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Understanding influencer marketing: The role of congruence between influencers, products and consumers

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ABSTRACT

Influencers increasingly provide sources of information and innovation to followers. Grounded in balance, cognitive dissonance, and congruity theories, the current article highlights how a congruence psychological mechanism, leveraged in influencer marketing campaigns, can contribute to the success of this novel form of persuasive communication. To understand consumers' behavioral intentions when they encounter product recommendations from fashion influencers on Instagram, this study addresses the congruence among the three inherent contributors to any influencer marketing campaign: the influencer, the consumer (or follower), and the sponsored brand. The study involves 372 followers of a famous fashion influencer. Results confirm that when influencer–consumer congruence is fixed and high, high (low) influencer–product congruence prompts high (low) consumer–product congruence. Strong congruence between the consumer and product then generates more favorable attitudes toward the product, as well as higher purchase and recommendation intentions, ensuring optimal returns on influencer marketing campaigns.

1. Introduction

Instagram ranks among the most downloaded apps, with more than 1 billion active users (Statista, 2019), such that many brands establish accounts in an attempt to benefit from high engagement rates among a large market of consumers (Hsu & Lin, 2020; Socialbakers, 2018). Although brands from virtually every industry maintain such accounts (Statista, 2019; Blasco-Lopez, Virto, Manzano, & Delgado, 2019), fashion brands in particular appear to find this social networking site helpful (Fashionista, 2018), as do influencers #Hashoff, 2017; Sanz-Blas, Buzova, & Miquel-Romero, 2019) whose reputations involve fashion expertise (Klear, 2018). In turn, influencer marketing—defined as marketing communications in which influencers promote a brand's offerings on their own social media pages—continues to grow (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2019a), with predictions that it will nearly double beyond its $8 billion value by 2022 (Business Insider, 2021). Just as Instagram promises strong consumer engagement, influencer marketing arguably appeals better to customers than traditional, celebrity-based, mass media advertising (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017; Müller, Mattke, & Maier, 2018), because it gives consumers a sense of close relationships and fit with their favorite influencers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019).

Brands can leverage these close links by having influencers promote their offerings to consumers who already embrace the image or views of those influencers (Rakuten, 2019). However, this effectiveness has come in for some challenges, as consumers grow more familiar with and skeptical in the face of inauthentic influencer marketing campaigns (Fashionista, 2019). For example, consider a failed collaboration between Chriselle Lim, an influencer whose lifestyle posts normally pertain to beauty, fashion, and motherhood, and Volvo. Lim posted to promote Volvo's toxic-free car cleaner, an endorsement that did not ring true to her followers (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2018; Statusphere, 2019). In response, they complained the message was unlike the content she usually posts, and even worse, promoting an eco-friendly product seemed inconsistent with the image of a jet-setting lifestyle she depicts. The lack of authenticity led to criticisms of both the influencer and the brand. As a result, Volvo wasted resources on a useless partnership that failed to shine a spotlight on its product. Instead, the focus shifted to Lim, who reacted to the risk of losing followers and influence by retracting and obliquely apologizing for her post. This and similar examples suggest the need for some congruence between the brand and the influencer for the marketing effort to work.

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But inauthenticity is not the only challenge brand marketers confront; they also must identify unethical influencers who claim fake followers or falsified rates of engagement (Mediakix, 2019). Such challenges combine to suggest that brands must undergo exhaustive processes to find and collaborate with appropriate influencers. After they have done so, the influencers in turn need to create campaigns that seem natural to their audience, rather than eliciting suspicions of covert advertising, such that followers believe the promoted message and adopt positive responses (e.g., purchase, recommend the products). Such features represent prerequisites of positive collaborations for both influencers and brands.

In this setting, researchers and practitioners need more insights into factors that lead to the success or failure of an influencer marketing campaign on social networking sites (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Balance theory (Heider, 1946) offers potentially beneficial insights, in terms of its ability to explain how customers evaluate commercial information available through social media (van Dam & van Reijmersdal, 2019). In particular, customers (followers) evaluate information more favorably if they perceive their own fit with the influencer but also if the influencer seems to fit well with the entity (e.g., product, brand, outfit) that he or she is promoting. A persuasive communication process, designed to encourage consumers to embrace the promoted brand or product as appealing and appropriate for their consumption, likely fails if either link does not evoke customers' fit perceptions.

Previous studies on influencer marketing mainly consider influencer–consumer fit (Casaló et al., 2020) or influencer–brand fit (Breves, Liebers, Abt, & Kunze, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2020) separately, rather than addressing matches across all three elements of an influencer marketing campaign, namely, the influencer, the brand/product, and the consumer (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). That is, prior literature fails to acknowledge that all three elements of the tripartite model are interrelated (i.e., influencer–consumer, influencer–product, and consumer–product) and must align for persuasive influencer communication to occur. In particular, consumer–product congruence likely depends on the influencer's fit with the promoted product. Because followers aspire to be like influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), an influencer that shows good fit with the product should prompt followers to assess the product as a match with their ideal selves too, with influences on their subsequent evaluations and behavioral intentions. Using this reasoning, we predict that consumer–product fit represents an underlying mechanism that activates consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions toward an advertised product. To clarify this psychological process, we propose and test whether customers tend to align their preferences with those of their favorite influencers, to achieve consistency and avoid psychological dissonance or imbalance. Therefore, we focus on circumstances in which both influencer–consumer and influencer–product congruence are high, and we predict that customers tend to generate favorable attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the promoted product/brand in such a situation. Our central research question asks, *Is influencer marketing effectiveness (attitude and behavioral intentions) based on the congruence of the three elements of this marketing relationship (consumer–influencer–product)?*

