% CI [0.0175, 0.1382]) and was significant for those with a high ($\beta=0.19$, $SE=0.08$, 95% CI=0.0126, 0.3652), and low BA ($\beta=-0.08$, $SE=0.04$, 95% CI=-0.1601, -0.0108), suggesting that while higher norm violation perceptions were reported at high levels of BA, lower norm violation perceptions were reported at low levels of BA. The significant effect for the low BA respondents was intriguing, but not predicted by us. Overall, however, these findings enhance our confidence in the underlying role played by perceptions of a norm violation in lowering purchase likelihood among high BA respondents.

We also conducted a second mediation analysis with the same predictor variables but with negative affect as the dependent variable and perceptions of a norm violation as the mediator. A bootstrap analysis with 5000 resamples showed support for mediation (Index of moderated mediation=0.1468 $SE=0.0561$, 95% CI [0.0336, 0.2574]) and was significant for those with a high ($\beta=0.35$, $SE=0.16$, 95% CI=0.0370, 0.6660) and low BA ($\beta=-0.16$, $SE=0.07$, 95% CI=-0.3111, -0.0143), suggesting that perceptions of a norm violation underlie higher (lower) negative affect at high (low) levels of BA.

Norms violation and negative affect were significantly correlated in our study ($r=0.801$, $p<0.001$). Since our hypothesis focused on the role of norm violations as the underlying reason for the negative effects on purchase likelihood, we considered negative affect as an outcome of norm violations, not as a competing

explanation for the negative effects on purchase likelihood. In support of this, a parallel mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 7, with Post-Source as the IV, norm violation perceptions and negative affect as mediators, BA as the moderator, and purchase likelihood as the DV, revealed a significant moderated mediation effect of only norm violations (Index = 0.0556, 95% CI [0.0058, 0.1167]), but not negative affect (Index = 0.0268, 95% CI [-0.0088, 0.1801]). Serial mediation analyses with norm violations and negative affect (in any order) as mediators also revealed no significant moderated mediation effects.

Thus, in line with our hypothesis, it appears that the negative effects of influencer marketing on high BA consumers are due to their heightened perceptions of norm violations and not due to their greater perceptions of negative affect.

Discussion

These results support our contention that using SMIs can enhance perceptions of norm violations, foster negative emotions such as envy and resentment among high BA consumers, and dampen purchase likelihood. The use of real SMIs that respondents followed or were interested in following enhances confidence in our results and the applicability of our findings.

Given that our predicted effects presume that consumers engage in social comparison with SMIs in order for perceptions of norm violations to be triggered, an important pre-condition is that consumers engage in social comparison with SMIs. In a study reported in the MDA: Appendix S1 (MDA Study 2), we measured an individual's propensity to engage in social comparisons as a moderator to our effects. Our prediction was that high BA consumers with a higher tendency to engage in social comparisons (TSC) would be more affected by influencer marketing as compared to consumers with a lower tendency to engage in social comparisons. In line with these predictions, we found that among high TSC consumers, perceptions of influencer campaigns are more negative among high BA consumers, likely because they are engaging in greater social comparison with the SMI. On the other hand, when the tendency to engage in social comparison is low, less social comparison occurs, making it less likely that norm violations will be perceived, leading to an attenuation of the negative effects on consumer evaluations. These findings further support the role of norm violation perceptions in impacting consumer responses to influencer marketing.

Studies 1–3 document that the use of SMIs can have negative effects among high BA consumers, including lowered purchase intentions and willingness to pay. Having established these negative consequences of influencer marketing, we now turn to examining moderators (salience of SMI sponsorship and attachment to the

SMI) to our effects, which provide additional support for our theorized process.

