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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# How social media influencer collaborations are perceived by consumers

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## Abstract

Within the social media community, influencers engage in a variety of collaborative practices such as tagging, reposting content from, or forming partnerships with other influencers and brands. While such collaborative efforts are a known practice, less is understood about how influencer collaborations affect consumers' perceptions of the partnering influencers, specifically when a status differential exists within the collaboration. We suggest that such collaborative practices, specifically those where the focal influencer has a higher status than the collaborating partner, may help to weaken consumers' perceptions that the influencer's actions are purely self-focused. A pilot study, analyzing both influencer–influencer collaborations and influencer–brand collaborations, provides evidence that influencers engage in collaborations with other influencers and brands of different status levels. Two studies then support our theorizing that influencers who collaborate with lower-status influencers are perceived as less self-serving and more altruistic, while influencers who collaborate with lower-status brands are only perceived as less self-serving. This suggests that, for influencers who desire to enhance how consumers perceive them, an effective strategy is to engage in collaborations with either a lower-status influencer or brand.

**KEYWORDS**

altruistic, attribution theory, collaborations, influencer, partnerships, self-serving, signaling theory

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers are individuals who use social media to foster online connections to gain social capital, often with the intent to parlay that capital into compensation from others who desire to gain an advantage from the influencer's ability to persuade their followers (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). A significant amount of literature examines influencers from a brand strategy perspective, exploring how social media influencers can best be utilized to promote a brand's message (for a review see Hudders et al., 2021). However, influencers are also brands (Brooks et al., 2021; Thomson, 2006) and, as such, must engage in strategies to promote their personal brand to gain followers and obtain endorsement deals. Research has recently started to focus on the personal branding strategies of social media influencers (e.g., Lo & Peng, 2022), often exploring the more positive perceptions consumers hold about social media influencers (Kim, Duffy, et al., 2021; Kim, Song, et al., 2021; Schouten et al., 2020). However, there is evidence that influencers may not always be perceived positively (Abidin, 2016; Erz et al., 2018; Valsesia & Diehl, 2022), resulting in the need for influencers to engage in strategies to attenuate negative perceptions.

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We focus on exploring strategies that influencers can employ to mitigate negative perceptions, specifically examining how an influencer's collaboration with other influencers *or* brands affects consumers' perceptions of the influencer. Collaborations are common and influencers often engage in these partnerships with both other influencer and brand collaborators of different statuses. For example, the #ShareTheMicNow campaign is an example of an influencer–influencer collaboration where influencers with millions of followers collaborated with influencers with far few followers to expand the reach of Black women's voices. Similarly, influencer–brand collaborations exist with varying status differentials such as influencer Ella Mills (Deliciously Ella, 2.1 M Instagram followers) who has collaborated with well-established, larger revenue brands like Neal's Yard Remedies (established in 1981; 137 K Instagram followers) and newer, smaller revenue brands like Self Care Co. (established in 2018; 39.9 K Instagram followers). We specifically explore status differentials in collaborations, proposing that such collaborations (influencer–influencer and influencer–brand) affect consumers' perceptions of the focal influencer, an issue the extant research has yet to examine.

Drawing on the brand alliance literature (Rao et al., 1999) and signaling theory (Spence, 1973), we suggest that when influencers collaborate (with either another influencer or brand) consumers use cues to ascertain the status of each of the collaborators. When status differentials exist in a collaboration, we suggest, in line with attribution theory (Folkes, 1984), that consumers will attempt to determine the influencer's motivations for entering the collaboration. Thus, the collaboration has the potential to influence the extent to which consumers perceive an influencer as self-serving or altruistic, an effect that is dependent upon the status differential of the collaborators.

To support our theorizing, we conducted three studies (a pilot study, Study 1, and Study 2). The pilot study demonstrates the prevalence of both influencer–influencer and influencer–brand collaborations, supporting the relevance and need for this research. Study 1 demonstrates that when an influencer collaborates with *another influencer* who has lower status, the focal influencer is perceived as less self-serving and more altruistic. However, the Study 2 results differ slightly, finding that an influencer collaborating with *a brand* that has lower status will be perceived as less self-serving; however, there is no impact on perceptions of altruism.

Theoretically, our findings contribute to research that explores collaborations that occur between human brands as well as human and traditional brands (Miguel et al., 2022; Schouten et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2019), extending the brand alliance literature into the context of social media influencers and their collaborating partners. Our results also integrate signaling theory and attribution theory to demonstrate that consumers employ status cues when evaluating an influencer's collaboration with either another influencer or a brand. Managerially, our results provide important insights for influencers who wish to engage in collaborations with other influencers or brands as a means to manage their personal brand perceptions. If an influencer wishes to be viewed as less self-serving, they should collaborate with another influencer or brand who has lower status. If an influencer wishes to be perceived as more altruistic, they should collaborate with an influencer who has lower status. Importantly, collaborating with an influencer or brand with equivalent or higher status will not negatively affect the influencer, but will fail to reduce self-serving perceptions and bolster altruistic perceptions.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 | Social media influencers as brands

Extant literature recognizes that people can be brands (Thomson, 2006) and while social media influencers often promote more traditional brands (i.e., influencer marketing), social media influencers are also their own brands (Brooks et al., 2021). The academic literature has started to recognize influencers as human brands and explore how influencer actions affect outcome variables germane to the influencer (e.g., attitudes toward, perceptions of, and engagement with the influencer). Indeed, research examines how influencers can manage consumers' perceptions by engaging with their followers (Lo & Peng, 2022) or participating in prosocial behaviors (Thomas & Fowler, 2023).

Existing literature often highlights the perceived desirability of influencers, especially in comparison to celebrity endorsers (Kim, Song, et al., 2021; Schouten et al., 2020). Research, though, fails to consider that consumers may not always perceive influencers positively. Indeed, influencers, as compared to everyday social media users, are more likely to be narcissistic and have status-seeking tendencies (Erz et al., 2018), and these aspects of influencers are perceived by some consumers as indicators of influencers' vanity (Abidin, 2016). Further, many of the activities in which influencers typically engage (e.g., posting about products) can elicit negative impressions of the poster (Valsesia & Diehl, 2022). Thus, influencers' efforts to gain social capital, influence followers, and earn compensation may elicit negative consumer perceptions. To more concretely support this assertion, we conducted a small study[1] which shows consumers perceive influencers as manipulative, untrustworthy, and narcissistic. Thus, as brands themselves, such negative perceptions should be cause for concern for social media influencers.

### 2.2 | Brand alliances

We propose that, by collaborating with another influencer or a brand, influencers may be able to mitigate negative perceptions and enhance positive perceptions. Such collaborations represent a brand alliance that occurs when "two or more brand names are presented jointly to the consumer" (Rao et al., 1999, p. 259). Just as traditional brands can form alliances with each other, research demonstrates that human brands also form alliances for promotional purposes (Fowler & Thomas, 2019; Kupfer et al., 2018; Nascimento et al., 2020).

[1]Three one-sample *t* tests, conducted using data collected from the Connect CloudResearch platform ($n = 60$; $M_{age} = 44.50$, $SD_{age} = 13.14$, 48% male), demonstrate that consumers' perceptions of influencers as manipulative (Bock & Thomas, 2023; $\alpha = 0.89$; $M = 4.91$, SD = 1.31; $t(59) = 5.36$, $p < 0.001$), untrustworthy (Ohanian, 1990; $\alpha = 0.97$; $M = 4.90$, SD = 1.35; $t(59) = 5.15$, $p < 0.001$), and narcissistic ($M = 5.32$, SD = 1.61; $t(59) = 6.33$, $p < 0.001$) were significantly above the midpoint (4.0) of the scale.