To answer this question, we take a composite view and consider fit along each path, such that we control for the level of fit between consumers and influencers, manipulate fit between influencers and the product, and measure the fit between consumers and the product. As noted, we rely on balance theory as a foundation (Heider, 1946, 1958), then integrate cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and congruity theory (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955) to detail our predictions. In an influencer marketing context, influencers are customers, but they embody some expertise or social appeal, such that other consumers follow them due to their perception that they share similar interests (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Cognitive dissonance, congruity, and balance theories predict that followers prefer balance and want to avoid the psychological distress that might arise if they were to disagree with an influencer whom they previously chose to follow. Accordingly, influencer marketing arguably should exert stronger influences on customers' behavior than traditional celebrity advertising (Evans et al., 2017; Müller et al., 2018), particularly if it involves a relationship marked by strong congruence across influencer–product–follower links. We propose in turn that, in an effort to avoid cognitive dissonance, followers evaluate promoted products/brands as more congruent with their own image or preferences if those products appear congruent with the influencer. If instead the promoted product seems incongruent with what followers know of the influencer, they likely dismiss it as incongruent with themselves too.

We test these predictions in a fashion industry context, using the relationships between an influencer and followers (consumers) on Instagram, which by their very nature imply a high level of fit. In this real-world study setting, we derive practical results that may enable brand managers to design effective influencer marketing campaigns that reflect the degrees of congruence among the influencer, the sponsored product, and followers. In this sense, in addition to offering theoretical insights for the growing research domain devoted to influencer marketing, we provide recommendations for how brands can develop campaigns and collaborations that generate more fruitful consumer responses and outcomes. To establish these insights, we start by presenting our theoretical framework and hypotheses. After we explain the data collection procedures and methodology, we offer the research findings, along with some related conclusions and implications. Finally, this article concludes with several limitations and pertinent directions for further research.

2. Literature review: Influencers on Instagram

Influencers represent a new category of opinion leaders, with a position somewhere between celebrities and friends, that has emerged with the growth of social media opportunities. Influencers might be described as self-made "microcelebrities" (Evans et al., 2017). Celebrities have long been leveraged for marketing campaigns, which seek to transfer the image or value of the celebrity to endorsed brands (Cheah, Ting, Cham, & Memon, 2019); social media influencers represent a unique and relatively newer version of this marketing tactic. On a conceptual basis, celebrities and influencers differ in nature (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019): Whereas celebrities are known for their non–social media activities (e.g. sports, music), influencers are "born" on social media, where they develop the main activity for which they are known (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2019; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Therefore, influencers' reputation derives solely from the content they post and their social media activity, usually in collaboration with their followers (Hu, Min, Han, & Liu, 2020; Schouten et al., 2019). They often focus on a more segmented audience with whom they share similar interests, as a kind of virtual friend. Because influencers seem closer to their specific audiences, they also tend to appear more trustworthy (Lou & Yuan, 2019) or credible (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019) than conventional celebrities. They come to serve as opinion leaders or experts among their followers in their respective fields (Rahman, Saleem, Akhtar, Ali, & Khan, 2014), so followers tend to seek out or rely on their opinions to inform their purchase decisions, revealing the relevance and potential impacts of social media influencers (Casaló et al., 2020; Schaefer, 2012). Such developments have encouraged the continued and expanding use of influencer marketing campaigns on Instagram (#Hashoff, 2017), especially in sectors that require some minimum level of expertise, such as fashion (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Rahman et al., 2014). Brands in these sectors seek positive returns on their investments in influencer marketing campaigns, in the form of enhanced purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Rakuten, 2019), recommendations (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019), engagement (Chmait et al., 2020; Hughes, Swaminathan, & Brooks, 2019), attitudes toward the sponsored brand (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019), or brand awareness (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

In support of these effects, Instagram and its visual features offer several interesting functionalities (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez,

2017a) with the potential for inspiring and engaging consumers (Sheng, Yang, & Feng, 2020). The service actively seeks to promote and expand such capabilities, such as with the introductions of Instagram Stories (Belanche, Cenjor, & Pérez-Rueda, 2019), Instagram TV, and shoppable functionalities. In turn, the prominence of influencers, who also maintain their social media presence on networks such as Twitter (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011), YouTube (Xiao, Wang, & Chan-Olmsted, 2018) or Facebook (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015), is particularly notable and growing on Instagram (Statista, 2019; Socialbakers, 2018). Such developments in practice increase the need to specify and clarify influencers' effects on customers' behaviors and the underlying mechanisms that define them (Casaló et al., 2020; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).