We begin by considering whether non-sponsored SMI posts (i.e., posts by an SMI about a brand that are not paid for in any way by the brand) lead to the same decrease in purchase intentions as sponsored posts do. If, as we argue, purchase intentions decrease because of a perceived violation by the brand for treating the SMI more favorably rather than simply because the SMI endorsing a brand is perceived negatively, we should only replicate the effects from our prior studies when an SMI post is explicitly sponsored by a brand, but not when the SMI makes a non-sponsored post about a brand. Furthermore, since it is the sponsorship of the SMI that is perceived as conferring preferential and unfair treatment when the brand does not sponsor the SMI, there ought to be no reason to perceive a norm violation, thereby attenuating any negative effects among high BA consumers.

We also measure the perceived credibility of the post to rule out differences in credibility as a reason for our effects (i.e., the possibility that posts by a sponsored SMI are perceived as less credible than posts by the brand), especially among high BA consumers.

STUDY 4: SPONSORED VERSUS NON-SPONSORED SMIS

Design and procedure

This study was conducted with a sample of 388 Cloud Research participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.14$ years; 47.9% male). The independent variables were BA ($r = 0.934$) and the post source (brand vs. sponsored SMI vs. non-sponsored SMI), the main dependent variable was purchase intentions ($\alpha = 0.95$), and the focal brand was Starbucks.

Similar to prior studies, respondents were provided with some general information about the brand, after which they completed the BA scale, viewed the Instagram post, and then reported their purchase intentions. The Instagram post was supposedly made on either Starbucks's Instagram account, on the Instagram account of an SMI that Starbucks had a partnership with, that is, it was clearly stated that the post was sponsored by Starbucks, or on the Instagram account of an SMI, with the post explicitly stating that it was not sponsored by Starbucks and that the SMI was posting because he/she truly loved the product. After completing the purchase intention measure, participants rated how credible and honest ($r = 0.85$) they found the post, followed by the demographic and attention check measures.

Results

Fourteen participants were dropped for failing the attention check or based on their completion time ($M = 188.9$ s,

SD=234.19; Drops_{Check}=5, Drops_{Time}=9), leaving a final sample of 374, with no significant difference in the drop-out rate across conditions ($p=0.78$).

Purchase intentions

We conducted a regression analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 1, Hayes, 2013) with BA (continuous) and post source (multi-categorical) as the independent variables and purchase intentions as the dependent variable. The analysis thus included a dummy variable for the sponsored SMI condition, a dummy variable for the non-sponsored SMI condition, the interaction between BA and the sponsored SMI dummy, and the interaction between BA and the non-sponsored SMI dummy. Thus, all conditions are retained in this analysis; the brand post condition is the baseline condition, and the first contrast compares the brand post to the sponsored SMI condition, while the second contrast compared the brand post to the non-sponsored SMI condition.

The analysis revealed a simple effect of BA ($\beta=0.816$; SE=0.058; $t(368)=13.978$; $p=0.000$), a significant interaction between BA and the dummy variable for the sponsored SMI post ($\beta=-0.155$; SE=0.078, $t(368)=-1.974$; $p=0.049$), and a marginally significant interaction between BA and the dummy variable for the non-sponsored SMI post ($\beta=-0.134$; SE=0.078; $t(368)=-1.706$; $p=0.089$).

We conducted a spotlight analysis (± 1 SD from the mean BA, $M=3.23$, SD=1.86) to examine these results further (Figure 2). When comparing the brand post and sponsored SMI post conditions, respondents with a low BA reported no significant differences in purchase intentions after viewing the sponsored SMI post ($M_{\text{sponsored}}=2.94$) as opposed to the brand post ($M_{\text{brand}}=2.89$; $\beta=0.049$; SE=0.204; $t(368)=0.240$; $p=0.81$). However, respondents with a high BA reported lower purchase intentions after seeing the sponsored SMI post ($M_{\text{sponsored}}=5.40$) as compared to the brand post ($M_{\text{brand}}=5.93$; $\beta=-0.528$; SE=0.205; $t(368)=-2.574$; $p=0.010$). A floodlight analysis revealed that the effect of post source was significant for participants who scored

higher than 3.41 on the BA scale (42.34% of participants; $B_{\text{JN}}=-0.267$; SE=0.136; $p=0.05$).