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When social media influencers tag another brand or influencer, repost content from a brand or influencer, or form creative partnerships, these represent a form of brand alliance where "firm (s) coordinate marketing activities to communicate value for two separate brand resources" (Newmeyer et al., 2018, p. 280). Brand alliances can vary in form, with some alliances representing close integrations and others looser associations (Fowler & Thomas, 2019; Newmeyer et al., 2018; Rao & Ruekert, 1994).

For both influencer–influencer and influencer–brand collaborations, some are longer, more formalized partnerships whereas others are more informal such as a casual mention or tag in a social media post. For example, Khaby Lame, a Senegalese-born Italian social media influencer and long-time Hugo Boss brand ambassador, recently announced a capsule collection with the fashion house that features apparel with a logo of Khaby's likeness (Hugo, 2023). This would represent a longer, more formalized collaboration between an influencer and brand. Conversely, the #ShareTheMicNow campaign, an Instagram initiative where Black female influencers "took over" the Instagram account of White female influencers for a single day represents a more abbreviated example of an influencer–influencer collaboration.

While brand alliances can occur between two brands of similar levels of equity, brand alliances often form between two brands with equity differentials. Such partnerships have beneficial effects on the lower-equity brand as perceptions of the lesser-known brand shift to more closely align with those of the well-known brand (Gammoh et al., 2006; Levin & Levin, 2000; Mohan et al., 2018). Rao and Ruekert (1994) warn that such alliances should be entered into thoughtfully, however, as a partnering brand may choose to act opportunistically rather than for the good of the alliance.

### 2.3 | Status signals

In the context of social media influencers, the categorization of a high-equity or low-equity partner is likely determined by perceptions of the influencers' level of influence or status (the common currency of social media influencers) and is conveyed to consumers via various social media metrics such as number of followers or engagement rates (De Veirman et al., 2017). Signaling theory provides a theoretical explanation of how the process works. Originally developed to understand the dynamics between individuals who engage in an exchange with asymmetrical information (Spence, 1973), signaling theory suggests that extrinsic cues can be used to communicate information to reduce perceived uncertainty (Wells et al., 2011). Signals can be sent to convey information that is not readily observable such as the qualities and effectiveness of social media influencers in general (Hugh et al., 2022). Consumers can use the numbers displayed for a specific post (e.g., likes, comments) or in an influencer's bio (e.g., number of followers, number of people the influencer is following, number of posts) to ascertain an influencer's status. Similarly, brands can also signal status via social media cues (Lee, 2021; Li & Shin, 2023) as well as other metrics such as their size or revenues (Shepherd et al., 2015).

### 2.4 | Attribution theory

We suggest that when an influencer engages in a collaboration with another influencer or brand, consumers' perceptions of the focal influencer will vary based on whether the collaborating partner (either another influencer or brand) has higher or lower status. Attribution theory suggests that consumers make inferences about the world around them to explain or make sense of events (Folkes, 1984). Such attributions often take the form of inferences, whereby consumers attempt to determine the motives for another's actions; this, in turn, affects their perceptions of that individual. As influencers are motivated to enhance their sphere of status, we examine how collaborations affect consumers' attributions that the influencer is self-serving and altruistic. Although they are related, these attributions have been shown to operate independently (e.g., Reinhard et al., 2006; Siem & Stürmer, 2019; Wei et al., 2020). Self-serving attributions are perceptions that an individual is motivated by a desire to obtain a reward, while altruistic attributions are perceptions that an individual is motivated by a desire to benefit another (Ellen et al., 2000). The two may occur in tandem, whereby an increase in one suggests a decrease in the other. For example, an action might be perceived to be motivated by a desire to obtain a reward at the expense of another (leading to perceptions that the individual is self-serving and not altruistic), or an action might be perceived to be an act of kindness, motivated solely by a desire to help another at the potential the expense of their own self-interest (leading to perceptions of altruism, but not self-serving). Self-serving and altruistic attributions may also be independent appraisals. For example, an individual might be engaged in an action that could be perceived as self-serving, but not be concerned with the impact on another; or the individual's action might be perceived as a willingness to help another without considering the impact on themselves. In the context of our research, we suggest the two appraisals will work in tandem in influencer–influencer collaborations, and independently in influencer–brand collaborations.

## 3 | HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

### 3.1 | Influencer–influencer collaborations

As supported by attribution theory (Folkes, 1984), when an influencer engages in a collaboration with another influencer, consumers are likely to make inferences about this decision. Specifically, consumers are likely to assess whether the influencer's actions for entering the collaboration are self-serving (i.e., the influencer wants to benefit the self) or altruistic (i.e., the influencer wants to help their collaborator). We suggest that perceptions of the focal influencer as self-serving and altruistic will be dependent upon whether they have higher or lower status than the influencer with whom they are collaborating. If an influencer collaborates with another influencer who has lower status, the focal influencer may be able to reduce self-serving perceptions and enhance altruistic

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perceptions. This theorizing is supported by the brand alliance literature which demonstrates that a lesser-known brand is most likely to reap benefits from a partnership (Gammoh et al., 2006; Levin & Levin, 2000; Mohan et al., 2018). This suggests a higher-status influencer collaborating with a lower-status influencer is unlikely to benefit while the lower-status influencer is likely to benefit. Previous research also demonstrates that entities are less likely to be perceived as self-serving when they engage in actions where they do not stand to greatly benefit (Szykman et al., 2004) as is the case when an influencer partners with a lower-status influencer. Finally, research shows that when one's actions benefit others or require more effort, then they are perceived as more altruistic (Langan & Kumar, 2019; Miotto & Youn, 2020; Rifon et al., 2004). Thus, by collaborating with a lower-status influencer, the focal influencer is less likely to obtain a reward, thereby reducing self-serving perceptions, and more likely to benefit their collaborator, enhancing altruistic perceptions. Formally:

**H1a.** An influencer who collaborates with a lower-status influencer will be perceived as less self-serving.

**H1b.** An influencer who collaborates with a lower-status influencer will be perceived as more altruistic.

### 3.2 | Influencer–brand collaborations

Similar to influencer–influencer collaborations, when an influencer partners with a brand, consumers will make inferences about the influencer's motivations (Folkes, 1984), affecting the extent to which consumers perceive the influencer as altruistic and self-serving. Consumers are usually aware that brands typically incentivize such collaborations. As such, the collaborations are likely viewed as business transactions, not altruistically motivated acts. Therefore, we anticipate a null effect on perceptions of altruism. However, when an influencer collaborates with a lower-status brand, perceptions that the influencer is self-serving are likely to be reduced. This is based on the brand alliance literature which finds that a well-known partner reaps fewer rewards than a lesser-known partner (Gammoh et al., 2006; Levin & Levin, 2000; Mohan et al., 2018). Thus, when a higher-status influencer collaborates with a lower-status brand, consumers will perceive that the influencer is not likely to advance their career (e.g., enhance their status) through such a collaboration, while the brand is likely to benefit via their affiliation with the higher-status influencer. Therefore, by entering such collaboration, a higher-status influencer is likely to be perceived as less self-serving (see Figure 1 for predicted effects). Formally:

**H2.** An influencer who collaborates with a lower-status brand will be perceived as less self-serving.

## 4 | PILOT STUDY

The proposed hypotheses are predicated upon the assertion that influencers collaborate with other influencers and brands and that such collaborations are not always equivalent in terms of the collaborating partners' level of status. To determine if such variations exist in influencer–influencer and influencer–brand collaborations, we conducted a pilot study examining 622 influencer–influencer