The match between an influencer's image and followers' interests represents a likely determinant (Choi & Rifon, 2012; Casaló et al., 2020), as some previous research has suggested. For example, studies that focus on influencers identify effects related to the number of followers they attract (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), their use of hashtags (Erz, Marder, & Osadchaya, 2018), or their activity metrics (Arora, Bansal, Kandpal, Aswani, & Dwivedi, 2019). Another line of research specifies the implications of various message characteristics, such as the way influencers disclose the commercial nature of the advice (Boerman, 2020; De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). As we noted in the introduction, a few studies also consider fit along one specific link in the triadic influencer marketing context. In an attempt to determine what factors qualify a person as an influencer on Instagram, Casaló et al. (2020) note the effect of consumer–influencer fit on followers' behavioral intentions; a greater match leads followers to imitate or take influencers' advice. Kim and Kim (2020) instead manipulate product–influencer fit and show that greater fit fosters more positive product attitudes among consumers and reduces their perceptions that the promotion is advertising. In other cases, tests of these links involve simulated data gathered from social networks (Hummon & Doreian, 2003) or qualitative analyses (van Dam & van Reijmersdal, 2019). To expand on these views, we consider all forms of congruence, across the influencer, the customer, and the product advertised.

3. Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

3.1. Theoretical foundations

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) predicts that if people develop two inconsistent cognitions or engage in an action that conflicts with their cognitions, they experience mental discomfort. This unpleasant feeling creates pressure to overcome the situation, whether by changing one of their dissonant cognitions (beliefs or attitudes) or adapting their behaviors (Festinger, 1957). They might do so by changing one or more of their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors; acquiring new information that prompts a change in beliefs or attitudes; or finding a way to mitigate the importance attributed to dissonant beliefs or attitudes. That is, in the long term, the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of consumers require stability and coherence (Festinger, 1957, 1962), because mental discomfort due to a lack of coherence and the resulting negative effects on well-being are so problematic that people cannot maintain inconsistencies over time and are forced to change their beliefs or behaviors. The objective is to balance them and find an equilibrium that allows beliefs and behaviors to be coherent.

In turn, balance theory (Heider, 1946) predicts that people seek cognitive consistency in the form of psychological balance. For example, if congruency exists between the self and another person (i.e., reference person), who also is perceived as congruent with a novel stimulus (e.g., object, behavior), the focal person will accept this pattern and consider the novel stimulus congruent with her- or himself too. In this way, relationships tend toward equilibrium (Basil & Herr, 2006; Rambaran, Dijkstra, Munniksma, & Cillessen, 2015). In a simplified example involving relations among three entities A, B, and C, balance theory predicts that if A has a good relationship with B and a good relationship with C, B should have a good relationship with C (Heider, 1946, 1958). A similar, opposite pattern would result in the case of incongruence though. Therefore, in seeking psychological balance, a person judges a new stimulus according to the evaluation indicated by the referent that the person regards as congruent with her- or himself. A lack of balance leads to psychological distress, so people avoid the risk of disagreeing with a referent's judgment (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

Congruity theory, oriented more toward communication and persuasion contexts, similarly posits that people prefer elements that are cognitively consistent (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). A message source might make an assertion about a particular concept (object) that is positive (associative) or negative (disassociative). The audience already has some attitudes toward the concept and the source, which determine if a state of congruity or consistency occurs. Changes in audiences' attitudes shift toward generating increased congruity, because audiences are motivated to modify their attitudes and achieve congruent situations (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). Thus, it is possible to predict the direction and amount of change in attitudes.

These theories apply not only to interpersonal relations but also to the relations that develop between a person and another entity (Heider, 1958), such as a product. If a person owns a product, it implies liking for that product; if confronted with contrasting information, the owner tries harder to like the product, once he or she owns it, compared with if he or she did not own it (Woodside & Chebat, 2001). Such efforts help people maintain their psychological stability and form relationships that balance their likes and dislikes. In this way, balance theory can predict consumer behavior and suggest new marketing strategies (Solomon, 1999). Similarly, cognitive dissonance theory offers insights into consumers' decision making (Festinger, 1962), in that it predicts that people want to feel comfortable about their beliefs. Furthermore, congruity theory serves to explain changes in attitudes due to persuasive processes and the search for congruence (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). If a consumer likes a particular influencer and this influencer likes a particular product, psychological theory predicts that the consumer feels compelled to like the product too. Evidence in support of these influences comes from studies in other marketing channels, such as the relationships among a spectator, a celebrity, and an advertised event (e.g., game, concert) (Silvera & Austad, 2004).

3.2. Hypotheses

Consumers use products and brands to express themselves, transmit their identity, or signal their belonging to social groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Sirgy, 1985; Sirgy, Lee, Johar, & Tidwell, 2008). To increase self-congruence (consumer–product congruence), they also select products or brands with images that align with their actual or ideal self (Fennis & Pruyn, 2007). We apply balance (Heider, 1946), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), and congruity (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955) theories to clarify the relationships among influencers, sponsored products, and followers (i.e., potential consumers) further. The relationship between the consumer and the influencer involves high fit because of the very nature of their relationship. That is, among the thousands of influencers with different interests available (Swant, 2016), the consumer is free to choose whom to follow or unfollow at any time. A customer establishes a positive link with followed influencers because they represent an ideal self or because both have similar interests (Boerman, 2020). Then, when an influencer promotes a product coherent with the image he or she seeks to transmit (Casaló et al., 2020), and the consumer encounters such an endorsement on Instagram, it should prompt a positive link between the consumer and the product, to avoid dissonance or imbalance. That is, high congruence between the influencer and the product should lead the consumer to evaluate the product positively too (Breves et al., 2019). However, if the customer perceives that the link between the influencer and the product is

incoherent, it could disrupt this connection. Consequently, our first hypothesis proposes:

H_1: Greater (lower) influencer–product congruence prompts greater (lower) consumer–product congruence among followers of the influencer.