An additional spotlight analysis to examine the marginally significant interaction between BA and the dummy variable for the non-sponsored SMI post did not find significant differences in purchase intentions for low or high BA participants. Thus, when comparing the brand post and non-sponsored SMI post conditions, respondents with a low BA reported no significant differences in purchase intentions after viewing the non-sponsored SMI post ($M_{\text{non-sponsored}}=3.16$) as opposed to the brand post ($M_{\text{brand}}=2.89$; $\beta=0.266$; SE=0.204; $t(368)=1.303$; $p=0.19$). Additionally, respondents with a high BA reported no significant differences in purchase intentions after viewing the non-sponsored SMI post ($M_{\text{non-sponsored}}=5.70$) as opposed to the brand post ($M_{\text{brand}}=5.93$; $\beta=-0.232$; SE=0.205; $t(368)=-1.136$; $p=0.26$).

In order to compare the two SMI conditions, we ran a separate regression analysis with the sponsored SMI condition as the baseline and dummy variables for the brand and non-sponsored SMI conditions. This analysis showed that there was no significant interaction between BA and the dummy variable for the non-sponsored SMI post ($\beta=0.021$; SE=0.074, $t(368)=0.285$; $p=0.78$). The pattern of results showed higher purchase intentions in the non-sponsored post condition, as compared to the sponsored post condition, among both low BA ($M_{\text{sponsored}}=2.94$, $M_{\text{non-sponsored}}=3.16$, $p=0.27$) and high BA respondents ($M_{\text{sponsored}}=5.40$, $M_{\text{non-sponsored}}=5.70$, $p=0.13$), although neither of these differences was significant.

Thus, the results of this study show that, in line with our hypothesizing, non-sponsored SMI posts do help to attenuate the negative effects of SMI posts among high BA consumers, as purchase intentions among high BA participants were significantly higher in the brand post condition as opposed to the sponsored SMI post, but there was no difference between the brand and non-sponsored post conditions. Interestingly, the difference between the non-sponsored and sponsored SMI post conditions was directional, but not significant, among high BA respondents. It is possible that high BA consumers may be protective over their brand relationships, therefore SMI posts of any kind may elicit some degree of negative reaction, but the authentic brand support reflected in a non-sponsored SMI post may attenuate this negative response. This possibility, however, is purely speculative, and more research is needed to understand the differences in perceptions between sponsored and non-sponsored posts among high BA consumers.

Credibility

A regression analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 1, Hayes, 2013) with BA (continuous) and post source

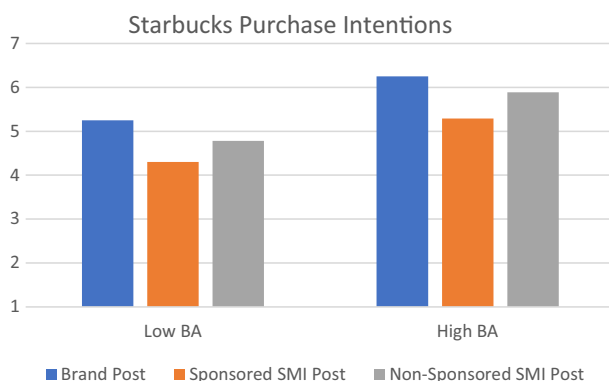


FIGURE 2 Study 4 results.

(multi-categorical) as the independent variables and post credibility as the dependent variable showed no significant interaction when comparing the brand to the sponsored or non-sponsored SMI post ($\beta = -0.003$, $SE = 0.089$, $t(368) = -0.034$, $p = 0.973$; $\beta = 0.029$, $SE = 0.089$, $t(368) = 0.326$, $p = 0.74$; respectively). Thus, it is unlikely that differences in perceptions of credibility are driving our effects.