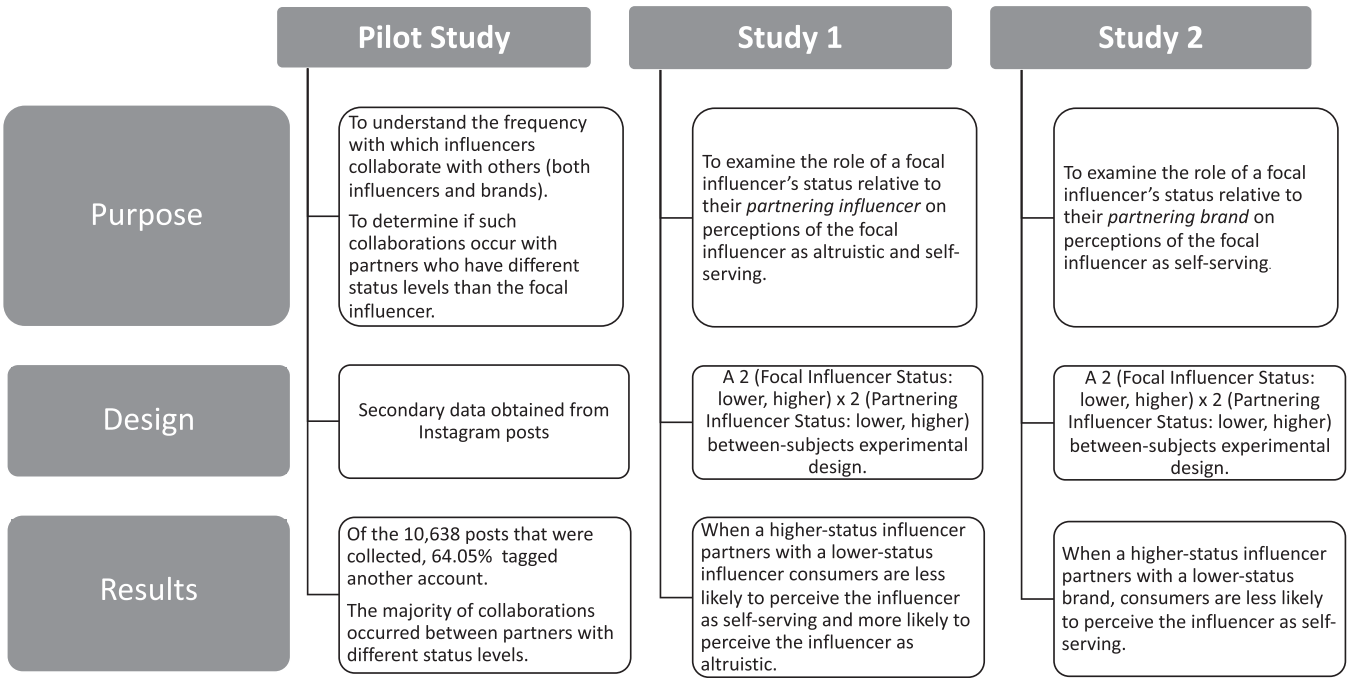


**FIGURE 1** Overview of studies.

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collaborations and 1347 influencer–brand collaborations on Instagram. See Figure 1 for an overview (purpose, design, and results) of each study.

## 4.1 | Sample

The social media context employed is Instagram as it is popular among users, brands, and influencers. Indeed, Instagram has over 2 billion active users (Newberry, 2023) and over 200 million businesses on its platform (Meta, 2023), and is recognized as an important platform for social media influencers (Geyser, 2023).

To determine the sample of influencers, we reviewed the existing literature and, based on precedent (Boerman & Müller, 2022), set the criteria of collecting data for 50 social media influencers and their corresponding influencer and brand collaborations over a 6-month period (October 19, 2021, to April 19, 2022). We started with a list of 50 social media accounts that was previously employed by Boerman and Müller (2022). Upon examination of the list, 13 accounts were removed as they were noninfluencer (i.e., traditional brand) accounts ($n = 4$), non-English speaking accounts ($n = 5$), private accounts ($n = 2$), and accounts without posts during the specified timeframe ($n = 2$). To obtain the predetermined number of 50 influencers, we used a snowball selection process with an emphasis on diversifying our list of influencers in terms of people of color, men, and influencers who had a smaller number of followers (less than 1 million). Thus, we started with Alicia Tenise (33,000 followers) and looked at whom she followed, selecting only accounts of individuals engaging in influencer activity (self/brand promotion) with a preference toward those with smaller follower counts and diversifying the list (see Table 1 for the final list of 50 influencers).

## 4.2 | Procedure

Data collection was a four-step process. First, using data extraction tools from Phantombuster, we scraped the Instagram posts made during the designated 6-month period for each of the 50 influencers. This resulted in a total of 10,638 posts, of which 6,814 tagged at least one other social media account. For the purposes of this research, a post was deemed as depicting a collaboration if it tagged another social media account.

The second step was to categorize the tagged accounts as either another influencer or a brand. After making this determination, we were left with 878 unique influencer–influencer collaborations (note that some influencers tagged the same influencer across multiple posts and are, therefore, not duplicated in the resulting data set) and 1,868 unique influencer–brand collaborations (note that some influencers tagged the same brand across multiple posts and are, therefore, not duplicated in the resulting data set). Table 1 includes the number of unique influencer–influencer collaborations and unique influencer–brand collaborations for each of the 50 focal influencers.

The third step was to indicate the status of the focal influencer and their collaborators. Status was operationalized using the number of followers as research suggests that as the number of followers increases, cultural capital and the perceived value of the influencer increases (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Therefore, we collected the number of followers for each of the 50 focal influencers and the number of followers for each of the 878 influencers and each of the 1,868 brands tagged by one of the focal influencers.

The final step was to provide an additional means for categorizing number of followers. Thus, for the influencers (both partnering and focal), we used Campbell and Farrell's (2020) taxonomy to categorize each influencer based on number of followers: nanoinfluencers (<10,000 followers), microinfluencers (10,000–100,000 followers), macroinfluencers (100,001–1 million followers), and mega-influencers (>1 million followers). While this taxonomy was developed for influencers, for comparability, we similarly categorized brands as having a small (<10,000 followers), medium (10,000–100,000 followers), large (100,001–1 million followers), or extra large (>1 million followers) following. We then compared the categorization of the focal influencer to the partnering influencer or brand and cataloged the percentage of collaborations where the focal influencer partnered with a lower-status collaborator (see columns 4 and 6 in Table 1, respectively).

## 4.3 | Results

For the analysis, influencers who had an exceptionally high number of collaborations were removed so as not to unduly skew the results. Specifically, for the influencer–influencer collaboration data, the average number of influencer–brand collaborations was 17.56 (SD = 27.38). Therefore, we removed two influencers whose number of brand collaborations were two standard deviations above the mean. These influencers had 91 and 165 collaborations with other influencers accounting for 10.36% and 18.79%, respectively, of the total number of influencer–influencer collaborations. For the influencer–brand collaboration data, the average number of influencer–brand collaborations was 37.36 (SD = 56.12). Thus, two influencers were again removed from the analysis as one had 233 brand collaborations and the other had 288 brand collaborations. Collectively, the number of brand collaborations these influencers accounted for was 27.89%, supporting our conjecture that they would have disproportionately affected the analysis. Removal of the outliers resulted in a final sample of 622 influencer–influencer collaborations and 1347 influencer–brand collaborations.