Previous literature suggests that consumer–product congruence determines attitudes toward products (Zhu, Teng, Foti, & Yuan, 2019). Specifically, we anticipate effects of such congruence on consumer attitudes, defined as affective, evaluative predispositions to respond favorably or unfavorably toward the target (Shaver, 1977). For example, attitudes toward products may reflect the level of congruence between the products' image and consumers' self-images (Sirgy et al., 2008). Consumers tend to develop more positive evaluations of products that evoke perceived images similar to their own self-images (Graeff, 1996), which result in more positive attitudes. Recent studies also show that congruence with an ideal self is a clear predictor of brand attachment (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2019) or emotional brand attachment (Japutra, Ekinci, Simkin, & Nguyen, 2018) and may lead to compulsive buying (Japutra et al., 2018, 2019). We expect that consumers develop more positive attitudes toward products for which they perceive greater self-congruence (greater consumer–product congruence):

H_2: Congruence between the consumer and the product has a positive influence on consumers' attitudes toward the product.

Consumers' attitudes also are crucial to understand their behavioral intentions (e.g., Lu, Chang, & Chang, 2014; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Previous literature indicates that a consumer's positive attitude toward a product influences that customer's behavioral intentions, such as willingness to purchase, pay premium prices, or recommend the product to other consumers (e.g., Belanche, Flavián, & Pérez-Rueda, 2020; Lu et al., 2014; Zeithaml et al., 1996). According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), intentions offer strong predictions of how customers behave subsequently (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2010), such that they represent customers' willingness to perform a particular behavior. Thus, previous research establishes correlations between behavioral intentions and actual behaviors (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2017b; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000).

Purchase intentions reflect customers' conscious plans to provide economic outlays to acquire a product or service (Spears & Singh, 2004) and a greater chance that customers actually buy the products (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007). If customers develop positive attitudes toward a product or brand, they also are more prone to recommend it to others (De Matos & Rossi, 2008). Intentions to recommend a product predict whether the consumer offers positive assessments (Casaló et al., 2017a). Formally then, consumers' attitudes should guide their intentions to purchase or recommend a sponsored product, and we hypothesize:

H_3: Attitudes toward the product have positive influences on consumers' intentions to (a) purchase and (b) recommend the product.

As the research model in Fig. 1 shows, we predict a perception (consumer–influencer–product congruence) → evaluation (attitude toward the product) → behavioral intentions (to purchase and recommend) chain.

4. Methodology

The data to test our hypotheses came from an online experiment, which presented a well-known fashion and beauty influencer named Zoe Sugg to participants. She started her blog Zoella in 2009 and has more than 9.8 million followers on Instagram (@zoesugg), where Sugg features fashion photos, along with shared moments featuring her friends, her partner, and herself. We chose this influencer on the basis of relevant criteria, to ensure we investigate an influencer rather than a celebrity. Specifically, Sugg posts mainly about fashion and beauty topics, ranks among the top 25 U.K. influencers in number of followers, and was not a celebrity in any other context prior to introducing her social media persona (InfluencerMarketingHub, 2019b). Because she is well-known, especially in the United Kingdom, we could easily identify followers to participate.

The experiment consisted of an English-language online survey that asked participants to read hypothetical information about an outfit the influencer had mentioned on Instagram. For the manipulation, we presented a picture of Sugg wearing either a highly congruent outfit (her usual style) or a less congruent outfit (a style that she does not normally wear), reported to have been published to her Zoella Instagram account. A pretest with 62 U.K. participants who were familiar with Sugg confirmed the manipulation, in which we randomly showed participants one of the pictures and asked for their perceptions of the degree of congruence between the influencer and the outfit, according to a multi-item scale adapted from Xu and Pratt (2018) (see the Appendix). The results affirmed that the pretest participants regarded the congruent outfit as more congruent with Zoella ($M = 5.09$; $SD = 1.14$) than the other outfit ($M = 2.48$; $SD = 1.55$), and the differences were significant ($t(60) = 7.47$, $p < .01$). We used this manipulation for the online