Discussion

In this study, we find that seeing a sponsored SMI post, as opposed to a brand post, can negatively impact consumers' purchase intentions among those with a high BA. However, purchase intentions do not decrease when the SMI post is not sponsored by the brand. Thus, it is not that consumers with a high BA do not like seeing SMIs post about their brand or that the SMI post may lead more consumers to purchase the brand, but it is when the brand is perceived as violating the norms of their relationship with the consumer, by sponsoring the post in some way, that purchase intentions decrease. We also find that differences in the perceived credibility of the post cannot explain our effects.

While our findings across studies support our claim that the use of SMIs can have negative effects on high BA consumers, we do not measure or assess consumers' perceptions of attachment to the SMIs. That is, it is possible that when consumers who are highly attached to a brand are also highly attached to an SMI that the brand partners with, the negative effects that we find may be attenuated. Therefore, our next study examines the moderating role of attachment toward the SMI (SMI-A). Additionally, to further enhance the realism of our stimuli, we had respondents list SMIs whom they followed and used these SMIs as our influencers. Thus, each respondent viewed an influencer post ostensibly from an SMI that they followed.

STUDY 5: HIGH ATTACHMENT TOWARD SMIS CAN ATTENUATE NEGATIVE CONSUMER RESPONSES

Design and procedure

A total of 590 Cloud Research workers participated in this study ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.4$ years, 45.5% male). Target was the focal brand; the independent variables were BA ($r = 0.91$), SMI_A ($r = 0.80$) and post source (brand vs. SMI), with purchase intentions as the dependent variable ($\alpha = 0.96$).

At the beginning of the study, participants were asked to list the names of two SMIs they followed on Instagram and then asked to report their attachment toward one of these two SMIs (randomly selected) using the same

two-item scale used to measure BA in previous studies. They were then informed that they would be evaluating a social media post about Target and provided some general information about the brand, after which they reported their brand attachment. Participants then viewed the same Instagram post as used in Study 1, promoting a new product—Denim, supposedly from either the brand or the SMI that they had reported their attachment toward and with whom they were told Target had a partnership. The picture and text featured in the posts were consistent across conditions, and we did not use any specific hashtags to cue the sponsored nature of the post. Instead, we informed respondents that the post was a sponsored social media post by the SMI before they viewed the post. Next, participants reported their purchase intentions and completed measures of their social media usage, demographics, and attention check.

Results

Thirty-eight participants were dropped based on the attention check and/or response time (more than 2 SDs from the mean time taken, $M = 316.93$ s, $SD = 303.96$; Drops_{Check} = 19, Drops_{Time} = 18, Drops_{both} = 1), leaving a final sample of 552, with no significant difference in the dropout rate across conditions ($p = 0.32$).

Purchase intentions

A regression analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 3; Hayes, 2013), with post source as the independent variable, BA and SMI-A as the moderators, and purchase intentions as the dependent variable, revealed a simple effect of BA ($\beta = 0.91$; $SE = 0.26$; $t(544) = 3.38$; $p < 0.001$), a significant BA \times Post source interaction ($\beta = -0.37$; $SE = 0.16$; $t(544) = -2.22$; $p = 0.026$), and importantly, a significant BA \times Post source \times SMI-A interaction ($\beta = 0.08$; $SE = 0.036$; $t(544) = 2.18$; $p = 0.029$; $R^2 = 0.41$ —Figure 3).

In line with our expectations, when SMI-A was low (-1 SD from the mean of 3.94, $SD = 1.64$), the interaction between BA and post-source was marginally significant ($\beta = -0.18$, $F(1, 544) = 3.67$, $p = 0.055$), while, when SMI-A was high ($+1$ SD from the mean), the BA \times Post source interaction was not significant ($\beta = 0.07$, $F(1, 544) < 1$, $p = 0.40$). Specifically, a spotlight analysis (± 1 SD from the mean BA, $M_{\text{BA}} = 3.80$, $SD = 1.82$) revealed that when BA was high and SMI-A was low, we replicated our previous findings such that participants were less likely to purchase the Target Denim after seeing the post made by the SMI ($M_{\text{SMI}} = 4.84$) as opposed to the brand ($M_{\text{brand}} = 5.62$; $\beta = -0.78$; $SE = 0.32$; $t(544) = -2.40$, $p = 0.016$). However, when SMI-A was also high, there was no significant difference in purchase intentions between the SMI ($M = 5.72$) and brand ($M = 5.71$) conditions ($\beta = 0.003$; $SE = 0.18$; $t(544) < 1$). Thus, higher levels of