### 4.3.1 | Influencer–influencer collaborations

As previously noted, two influencers were not included in this analysis as they were outliers, and five influencers did not have any influencer–influencer collaborations during the period of analysis. Of the influencers who qualified for analysis ($n = 43$), the majority of the

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**TABLE 1** Pilot study: Sample description for influencer collaborations.

| Account | Number of followers | # of Influencer collaborations | % of collaborations FI followers > PI followers | # of brand collaborations | % of collaborations FI followers > Brand followers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| deboracornetta | 1049 | 1 | 0 | 0 | n/a |
| lrsbrwr | 1183 | 0 | n/a | 1 | 0 |
| wh1telightning[a] | 1461 | 4 | 50 | 11 | 9.1 |
| Misskaayle | 2029 | 0 | n/a | 0 | n/a |
| Arjunvsampath[a] | 2347 | 17 | 11.8 | 17 | 17.6 |
| priscillajerina | 3114 | 0 | n/a | 0 | n/a |
| alexisbakerrr | 4819 | 5 | 60 | 26 | 7.7 |
| myrhalyn | 9119 | 3 | 66.7 | 7 | 71.4 |
| mayamchenry[a] | 11,800 | 15 | 33.3 | 15 | 13.3 |
| aboxofsweets | 22,200 | 2 | 100 | 14 | 21.4 |
| glennymah | 24,200 | 2 | 100 | 7 | 71.4 |
| balancedles[a] | 30,700 | 6 | 50 | 31 | 38.7 |
| aliciatenise[a] | 33,300 | 4 | 25 | 87 | 23 |
| rienwelsink | 35,500 | 1 | 0 | 21 | 33.3 |
| summerhopechamblin[a] | 37,700 | 11 | 90.9 | 21 | 9.5 |
| lisannede_bruijn | 42,200 | 17 | 88.2 | 46 | 41.3 |
| tristanwalker[a] | 43,000 | 8 | 62.5 | 8 | 62.5 |
| hithapalepu[a] | 57,500 | 29 | 55.2 | 84 | 35.7 |
| jonaskautenburger | 69,500 | 3 | 100 | 1 | 100 |
| berosa_gogreen | 81,800 | 9 | 88.9 | 62 | 45.2 |
| mr. sangiev[a] | 92,300 | 13 | 69.2 | 29 | 58.6 |
| leanneliveshealthy | 109,000 | 0 | n/a | 27 | 96.3 |
| serdi_kay | 122,000 | 15 | 100 | 18 | 66.7 |
| iqbalgran | 177,000 | 1 | 0 | 66 | 27.3 |
| kinyaclaiborne[a] | 221,000 | 49 | 57.1 | 288 | Outlier |
| theserenagoh[a] | 255,000 | 35 | 74.3 | 117 | 52.1 |
| maryljean | 300,000 | 1 | 100 | 62 | 45.2 |
| elaisaya | 315,000 | 2 | 50 | 42 | 31 |
| giarogiarratana | 411,000 | 4 | 50 | 7 | 57.1 |
| timorworld | 471,000 | 20 | 80 | 12 | 83.3 |
| vivianhoorn | 572,000 | 39 | 82.1 | 142 | 74.6 |
| breadbyelise | 751,000 | 0 | n/a | 0 | n/a |
| annanooshin | 963,000 | 19 | 100 | 35 | 60 |
| alexlange | 1,800,000 | 28 | 78.6 | 13 | 61.5 |
| morganharpernichols[a] | 1,900,000 | 14 | 100 | 12 | 83.3 |
| lethalshooter[a] | 2,000,000 | 165 | Outlier | 233 | Outlier |
| kaihavertz29 | 4,500,000 | 13 | 53.8 | 2 | 0 |
| ijessewilliams | 7,600,000 | 36 | 97.2 | 20 | 90 |

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**TABLE 1** (Continued)

| Account | Number of followers | # of Influencer collaborations | % of collaborations FI followers > PI followers | # of brand collaborations | % of collaborations FI followers > Brand followers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| lizgillz | 13,800,000 | 17 | 94.1 | 7 | 71.4 |
| samsmith | 14,600,000 | 4 | 100 | 2 | 100 |
| chiaraferragni | 26,800,000 | 91 | Outlier | 86 | 94.2 |
| nickjonas | 32,300,000 | 24 | 95.8 | 18 | 94.4 |
| chrissyteigen | 37,500,000 | 30 | 100 | 36 | 97.2 |
| vanessahudgens | 45,000,000 | 54 | 98.1 | 67 | 98.5 |
| milliebobbybrown | 48,300,000 | 11 | 100 | 16 | 100 |
| zacefron | 52,400,000 | 5 | 100 | 5 | 100 |
| justintimberlake | 64,400,000 | 3 | 100 | 1 | 100 |
| shawnmendes | 67,800,000 | 16 | 100 | 7 | 85.7 |
| badgalriri | 127,000,000 | 5 | 100 | 8 | 100 |
| kendalljenner | 232,000,000 | 27 | 92.6 | 31 | 100 |

Abbreviations: FI, focal influencer; PI, partnering influencer.

[a]Not in Boerman and Muller's original list.

collaborations skewed toward the focal influencer having more collaborations with a lower-status influencer (i.e., an influencer with fewer followers). Indeed, 76.7% ($n = 33$) of the focal influencers engaged predominantly in collaborations with lower-status influencers—meaning that over 50% of the time, the focal influencer had a higher number of followers (i.e., higher status) than the collaborator, see the fourth column in Table 1.

Examining the categorical data (nano, micro, macro, and mega categorizations), a crosstab analysis was conducted, see Table 2. One hundred sixty-nine (27.17%) of the collaborations occurred between influencers with the same status levels. The remaining collaborations ($n = 453$; 72.83%) represented partnerships between influencers with different levels of status. Specifically, there were 92 (14.79%) mega-macrocollaborations, 85 (13.67%) mega-micro collaborations, 76 (12.22%) mega-nano collaborations, 72 (11.58%) macro–micro collaborations, 66 (10.61%) macro-nano collaborations, 62 (10.0%) micro-nano collaborations.

### 4.3.2 | Influencer–brand collaborations

For the influencer–brand analysis, two influencers were excluded as they constituted outliers and four influencers did not have any brand collaborations during the period of analysis, resulting in 44 influencers who qualified for inclusion. The majority of the collaborations skewed toward the focal influencer having more partnerships with a lower-status brand (i.e., a brand with fewer followers). Specifically, 61.3% ($n = 27$) of the influencers engaged in brand collaborations where, over 50% of the time, the influencer had a higher number of followers than the collaborating brand, see the last column in Table 1.

**TABLE 2** Pilot study crosstabulation: FI's status and PI's status.

| PI | FI | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Nano | Micro | Macro | Mega | Total |
| Nano | | | | | |
| Count | 12 | 56 | 56 | 74 | 198 |
| % within PI | 6.1 | 28.3 | 28.3 | 37.4 | 100% |
| % within FI | 40.0 | 46.7 | 30.3 | 25.8 | 31.8% |
| Micro | | | | | |
| Count | 6 | 38 | 51 | 80 | 175 |
| % within PI | 3.4 | 21.7 | 29.1 | 45.7 | 100% |
| % within FI | 20.0 | 31.7 | 27.6 | 27.9 | 28.1% |
| Macro | | | | | |
| Count | 10 | 21 | 55 | 69 | 155 |
| % within PI | 6.5 | 13.5 | 35.5 | 44.5 | 100% |
| % within FI | 33.3 | 17.5 | 29.7 | 24.0 | 24.9% |
| Mega | | | | | |
| Count | 2 | 5 | 23 | 64 | 94 |
| % within PI | 2.1 | 5.3 | 24.5 | 68.1 | 100% |
| % within FI | 6.7 | 4.2 | 12.4 | 22.3 | 15.1% |
| Total | | | | | |
| Count | 30 | 120 | 185 | 287 | 622 |
| % within PI | 4.8% | 19.3% | 29.7% | 46.1% | 100% |
| % within FI | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Abbreviations: FI, focal influencer; PI, partnering influencer.