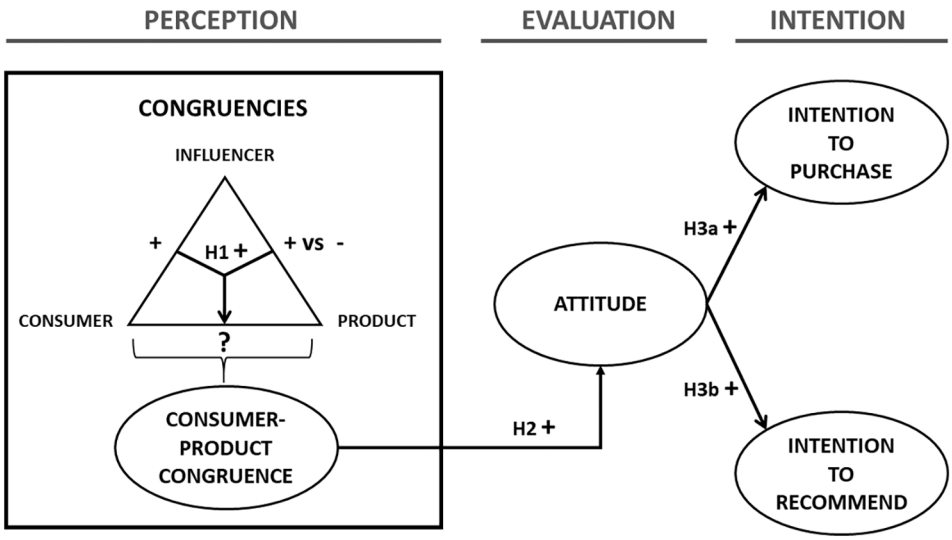

Fig. 1. Research model.

experiment too.

The sample for the main experiment included 396 British followers of Zoella, invited to take part in the survey. A market research firm helped distribute the survey. As is common practice in studies involving fashion sectors (Loussaïef, Ulrich, & Damay, 2019; Michon, Yu, Smith, & Chebat, 2008), we limited the sample to female respondents. The selected influencer targets a female audience, so the vast majority of her followers are women, and the focal products are outfits targeting mainly female consumers. Thus, we deliberately exclude male participants to avoid any potential bias created by responses from non-targeted participants, considering that male and female shoppers differ in their attitudes toward fashion (Michon et al., 2008).

Most of the participants were women between 18 and 34 years of age (71%) and had completed at least some college (76%). Furthermore, all of them were active on Instagram at the time of the study, and 75% had been active users of the site for at least one year. To confirm their familiarity with the influencer, we asked participants how well they knew Zoe Sugg (1 = "not at all," 7 = "very much"), her age, nationality, the reason she became famous, whether they follow her on Instagram or YouTube, and the type of videos she uploads. We excluded some participants on the basis of their answers, whether because they offered incomplete responses or did not follow Zoella closely, which helps ensure the high level of consumer–influencer congruence that we assume for our analysis in the final sample of 372 participants.

These participants next had to click on a link to view the Zoella Instagram account, which led to the randomized manipulation, featuring a picture of Zoe Sugg with a congruent or incongruent outfit. We included previously validated scales to measure consumer–influencer congruence (Casaló et al., 2020; Lee, Park, Rapert, & Newman, 2012), such that we confirm our assumption that it is consistently high; influencer–product congruence, to check our experimental manipulation; and consumer–product congruence, to support the tests of our hypotheses (Xu & Pratt, 2018). We also measured attitudes toward the product (Silvera & Austad, 2004) and intentions to recommend (Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001) and purchase (Müller et al., 2018; Sia et al., 2009; Xu & Pratt, 2018) the product. All the seven-point Likert-type scales ranged from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree." Finally, we inquired about the participants' behaviors on Instagram (e.g., frequency of use), use of other social networks, online shopping behaviors, and demographic information. Some awareness check questions throughout the questionnaire ensured that participants had read the scenario description and all the questions.

4.1. Manipulation checks

Before checking the influencer–product congruence experimental manipulation, we sought to confirm the high level of consumer–influencer congruence that we assumed, because the consumers all follow the influencer. This measure of consumer–influencer congruence is adapted from Casaló et al. (2020) (see Appendix), and it affirms the high level of consumer–influencer congruence (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$), with a mean value of 4.83 (SD = 1.54), significantly above the midpoint of the scale ($t = 10.43$, $p < .01$). Regardless of which outfit they viewed, the participants indicated their high perceived fit with the influencer, with values consistently above the scale mean ($M_{congruent\ outfit} = 4.97$, SD = 1.49; $M_{incongruent\ outfit} = 4.70$, SD = 1.58) but without significant differences across conditions ($t(370) = 1.71$, $p > .05$).

For the check of the influencer–product congruence manipulation, we used an independent samples *t*-test. In line with the pretest results, influencer–product congruence was perceived as greater in the congruent outfit scenario (M = 5.33; SD = 1.12) than in the incongruent one (M = 2.61; SD = 1.60; $t(370) = 18.98$, $p < .01$). The successful manipulation provides confidence that we can reasonably compare the level of consumer–product congruence that results from a balanced (both consumer–influencer and influencer–product congruence are high) versus an imbalanced (consumer–influencer congruence is high but influencer–product congruence is low) scenario to test our hypotheses.