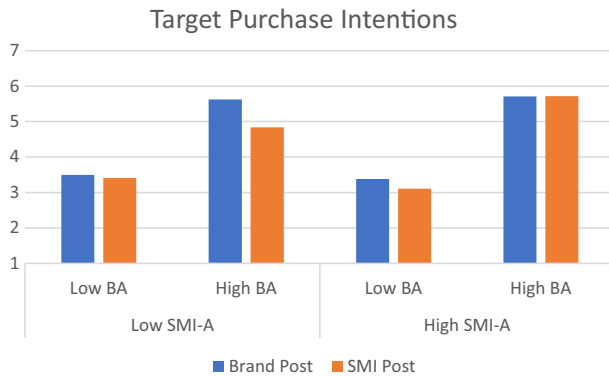


FIGURE 3 Study 5 results.

attachment toward the SMI seem to attenuate the negative effect found in our previous studies.

Similar comparisons at low levels of BA revealed no significant effects (p 's > 0.31). These results suggest that attachment with the SMI may help shield the brand from the negative effects of using SMIs among high BA consumers, rendering the selection of the SMI to be critically important.

Additionally, a floodlight analysis revealed that the interactive effect of post source and BA was significant for participants who scored lower than 2.14 on the SMI-A Scale (21.55% of participants; $B_{JN} = -0.20$; $SE = 0.10$, $p = 0.05$).

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the relationship between consumers and SMIs can impact consumers' responses to brand SMI campaigns. Specifically, when consumers hold high levels of attachment toward both the brand and the SMI, there seem to be no negative effects of using the SMI. However, when attachment toward the brand is high but SMI is low, there is a risk that using the SMI can lead to negative consumer responses.

These findings establish another boundary condition for our findings, that is, attachment toward the SMI, and reinforce the importance of brands selecting a suitable SMI to increase the success of influencer marketing campaigns. While attachment toward the SMI seems to alleviate the potentially negative effects of influencer marketing campaigns among consumers with high BA, it is also important that brands consider other aspects of the SMI, such as fit with the brand and product, since such factors can have a significant effect on consumers' receptivity to influencer campaigns.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The surge in digital and social media has altered how marketers and consumers communicate, connect, and engage with each other, leading to significant shifts in

consumer–brand relationships. These changes have led to the rise of consumer-provided input into marketing strategies (e.g., crowdsourcing and crowd content), as well as an increase in the use of new sources (e.g., SMIs) and communication channels used by marketers (e.g., location-based mobile). The pace of these changes has led to uncertainty about whether and how the use of such non-traditional communications may impact consumer responses. Our research focuses on these issues and examines the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns on consumers' intentions and willingness to pay. In contrast to common marketing practice and intuition, we find that the use of SMIs may backfire among consumers who feel highly attached to the brand (Studies 1–5) because the use of SMIs leads these consumers to perceive a norm violation (Study 3), leading to lowered purchase intentions (Studies 2–5) and willingness to pay for the brand (Study 1). We find these effects across different product categories (retailers, technology, coffee, body care, and jeans), using real and prominent brands (Target, Dove, Starbucks, and Levi's), as well as real (Studies 3 and 5) and fictitious (1, 2, and 4) SMIs.