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**TABLE 3** Pilot study crosstabulation: FI's status and partnering brand's status.

| | FI | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Partnering brand | Nano | Micro | Macro | Mega | Total |
| Small | | | | | |
| Count | 19 | 61 | 71 | 18 | 169 |
| % within brand | 11.2 | 36.1 | 42.0 | 10.7 | 100% |
| % within FI | 30.6 | 15.4 | 12.7 | 5.4 | 12.5% |
| Medium | | | | | |
| Count | 11 | 122 | 156 | 86 | 375 |
| % within brand | 2.9 | 32.5 | 41.6 | 22.9 | 100% |
| % within FI | 17.7 | 30.7 | 28.0 | 26.0 | 27.8% |
| Large | | | | | |
| Count | 8 | 141 | 180 | 104 | 433 |
| % within brand | 1.8 | 32.6 | 41.6 | 24.0 | 100% |
| % within FI | 12.9 | 35.5 | 32.3 | 31.4 | 32.1% |
| Extra-large | | | | | |
| Count | 24 | 73 | 150 | 123 | 370 |
| % within brand | 6.5 | 19.7 | 40.5 | 33.2 | 100% |
| % within FI | 38.7 | 18.4 | 26.9 | 37.2 | 27.5% |
| Total | | | | | |
| Count | 62 | 397 | 557 | 331 | 1347 |
| % within brand | 4.6% | 29.5% | 41.4% | 24.6% | 100% |
| % within FI | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Abbreviation: FI, focal influencer.

A crosstab analysis was also conducted to examine the categorical variables for influencer (nano, micro, macro, and mega) and brand (small, medium, large, and extra-large) status. The results show that 444 (32.96%) of the influencer–brand collaborations were between influencers and brands with the same status levels. The remaining collaborations ($n = 903$; 67.04%) represented partnerships differing in status. Specifically, there were 254 (18.86%) mega-large/macro-extra-large collaborations, 159 (11.80%) mega-medium/extra-large-micro collaborations, 42 (3.12%) mega-small/extra-large-nano collaborations, 297 (22.05%) macro-medium/micro-large collaborations, 79 (5.86%) macro-small/nano-large collaborations, 72 (5.35%) micro-small/nano-medium collaborations (see Table 3).

### 4.4 | Discussion

The goal of the pilot study was to demonstrate that influencers engage in collaborations with other influencers and brands who have different status levels. The results of the pilot study indicate that influencer collaborations are comprised of varying status structures, regardless of whether their collaborating partner is another influencer or a brand. In addition to supporting the contention that status differentials exist in collaborations, our initial step in the procedure for the pilot study (determining the total number of posts and the number of posts where at least one other social media account was tagged), suggests that collaborative practices are relatively commonplace. Of the 10,638 posts that were collected, 64.05% ($n = 6,814$) tagged another social media account, lending further credence to the need for this research.

## 5 | STUDY 1

Study 1 tests the conjecture that when an influencer (focal influencer) collaborates with a lower-status influencer (partnering influencer), consumers will perceive the focal influencer as less self-serving (H1a) and more altruistic (H1b). As with the pilot study, status is operationalized using number of followers. Study 1 employs a 2 (Focal Influencer Status: lower, higher) × 2 (Partnering Influencer Status: lower, higher) between-subjects design with self-serving and altruistic perceptions as the dependent variables.

### 5.1 | Procedure

Using Amazon's Connect CloudResearch platform, 200 individuals ($M_{age} = 42.14$, $SD_{age} = 12.15$; 49% male) were recruited and compensated. After electing to participate, they opened a link to an online survey that was administered through Qualtrics. The survey was open for 3 days, but once participants started the survey it had to be completed in one sitting.

After opening the survey and providing consent, participants viewed a fictitious news article. The article was used to manipulate both the focal and partnering influencers' status and, as such, announced an upcoming collaboration between two fictitious influencers and provided a description of each influencer. The use of fictitious influencers is consistent with previous research and reduces issues associated with pre-existing attitudes and familiarity (Kim, Duffy, et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021). Participants were randomly assigned to both a focal influencer condition (lower-status, higher-status) and a partnering influencer condition (lower-status, higher-status). For both the focal influencer and partnering influencer, status was manipulated via the number of followers (Focal influencer: lower-status condition: 2,700 followers, higher-status condition: 86,000 followers; partnering influencer: lower-status condition: 2,600 followers, higher-status condition: 87,000 followers).

After viewing the stimuli, participants were asked to focus only on the focal influencer and rate their perceptions of the influencer as self-serving and altruistic. Both self-serving and altruistic perceptions were measured using three items for each construct (Siem & Stürmer, 2019) and were rated on a one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree) scale. Specifically, self-serving perceptions ($\alpha = 0.86$) were measured using the items: "The influencer wants to use this

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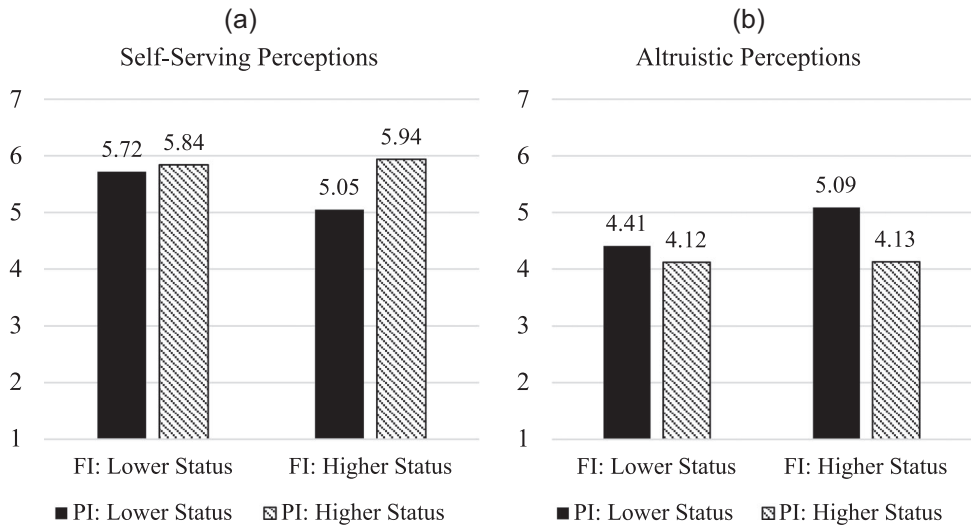


**FIGURE 2** The interactive effect of focal influencer status and partnering influencer status on (a) self-serving and (b) altruistic perceptions. FI, focal influencer; PI, partnering influencer.

collaboration for her own publicity," "The influencer expects benefits for her own career from this collaboration," and "The influencer wants this collaboration to impress people." Altruistic perceptions ($\alpha = 0.89$) were measured using the items: "The influencer is trying to give something back to the partnering influencer," "The influencer considers it important to help the partnering influencer," and "The influencer wants to help the partnering influencer gain followers." Demographic information was collected.