4.2. Measurement validation

As mentioned, the items we used to measure the latent constructs came from prior research in consumer behavior, marketing communication, and social networks, which helps ensure the content validity of the scales. All the scales also achieved appropriate Cronbach's α levels ($\alpha_{consumer–product\ congruence} = 0.98$; $\alpha_{attitude} = 0.95$; $\alpha_{purchase\ intention} = 0.96$; $\alpha_{recommendation\ intention} = 0.96$). Participants' perceptions of influencer–product congruence were measured with items from Xu and Pratt (2018) (see the Appendix), which achieved high levels of reliability too (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.98$) (Cronbach, 1970). To confirm the dimensional structure of the scales, we used confirmatory factor analysis and employed the statistical software EQS 6.1, with robust maximum likelihood. The factor loadings of the confirmatory model are statistically significant (at 0.01) and greater than 0.5 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993; Steenkamp & Van Trijp, 1991), so no item needed to be eliminated. We also obtained acceptable levels of convergence, R-square values, and model fit ($\chi^2 = 436.14$, 84 df, $p < .000$; Satorra-Bentler scaled $\chi^2 = 301.77$, 84 df, $p < .000$; normed fit index [NFI] = 0.97; non-formed fit index [NNFI] = 0.97; confirmatory fit index [CFI] = 0.98; incremental fit index [IFI] = 0.98; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = 0.08; 90% confidence interval [CI] [0.07, 0.09]). The composite reliability (CR) values exceeded the suggested minimum of 0.65 (Jöreskog, 1971; Steenkamp & Geyskens, 2006). The average variance extracted (AVE) values were greater than 0.5 (see Table 1), in support of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and each construct also shared more variance with its own measures than with the other constructs in the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), in support of discriminant validity. For each construct, the square root of the AVE was greater than its correlations with other constructs (Table 1).

5. Results

We use an independent samples *t*-test to determine if, as we predicted in H_1, high influencer–product congruence (balanced situation) encourages high consumer–product congruence, but low congruence between the influencer and product (imbalanced situation) does not evoke consumers' perceptions of their own congruence with the product. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), this methodology is appropriate in a situation in which the dependent variable is continuous, there is only one independent variable with two levels and no covariates, and participants have been randomly assigned, as in our case. As expected, consumer–product congruence is significantly greater ($t(370) = 12.52$, $p < .01$) in a balanced situation (M = 4.44, SD = 1.62) than an imbalanced one (M = 2.38, SD = 1.55). When consumer–influencer congruence is high, greater (lower) influencer–product congruence leads to a higher (lower) level of consumer–product congruence, as we predicted in H_1.

To test H_2 and H_3, we instead rely on a structural equation model (SEM), using the statistical software EQS 6.1 and robust maximum

Table 1
Construct Reliability, Convergent Validity, and Discriminant Validity.

Construct	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	CR	AVE
(1) Consumer–product congruence	**0.976**				0.988	0.952
(2) Attitude	0.859	**0.927**			0.961	0.859
(3) Intention to purchase	0.824	0.771	**0.939**		0.968	0.883
(4) Intention to recommend	0.669	0.678	0.845	**0.950**	0.966	0.903

Notes: Diagonal elements (in bold) are the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE). Off-diagonal elements are the correlations among constructs. CR = composite reliability.

likelihood. Because SEM allows for estimates of cause–effect models with latent variables (Sarstedt, Hair, Nitzl, Ringle, & Howard, 2020), we can simultaneously analyze complex interrelationships among the observed and latent variables while also accounting for the measurement error inherent to abstract concepts (Sarstedt, Hair, Ringle, Thiele, & Gudergan, 2016). Specifically, SEM can simultaneously analyze series of relationships in which a dependent variable becomes an independent variable (attitude in our case), together with multiple dependent variables (purchase and recommendation intentions) at the same time (Jöreskog, Sörbom, du Toit, & du Toit, 1999). It is thus appropriate for testing mediation (Sarstedt et al., 2020). More precisely, we use covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM), a confirmatory method that tends to replicate existing covariation among measures (e.g., Fornell & Bookstein, 1982; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). It provides acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 713.86$, 87 df, $p < .000$; Satorra-Bentler scaled $\chi^2 = 516.35$, 87 df, $p < .000$; NFI = 0.95, NNFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96, IFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.08; 90% CI [0.07, 0.09]). Consumer–product congruence exerts a positive influence on consumer attitudes toward the product ($\gamma = 0.873$, $p < .01$, H_2), which then positively affect behavioral intentions to purchase ($\beta = 0.799$, $p < .01$, H_{3a}) and to recommend ($\beta = 0.702$, $p < .01$, H_{3b}).

The proposed framework also implies an indirect effect of consumer–product congruence on consumer behavioral intentions to purchase and recommend the product, through attitude. In other words, attitude may act as a mediator because it intervenes between two related constructs (Sarstedt et al., 2020). The results affirm these indirect effects on intentions to purchase (indirect effect = 0.698; $p < .01$) and recommend (indirect effect = 0.613; $p < .01$). Together, these relationships largely explain the dependent variables in our model: consumers' attitudes toward the product ($R^2 = 0.763$), behavioral intentions to purchase ($R^2 = 0.639$), and behavioral intentions to recommend ($R^2 = 0.493$).

Finally, we conducted tests to check whether the direct effects of consumer–product congruence on consumers' behavioral intentions, which are not specified in the model, might be significant (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). As Sarstedt et al. (2020) note, CB-SEM can address potential model misspecification. The first row of Table 2 shows the goodness-of-fit values for the proposed model, which provides the baseline for the χ^2 difference tests. With M2, we check for a direct path from consumer–product congruence to consumer purchase intentions. Because M2 is nested in M1, we also perform a χ^2 difference test with one degree of freedom to determine whether attitude fully or partially mediates the effect of consumer–product congruence on purchase intentions (Kulviwat, Bruner, & Al-Shuridah, 2009). In M2, the path is significant, as is the χ^2 difference ($\chi^2(1) = 79.04$, $p < .01$). Therefore, attitude partially mediates the effect of consumer–product congruence on consumers' purchase intentions. Similarly, in M3, the path from consumer–product congruence to recommendation intentions is significant, as is the χ^2 difference ($\chi^2(1) = 10.11$, $p < .01$), such that attitude partially mediates this link.