Our findings contribute to the literature on social media marketing and word-of-mouth influences by showcasing a counterintuitive interaction between the use of SMIs and consumer brand attachment. Thus, while marketers have increasingly noted limitations to the use of famous celebrities (e.g., lack of credibility and cost), leading to a switch toward the use of “regular” consumers in promotional campaigns, we suggest that there could be significant limitations to the use of such SMIs in social media marketing. Our findings thus add an important and previously unconsidered moderator to the literature on consumer influence—brand attachment. While prior research has considered the moderating role of source (Berger & Iyengar, 2013) and consumer characteristics (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009) on the effectiveness of opinion leaders and social influences, the effect of brand attachment has not yet been examined.

Our findings also add to the research on influencer marketing (Breves et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2019), which has focused on examining the outcomes (e.g., awareness vs. trial) that are most impacted by SMIs, characteristics of SMIs that increase their effectiveness (e.g., number of followers—De Veirman et al., 2017; credibility—Schouten et al., 2020), as well as how the fit between a brand and SMI (Breves et al., 2019) and fit between SMIs and consumers (Todri et al., 2021) impacts campaign effectiveness. We add to this stream of research by considering the moderating role of brand attachment on the effectiveness of influencer campaigns using purchase intentions and willingness to pay as our outcome variables. We also introduce a new mediator to the influencer literature in the form of norm violations. Prior research has considered variables such as trust, liking, and credibility as explanations for the

effects of influencers on consumers, and we add norm violations to this list.

Our research contributes to the literature on consumer–brand relationships by identifying a potential “dark” side to high BA—lowered responsiveness to influencer marketing campaigns. While prior research has largely found positive payoffs to strengthening brand relationships with consumers (Ahluwalia et al., 2000), some work has revealed potential downsides to enhanced brand attachments including more pronounced negative responses to contractual breaches (Montgomery et al., 2018), brand transgressions (Grégoire et al., 2009; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008), and low-fit brand extensions (Fedorikhin et al., 2008). Our research adds to this literature by uncovering influencer marketing as another context within which stronger brand attachments could potentially hold negative consequences for brands.

Finally, we add to the literature on psychological contracts in marketing by identifying another outcome—consumer responses to influencer marketing. Prior work has documented the effects of psychological contracts on consumer attitudes (Montgomery et al., 2018), reuse intentions (Malhotra et al., 2017), perceptions of service agents (Wang et al., 2018), and satisfaction and trust (Guo et al., 2017); we add purchase intentions and WTP to this list.

Our work holds important implications for marketing practitioners by showcasing some potential downsides to the popular use of SMIs in marketing. While influencer marketing has become popular and is expected to continue growing, not all such campaigns have been successful (Sid, 2022), and there are signs that consumers may sometimes be less receptive to influencer campaigns (Lo, 2022) or even avoid influencers (Pradhan et al., 2023), underscoring the importance of focusing on identifying variables that impact when and how these campaigns may be effective. When outcomes of the effectiveness of such campaigns are considered in the aggregate (e.g., brand awareness, intentions, and engagement), without consideration of specific consumer segments, it is possible that the overall outcomes are positive, thereby propelling additional investments into such activities. We hope our findings encourage a more nuanced evaluation of how these campaigns may work among different consumers.

One intriguing implication of our findings is that new brands and brands that aim to use influencer marketing to generate brand awareness or new product awareness may elicit more positive responses since such new brands and products are likely to have a relatively smaller segment of high BA consumers. For example, Kettle + Fire, a company that sells high-quality bone broth, launched in 2014 and utilized influencer marketing due to marketing budget constraints. Their initial influencer campaigns resulted in \$4 in earned revenue for every \$1 spent (Trend, 2022). The brand has since seen great success, and as of 2021, Kettle + Fire is one of the fastest-growing

broth brands. Additionally, a recent survey (PR Newswire, 2022) found that 32% of Gen Z consumers discover new brands through social media influencers, so using social media influencers certainly presents an opportunity for new-to-market brands. Thus, influencer marketing may be very beneficial for new brands or brands looking to reach new consumers who are likely low in brand attachment.