## 5.2 | Results

### 5.2.1 | Self-serving perceptions

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with focal influencer status and partnering influencer status as the independent variables and self-serving perceptions as the dependent variable was conducted. The results show a significant interaction ($F(1, 196) = 6.70$, $p = 0.010$) (Figure 2a). To examine the combination of focal influencer and partnering influencer status conditions that significantly affect self-serving perceptions, we ran a Tukey multiple comparison of means analysis. The results show that when a collaboration occurs between a higher-status focal influencer and a lower-status partnering influencer, the focal influencer is perceived as significantly less self-serving ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.35$) than when the collaboration occurs between a higher-status focal influencer and higher-status partnering influencer ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.00$; $p < 0.001$), or a lower-status focal influencer and lower-status partnering influencer ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 0.90$; $p < 0.01$), or a lower-status focal influencer and higher-status partnering influencer ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 0.87$; $p < 0.01$). There were no significant differences (all $p > 0.70$) in self-serving perceptions between the latter three combinations (i.e., higher-status focal influencer and higher-status partnering influencer, lower-status focal influencer and lower-status partnering influencer, and lower-status focal influencer and higher-status partnering influencer), see Table 4. Collectively, these results support H1a which states that when an influencer (i.e., the focal influencer) collaborates with a lower-status influencer (i.e., the partnering influencer), the focal influencer will be perceived as less self-serving. Indeed, when the higher-status influencer partnered with an influencer who had lower status, self-serving perceptions were significantly reduced ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.35$).

In addition to the significant interaction, the two-way ANOVA revealed both a significant effect of focal influencer status ($F(1, 196) = 3.79$, $p = 0.053$) and partnering influencer status ($F(1, 196) = 11.75$, $p < 0.001$) on self-serving perceptions. Specifically, self-serving perceptions were higher in the lower-status focal influencer condition ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 0.89$) as compared to the higher-status focal influencer condition ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.27$). The focal influencer's self-serving perceptions were also higher in the higher-status partnering influencer condition ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 0.93$) as compared to the lower-status partnering influencer condition ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.19$).

### 5.2.2 | Altruistic perceptions

A two-way ANOVA with the focal influencer and partnering influencer as the independent variables and altruistic perceptions as the dependent variable was conducted. The results show a significant interaction ($F(1, 196) = 3.64$, $p = 0.058$) (Figure 2b). To examine the interaction, we ran a Tukey multiple comparison of means analysis. The results show that when the focal influencer has high status and the partnering influencer has low status ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.24$), the focal influencer is perceived as significantly more altruistic than when the focal influencer has high status and the partnering influencer has high status ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.31$; $p < 0.01$),

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**TABLE 4** Study 1: Mean cell values of dependent variables.

| Dependent variables | Focal influencer status / Partnering influencer status | Experimental conditions | | | | Differences of mean values between each group | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Higher–lower (1) | Higher–higher (2) | Lower–lower (3) | Lower–higher (4) | Difference of 2 from 1 | Difference of 3 from 1 | Difference of 4 from 1 | Difference of 3 from 2 | Difference of 4 from 2 | Difference of 4 from 3 |
| Self-serving perceptions | Mean | 5.05 | 5.94 | 5.72 | 5.84 | $p = 0.00$ | $p = 0.00$ | $p = 0.00$ | $p = 0.72$ | $p = 0.97$ | $p = 0.93$ |
| | Standard deviation | 1.35 | 1.00 | 0.90 | 0.87 | | | | | | |
| Altruistic perceptions | Mean | 5.09 | 4.13 | 4.41 | 5.09 | $p = 0.00$ | $p = 0.03$ | $p = 0.00$ | $p = 0.69$ | $p = 0.99$ | $p = 0.67$ |
| | Standard deviation | 1.24 | 1.31 | 1.07 | 1.24 | | | | | | |

the focal influencer has low status and the partnering influencer has low status ($M = 4.41$, SD = 1.07; $p < 0.05$), and the focal influencer has low status and the partnering influencer has high status ($M = 4.12$, SD = 1.40; $p < 0.001$). There were no significant differences (all $p > 0.60$) in altruistic perceptions between the latter three combinations (i.e., high-status focal influencer and high-status partnering influencer, low-status focal influencer and low-status partnering influencer, and low-status focal influencer and high-status partnering influencer), see Table 4. These results support H1b as the higher-status focal influencer was perceived as more altruistic when collaborating with the lower-status partnering influencer.

In addition to the significant interaction, the two-way ANOVA showed a significant effect of both focal influencer status ($F(1, 196) = 3.79$, $p = 0.053$) and partnering influencer status ($F(1, 196) = 12.22$, $p < 0.001$) on altruistic perceptions. Specifically, altruistic perceptions were higher when the focal influencer had high status ($M = 4.62$, SD = 1.36) as compared to low status ($M = 4.27$, SD = 1.24). Perceptions of the focal influencer as altruistic were also higher when the partnering influencer had low status ($M = 4.75$, SD = 1.20) as compared to high status ($M = 4.13$, SD = 1.35).

### 5.3 | Discussion

The results demonstrate that when an influencer (higher-status focal influencer condition) partners with a lower-status influencer (lower-status partnering influencer condition) consumers are less likely to perceive the influencer as self-serving and more likely to perceive the influencer as altruistic. These results also suggest that consumers tend to perceive influencers as relatively self-serving and not overly altruistic. A follow-up paired samples $t$ test shows that, on average, participants perceive influencers as more self-serving ($M = 5.63$, SD = 1.10) than altruistic ($M = 4.44$, SD = 1.31; $t(199) = 9.05$, $p < 0.001$). This also suggests that there is little to lose for lower-status influencers entering a collaboration as consumers tend to perceive influencers, regardless of status, as being more self-serving as compared to altruistic. Indeed, self-serving perceptions were lower and perceptions of altruism were higher (compared to the other conditions) only when the focal influencer had higher status than the partnering influencer. This suggests that for a lower-status influencer who wants to partner with a higher-status influencer, perceptions of the lower-status influencer will not suffer. However, to improve perceptions (reducing self-serving perceptions and increasing altruistic perceptions), our results suggest that influencers should collaborate with an influencer who has lower status.

## 6 | STUDY 2

The goal of Study 2 is to examine influencer–brand collaborations as opposed to influencer–influencer collaborations, exploring the extent to which influencers are perceived as self-serving when they partner with a brand with a higher or lower status (H2). While we only

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anticipate an effect for the dependent variable, self-serving perceptions, for completeness, we also measure altruistic perceptions. To increase generalizability, we operationalize status using a fictitious status score as explained in the procedures below. Study 2 employs a 2 (influencer status: lower, higher) × 2 (brand status: lower, higher) between-subjects design with self-serving perceptions and altruistic perceptions as the dependent variables.

## 6.1 | Procedure

Recruitment procedures were the same as those employed in Study 1 with 200 individuals ($M_{age}$ = 42.41, $SD_{age}$ = 11.16; 49% male) electing to participate in the study. Similar to Study 1, participants were provided with a fictitious news article that manipulated both the influencer and brand's status. Participants were randomly assigned to both an influencer status (lower-status, higher-status) and brand status (lower-status, higher-status) condition. Both influencer and brand status were manipulated using a fictitious POP score which was described in the article as a score "assigned to brands and influencers by the company POP Influential. POP scores range from 0 to 100 and higher scores mean that the brand or influencer is more influential." Participants in the higher-status influencer condition read that the influencer received a score of 68, while those in the lower-status influencer condition read that the influencer received a score of 32. Participants in the higher-status brand condition read that the brand received a score of 67, while those in the lower-status brand condition read that the brand received a score of 33.