Table 2
Formal Tests of Mediation.

Model	Goodness-of-Fit	χ^2 Difference	Additional Path
M1: Hypothesized paths (Fig. 1)	$\chi^2(87) = 713.86$; $p < .001$	–	–
M2: M1 + consumer–product congruence → purchase intentions	$\chi^2(86) = 634.82$; $p < .001$	M1 – M2 $\chi^2(1) = 79.04$; $p < .01$	0.592 ($p < .01$)
M3: M1 + consumer–product congruence → recommendation intentions	$\chi^2(86) = 703.75$; $p < .001$	M1 – M3 $\chi^2(1) = 10.11$; $p < .01$	0.264 ($p < .01$)

6. Discussion

Despite the growing popularity of influencers on social networking sites (Brown & Michinov, 2019; Schouten et al., 2019), increasing budgets devoted to influencer marketing campaigns (Business Insider, 2021), expanding importance of Instagram in terms of number of users and economic volume (Statista, 2019), and growing prevalence of influencers on this visual and engaging social networking site (#Hashoff, 2017; Socialbakers, 2018), scientific research that addresses influencers on Instagram in detail has remained lacking. We propose applying balance, cognitive dissonance, and congruity theories as a novel approach to understand influencer marketing. Accordingly, we analyze the effects of congruence among products, consumers, and the influencer simultaneously to determine the effects on consumers' attitudes toward the product and behavioral intentions.

The results confirm that when influencer–consumer congruence is high, greater (lower) influencer–product congruence encourages more (less) consumer–product congruence, in line with previous research that has analyzed the separate effects of congruence between the influencer and the product (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2020; Xu & Pratt, 2018) or the influencer and followers (e.g., Casaló et al., 2020; Choi & Rifon, 2012). By analyzing the joint effects, we establish that when followers find an influencer who reflects their own values, personality, or image, and that influencer promotes a product that appears congruent with her or his usual style, followers tend to align their perceptions of the product with the implied perceptions of the influencer. In particular, they express more favorable attitudes toward the product, in line with cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), balance (Heider, 1946), and congruity (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955) theories, which predict that greater alignment evokes more positive attitudes. This favorable attitude then generates positive behavioral intentions to purchase and recommend, as indicated in previous research (De Matos & Rossi, 2008; Lu et al., 2014), including studies involving influencers (Choi & Rifon, 2012). Encouraging recommendations by ensuring good influencer–product–consumer congruency is particularly helpful; it implies an opportunity to enhance the viral impact of influencer marketing campaigns. As another contribution, our framework can explain consumers' purchase intentions and thus inform ongoing debates about influencers' actual capacity to convert marketing actions into purchases (Evans et al., 2017). Finally, we find some direct effects of greater consumer–product congruence on behavioral intentions. As previously noted, influencers represent sources of admiration and aspiration for followers (Boerman, 2020; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019); as the opinion leaders of our time, they should use their influence in a responsible manner.

With these findings, this study contributes to prior literature in three main ways. First, rather than focusing on a celebrity who is well-known due to non–social media activity, we investigate a real influencer who gained her reputation solely through her social media presence (Hu et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2019). Influencers represent a new type of opinion leaders, who enter into seemingly close relationships with their followers, based on shared values, ideas, and preferences (Casaló et al., 2020). Their influence also depends on their credibility and trustworthiness, which are linked to their recommendations (Schouten et al., 2019). In this sense, the relationships between influencers and their followers, which provide greater insights into the lifestyle and interests of the influencer than is possible with traditional celebrities, likely heighten the role of congruence. By knowing the type of content influencers post, followers can make more appropriate evaluations of promotional actions and act accordingly. By studying a real influencer, we increase the external validity of our findings.

Second, to the best of our knowledge, this study offers the first analysis of the joint effects of influencer–product–consumer congruence for influencer marketing campaigns. These agents (influencer, product/brand, and consumer) are the main actors involved in any influencer marketing campaign (Stubb, Nyström, & Colliander, 2019), so investigating them comprehensively is necessary to obtain a complete picture

of this promotional activity. Previous research has assessed individual forms of congruence (e.g., influencer–customer, Casaló et al., 2020; influencer–product, Kim & Kim, 2020), without determining the effects of all types of congruence that might exist among these three main elements of an influencer campaign. Our results thus complement previous research that shows how greater congruence between two elements of an influencer marketing campaign enhance followers' responses (e.g., Breves et al., 2019; Casaló et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2020). As we show, combined congruence across all three agents can produce even more positive results. We shed new light on this topic by identifying joint effects: Congruencies together lead to better influencer marketing outcomes.