It is also predicted that marketers will move toward long-term relationships with SMIs, allowing brands to offer more enduring and consistent messages, compared to short, one-time messages that many SMIs offer. Such long-term relationships may have the advantage of attenuating perceptions of norm violations among high BA consumers since the SMI's relationship with the brand is likely to be viewed as a close, long-term relationship which may lead to enhanced perceptions of deservingness and reduced perceptions of preferential treatment.

Some limitations of our work need to be acknowledged. Given that our research examined the impact of influencer marketing campaigns on responses among consumers with high BA, implying an established brand relationship, our dependent measures are limited to purchase intentions and WTP intentions, yet many influencer campaigns target brand awareness. While intentions and WTP are downstream from awareness, and hence, more conservative variables to examine, future research on additional outcome variables will be useful. Our choice of intentions and WTP may also explain why we did not find positive effects of using SMIs among low BA respondents. Given the low levels of BA, perhaps considering outcomes such as brand awareness and engagement would be more appropriate and likely to reveal significant effects among these respondents. On a related note, we do not focus on the effect of influencer marketing on high BA consumers' subsequent brand relationships. It is possible that the use of SMIs dilutes the consumer's perceptions of brand attachment, which can have longer-term effects than our measures of purchase intentions and WTP. Thus, the effects of BA on consumer perceptions of influencer marketing may be more significant and longer term than we document.

Another limitation of our work is that while we do find evidence for the mediating role of norm violations, this evidence is limited to one study. While we do not find a mediating role for other variables such as negative affect, additional research is required to better understand the role of norm violations among high BA consumers within the context of influencer marketing.

Interestingly, in some of our studies, high BA consumers still reported higher intentions after viewing the SMI posts than low BA consumers, suggesting that the positive advantages of BA may not be completely erased for brands. However, in our studies, participants were only exposed to one SMI post. It is possible that seeing multiple posts could further decrease intentions among high BA consumers. Furthermore, a consideration of

the mean BA across our studies reveals that the high BA scores were around the midpoint of the scale (~4), suggesting that our findings are based on relative differences in BA rather than absolute high versus low levels of BA.

Finally, we also note that our findings are limited to SMIs who are not celebrities and that celebrity SMIs may not have the same negative effects among high BA consumers since they may be viewed as deserving of sponsorship by the brand.

Future research

Our findings provide ample opportunities for future research. While we find that perceptions of norm violations drive the negative responses of high BA consumers, future research could explore the degree to which different consumers respond to influencer campaigns as norm violations. Recent applications of the tightness–looseness framework have been used to understand the extent to which consumers adhere to social norms and respond to norm violations (Li et al., 2017), with brands noted as a particular area of interest (Torelli & Rodas, 2017). Specifically, consumers with tight orientations reflect greater adherence to norms and display a lower tolerance for norm violations, while those with loose orientations reflect a weaker adherence to norms and a greater tolerance for norm violations (Li et al., 2017). Future research might investigate how consumers' tight–loose orientations guide perceptions of norm violations and moderate the effect of influencer campaigns on consumer responses.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine how brand factors, such as perceived warmth/competence, may impact consumer responses to the use of influencers. Research has shown that perceptions of warmth and competence are important to consumers when evaluating a firm (Aaker et al., 2010), with warm firms perceived as being higher on traits such as sincerity and competent firms perceived as being higher in traits such as competitiveness (Aaker, 1997). Therefore, consumers may perceive their relationship with a warm (competent) firm as being more similar to a friendship (business relationship), rendering it interesting to examine if the detrimental effect of influencer campaigns is attenuated for competent brands.

We suggest that the effects of BA on consumer responses to influencer marketing may be more complex, nuanced, and longer term than purchase intentions or WTP and may extend to impacting consumers' perceived BA itself, along with their perceptions of the SMI. Longitudinal studies that examine the effect of influencer marketing over time would be able to identify such effects. Finally, while we focus on SMIs, it is possible that other sources, such as ordinary consumers who offer paid testimonials, may also elicit perceptions of

norm violations to high BA consumers, suggesting that our findings may apply to any sponsored/paid source of brand promotion using similar sources, which would be interesting to explore.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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