A pretest conducted on the Prolific platform ($n$ = 120: $M_{age}$ = 39.08, $SD_{age}$ = 13.17; 55% male) confirmed that the status manipulations were successful. Participants were randomly assigned to lower-/higher-status conditions for both the influencer and brand. After reading the fictitious news article, participants indicated the extent to which they perceived that the influencer had higher or lower status as compared to the brand on a 1 (influencer has lower status) to 7 (influencer has higher status) scale. As desired, a one-sample $t$ test demonstrates that participants who viewed the article where the influencer had higher status and the brand had lower status rated the influencer's status ($M$ = 6.10; SD = 1.18) as significantly above the midpoint (Midpoint = 4.0; $t$ = 9.64, $p$ < 0.001), indicating the influencer had higher status as compared to the brand. Further, a one-sample $t$ test demonstrates that participants who viewed the article where the brand had higher status and the influencer had lower status rated the influencer's status ($M$ = 2.03; SD = 1.10) as significantly below the midpoint ($t$ = −9.81, $p$ < 0.001), indicating the brand had higher status as compared to the influencer. Finally, when participants read the article where the influencer and brands had approximately equivalent status levels ($M$ = 4.08; SD = 0.86), there was no significant difference from the midpoint ($t$ = 0.74, $p$ = 0.46), indicating that participants viewed the status of the influencer and brand as equivalent.

After viewing the stimuli, participants then completed the survey. Participants rated their perceptions that the influencer was self-serving and altruistic using the same items employed in Study 1 (Siem & Stürmer, 2019) except modified slightly for the context of exploring collaborations in the context of influencer–brand relationships. Specifically, self-serving perceptions ($\alpha$ = 0.76) were measured using the items: "The influencer wants to use this collaboration for her own publicity," "The influencer expects benefits for her own career from this collaboration," and "The influencer wants this collaboration to impress people." Altruistic perceptions ($\alpha$ = 0.82) were measured using the items: "The influencer is trying to give something back to the brand," "The influencer considers it important to help the brand," and "The influencer wants to help the brand gain customers." Demographic information was then collected.

## 6.2 | Results

### 6.2.1 | Self-serving perceptions

A two-way ANOVA with influencer status and brand status as the independent variables and self-serving perceptions as the dependent variable was conducted and showed a significant interaction ($F$(1, 196) = 6.61, $p$ = 0.011), see Figure 3. To examine the interaction, we ran a Tukey multiple comparison of means analysis. The results show that in the higher-status influencer condition and the lower-status brand condition ($M$ = 5.51, SD = 0.95), the influencer is perceived as significantly less self-serving than when both the influencer and the brand have a higher status ($M$ = 6.10, SD = 0.85; $p$ < 0.01), or the influencer and brand both have lower status ($M$ = 6.11, SD = 0.93; $p$ < 0.01), or the influencer has lower status and the brand has higher status ($M$ = 6.03, SD = 0.94; $p$ < 0.05). There were no significant differences (all $p$ > 0.90) in self-serving perceptions between the latter three combinations (i.e., higher-status influencer and higher-status brand, lower-status influencer and lower-status brand, and lower-status influencer and higher-status brand), see Table 5. These results support H2, as a higher-status influencer partnering with lower-status brand was perceived as significantly less self-serving.

The results show both a significant effect of influencer status ($F$(1, 196) = 4.29, $p$ = 0.040) and brand status ($F$(1, 196) = 3.95, $p$ = 0.048) on self-serving perceptions. Specifically, perceptions that the influencer was self-serving were higher when the influencer had lower status ($M$ = 6.07, SD = 0.93) as compared to higher status ($M$ = 5.81, SD = 0.94). Perceptions that the influencer was self-serving were also higher when the brand had higher status ($M$ = 6.07, SD = 0.89) as compared to lower status ($M$ = 5.80, SD = 0.98).

### 6.2.2 | Altruistic perceptions

A two-way ANOVA with influencer status and brand status as the independent variables and altruistic perceptions as the dependent variable was conducted. The results show no significant interaction ($F$(1, 196) = 0.031, $p$ = 0.86), see Table 5, or significant main effects

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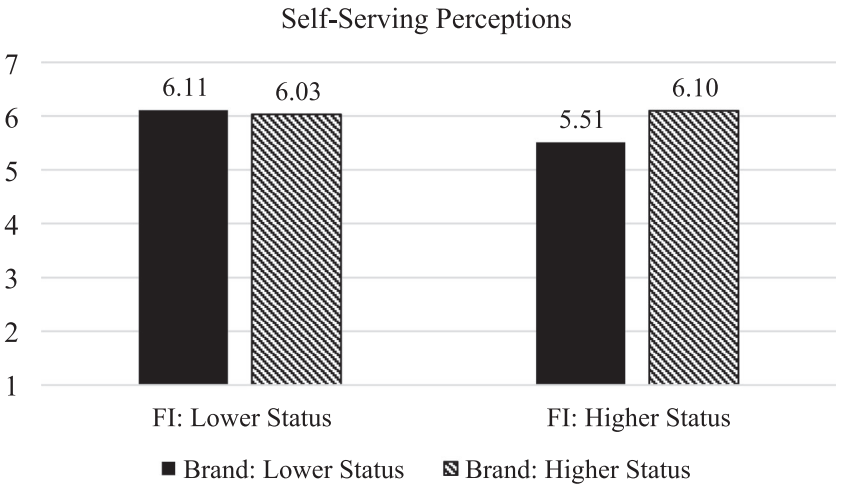


**FIGURE 3** The interactive effect of focal influencer status and partnering brand status on self-serving perceptions. FI, focal influencer.

for influencer status ($F(1, 196) = 0.125$, $p = 0.72$) and brand status ($F(1, 196) = 0.273$, $p = 0.60$).

### 6.3 | Discussion

The results for self-serving perceptions echo the findings from Study 1. When an influencer (higher-status influencer condition) partners with a lower-status brand, consumers are less likely to perceive the influencer as self-serving. As anticipated, the effect of influencer–brand status differentials had a null effect on altruistic perceptions, supporting our conjecture that the nature of an influencer–brand collaboration is different from an influencer–influencer collaboration. As such, when collaborating with a lower-status brand, an influencer may be viewed as less self-serving as the influencer is less likely to advance their career through such a collaboration. However, perceptions of altruism are not likely to increase as the collaboration is most likely to be viewed as a business transaction, not an altruistically motivated act. The Study 2 results also continue to support the contention that influencers are perceived as self-serving as self-serving perceptions were only significantly lower when the influencer partnered with a lower-status brand.

## 7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

### 7.1 | Theoretical implications

In the context of influencer marketing, research has primarily taken the endorsed brand's perspective, focusing on tactics for using social media influencers as part of the brand's strategy. Thus, extant research makes recommendations, often based on the match-up hypothesis (Kahle & Homer, 1985) or the source-credibility model (Ohanian, 1990), regarding fit between the influencer and brand (Breves et al., 2019), brand mention strategies (Hu et al., 2020), content style (Ki & Kim, 2019; Pozharliev et al., 2022), and influencer attributes such as attractiveness (Torres et al., 2019), number of followers (Pozharliev et al., 2022), and the number of accounts the influencer follows (Valsesia et al., 2020). In making such recommendations, the research provides a relatively positive account of the impact of social media influencers on brand outcomes.

Less research focuses on the self-branding strategies of influencers and even fewer articles discuss the notion that influencers are not always perceived positively—a worrisome finding as influencers are brands who also need to engage in self-promotion and management of consumers' perceptions. Thus, our findings provide additional support for research that has highlighted the less positive aspects of social media influencers and the reactions they incite (e.g., Mardon et al., 2023; Valsesia & Diehl, 2022). Further, our findings contribute to the study of human brands (Thomson, 2006) and, even more germane, our findings contribute to the small, but growing body of literature that investigates influencers as brands, exploring factors that affect an influencer's brand management strategy. Specifically, by drawing on signaling theory (Spence, 1973), we demonstrate that an influencer's engagement with others who are not followers (i.e., other influencers and traditional brands) is an additional tactic that influencers can employ to influence consumer perceptions. Further, our findings highlight an important difference between influencer–influencer and influencer–brand collaborations, contributing to work that highlights both similarities and differences between traditional brands and human brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2018) in the context of brand relationships theory (Fournier, 1998).

Our findings also contribute to work that explores brand alliances. To date, research has examined a variety of configurations that constitute brand alliances relying predominantly on power theory (French & Raven, 1959) to explain the dynamics of such alliances. Our work contributes to this literature and is especially germane to work examining social media influencers' use of alliances (Kupfer et al., 2018; Nascimento et al., 2020) as we find that consumers make inferences about influencers based on their partnership activities. Importantly, research acknowledges that influencers engage in both influencer–influencer collaborations (Miguel et al., 2022) and influencer–brand collaborations (Schouten et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2019), but research has not examined if

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TABLE 5 Study 2: Mean cell values of dependent variables.

| Dependent variables | Focal influencer status / Partnering brand status | Experimental conditions | | | | Differences of mean values between each group | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Higher–lower (1) | Higher–higher (2) | Lower– lower (3) | Lower–higher (4) | Difference of 2 from 1 | Difference of 3 from 1 | Difference of 4 from 1 | Difference of 3 from 2 | Difference of 4 from 2 | Difference of 4 from 3 |
| Self-serving perceptions | Mean | 5.51 | 6.10 | 6.11 | 6.03 | $p = 0.00$ | $p = 0.00$ | $p = 0.02$ | $p = 0.99$ | $p = 0.98$ | $p = 0.98$ |
| | Standard deviation | 0.95 | 0.85 | 0.93 | 0.94 | | | | | | |
| Altruistic perceptions | Mean | 4.35 | 4.29 | 4.32 | 4.19 | $p = 0.99$ | $p = 0.99$ | $p = 0.92$ | $p = 0.99$ | $p = 0.98$ | $p = 0.96$ |
| | Standard deviation | 1.17 | 1.34 | 1.42 | 1.44 | | | | | | |

influencer collaborations are a successful promotional tactic for the partnering influencers themselves. We demonstrate the potential for success with collaborations but highlight the applicability of signaling (Spence, 1973) and attribution theory (Folkes, 1984) to explain the key role of status differentials.

## 7.2 | Managerial implications

According to Influencer Marketing Hub's *2023 State of Influencer Marketing Report*, 83% of brand managers believe influencer marketing is effective and 67% of those who use influencer marketing intend to increase their budget (Geyser, 2023). Further, the influencer marketing industry is predicted to grow by an estimated $21.1 billion (USD) in 2023 (Geyser, 2023). As such, social media influencers need to engage in strategies that manage how consumers perceive their brand. Given our finding that status differentials between collaboration partners serve as a distinguishing characteristic influencing consumer perceptions, influencers interested in portraying a more benevolent persona would be better served to seek out collaborations with smaller, less well-known influencers and brands. Further, knowing that influencers benefit from partnering with brands that have lower status, lower-status brands may use this to pitch a partnership to a higher-status influencer. Thus, even if a brand is unable to pay an influencer a large amount of money, they can offer the less tangible benefit of a reduction in self-serving perceptions.

## 7.3 | Limitations and future research

The current research is not without its limitations. First, the studies were conducted within the context of Instagram. Although this platform is the most often used platform for influencer–brand collaborations (Geyser, 2023), it may not be the most often used platform for influencer–influencer collaborations. Further, Voorveld et al. (2018) suggest that consumer engagement and response may vary based on the platform. For instance, a classic double jeopardy pattern observed on TikTok implies that more followers are associated with greater engagement while this relationship does not hold true on Instagram (Pourazad et al., 2023). Thus, it is not known whether our results are applicable across different social media platforms such as TikTok or YouTube. Further, recent research also suggests that generational differences may affect consumers' perceptions of influencers (Pradhan et al., 2023). According to Haenlein et al. (2020), 60% of Instagram users in the United States are younger than 34, whereas approximately 40% of TikTok users are teenagers between 10 and 19 years old, indicating a significant generation gap between platforms. Finally, there is not always a clear-cut distinction between a social media influencer (as a person) and any branded products that might bear their name. These issues should be considered in future research.

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The current research used the number of followers to manipulate the status of both the focal influencer and partnering influencer (Study 1) and a fictitious status score to manipulate the status of both the focal influencer and partnering brand (Study 2). While manipulating status using two different methods enhances generalizability, it is still a limitation as there may be other ways in which consumers judge the relative status of collaborators (e.g., number of posts, number of brand collaborations, value/net worth of brand). Further, the signaling mechanisms used to judge the status of a brand partner might be different from those used to judge an influencer as few brands procure the same number of followers as the top influencers. Thus, future research should investigate other indicators that consumers might use to assess brand status and how such indicators compare to status indicators for influencers. For example, existing research suggests that social media cues (Lee, 2021; Li & Shin, 2023) as well as firm size and revenues (Shepherd et al., 2015) can act as brand status signals. Further, both brand and influencer rankings exist. Do consumers perceive brands and influencers who rank similarly on these lists as having comparable status levels? In sum, future research should both identify additional cues that signal status and examine the comparability of such cues across influencers and brands.

Additional outcome variables are also worth investigating. Positive perceptions that align or may even correlate with altruistic perceptions should also be explored. For example, generosity, kindness, and likability may all potentially be increased when an influencer collaborates with another influencer or brand who has a lower status level. However, such positive perceptions may not just be limited to the collaborator with higher status. While our research shows that lower-status influencers did not experience an increase in positive perceptions (i.e., altruistic perceptions), lower-status influencers may experience enhanced levels of likability as consumers come to associate the positive attributes of the higher-status influencer with the lower-status influencer. The potential for this relationship is supported by the associative network model of memory (Anderson, 1983) and the brand alliance literature (Gammoh et al., 2006; Levin & Levin, 2000; Mohan et al., 2018). Further, consumers may infer that the higher-status influencer may have knowledge about the lower-status influencer or brand which is affecting their desire to collaborate with the lower-status influencer or brand. For example, consumers may perceive that the lower-status influencer is especially talented or holds a certain level of expertise if they have managed to attract the attention of the higher-status influencer. In the context of a brand collaboration, similarly, consumers may infer that the lower-status brand must be exceptionally effective or of high quality to attract the attention of the higher-status influencer. As such, future research should explore additional outcome variables (e.g., likability, expertise, quality, etc.).

## 8 | CONCLUSION

In sum, this work explores how consumers perceive social media influencers who engage in collaborations with other influencers and brands. In doing so, we provide evidence that influencers frequently engage in collaborations with status differentials and that when a social media influencer has a higher status than their collaborating partner this reduces self-serving perceptions (in the context of influencer–influencer and influence–brand collaborations) and enhances altruistic perceptions (in the context of influencer–influencer collaborations). These findings lend support to the conjectures that influencer collaborations can represent brand alliances, marketing metrics serve as status signals, and that consumers make inferences about influencers who engage in collaborations that signal status differentials.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## 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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