Third, rooted in cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), balance (Heider, 1946), and congruity (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955) theories, our framework explains substantial variance in the dependent variables. This finding suggests a basic mechanism: Consumers seek balanced situations (e.g., like products recommended by an influencer they follow) and avoid unbalanced situations, and this preference shapes their attitudes and behavioral intentions toward products sponsored by the influencers they follow on Instagram. Congruity theory predicts that people work to be congruent with their actual selves (e.g., values, status, lifestyle), as a way to signal their identities to others but also to get closer to their ideal selves (Sirgy, 1985; Sirgy et al., 2008). In our research context, consumer–product congruence implies that the product reflects the consumer's actual self but also helps that consumer attain an ideal self that resembles the influencer who has endorsed the product and who functions as a role model for the consumer (Boerman, 2020). Thus, the advertised product acts as a link between the actual self and the ideal self. Our results in turn offer meaningful recommendations for influencers: They should be consistent and careful with regard to what they endorse and promote on their social media feeds, because the cognitive dissonance that can be generated by an incongruent recommendation ultimately might reduce their influence over followers. More broadly, influencers should recognize the limits of their sphere of influence. They likely can persuade followers only in relation to an area in which they have a reputation for unique expertise. Followers seem to follow an influencer not for the person but rather for his or her style (Taillon, Mueller, Kowalczyk, & Jones, 2020).

6.1. Managerial implications

The results may help managers in the fashion industry make choices in this competitive market, among the thousands of available influencers (Swant, 2016). When companies in this sector consider whether to conduct influencer marketing campaigns, they should analyze the possible options closely to check for congruence between each potential influencer partner, the target audience (i.e., is it similar to the influencer's followers?), and the product they want to advertise. If fashion brand managers can find influencers congruent with their product offerings, followers (who also should be the potential target audience) likely will perceive the relationship as credible and natural, and the campaign should have positive consequences for the company. However, selecting a nonmatching influencer may reduce the effectiveness of the campaign considerably.

In general, influencer marketing tactics should never appear forced or incongruent with the values or style of the influencer; ideally, the influencer should weave a product into his or her existing, personal story (Casaló et al., 2020). In this respect, sponsored fashion products should be promoted in a way that matches or mimics the content the influencer usually posts (#Hashoff, 2017). The greater congruence between potential customers and the sponsored product that results in such a situation should evoke positive consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions toward the product.

Such goals suggest the need for market research to identify which fashion influencers a brand's target market of potential customers follow. Having done so, the brand should select particular influencers whose personal stories (e.g., lifestyle, values, personality) match the product image, to achieve joint congruence. Similarly, if a brand seeks to appeal to a new target market of potential customers, it could segment them according to the fashion influencers they follow. To target a specific consumer segment (e.g., with a new clothing line with a particular style), companies can find influencers who fit with that style. Overall, our research suggests that managers should not limit their influencer choice process to metrics such as the number of followers but instead should focus on their capacity to address potential consumers congruently. In other words, selecting influencers with different interests or with a style that does not perfectly match the endorsed product may not be the best option, even if those influencers are very popular. As we noted previously, the results also inform fashion influencers that they should focus on promoting products that fit their fashion style. Breves et al. (2019) similarly suggest that influencers should decline cooperation with brands that do not fit their image, to avoid ineffective outcomes or even damage to their own image.

6.2. Limitations and further research

The respondents to our survey are from one country (United Kingdom), are women, and follow the specific influencer we investigate. To generalize the findings, additional studies need to replicate our efforts with a wider sample of influencers, including those more focused on male consumers, as well as in other countries. Although we consider it timely and relevant to expand research into Instagram, other studies might test the outcomes in other social networks (e.g., YouTube), especially in relation to other industry sectors (e.g., cosmetics, tourism) or products (e.g., cars, branded or non-branded products) and services. As products, our empirical study manipulates outfits, which could represent different brands. To increase the internal validity of our experiment and avoid familiarity or attachment effects, we did not include brand names (Keller & Aaker, 1992; Cauberghe & De Pelsmacker, 2008). Further research could replicate our study with brands and control for participants' previous attitudes and behavioral intentions toward those promoted brands.

Noting the conceptual differences in promotional actions by influencers versus celebrities (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), we also call for empirical comparisons of the congruence that arises in the dissimilar relationships they establish with their followers (closer for influencers). Research might identify an optimal format for influencer marketing campaigns, according to whether they include certain features supported by Instagram (e.g., stickers) or other social networking sites.

Another route for research might include different influencers' profiles, to establish categories or analogies according to the values and styles of the brands and possible collaborators. Moreover, the relationships between influencers and followers might evolve over time; if influencers continually post incongruent product endorsements, reflecting a lack of alignment in the influencer campaigns, they could lose their credibility or followers' trust, with detrimental consequences. An interesting topic for investigation is the exact level of incongruence that followers or influencers are willing to accept. Finally, the mediation analysis reveals partial mediation, so consumer–product congruence might foster behavioral intentions directly. This alternative perspective aligns with the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986), which would predict that followers are prone to buy or recommend a product sponsored in an influencer marketing campaign simply because they want the meaning associated with these admired influencers to transfer to themselves, by purchasing the products that the influencers claim to use. Continued research could test or compare this alternative account with our theoretical rationale to determine the potential effect on followers' behavioral intentions.

7. Conclusions

With an experimental design involving 372 followers of a U.K. top

fashion influencer, this study confirms that when influencer–consumer congruence is fixed and high, high (low) influencer–product congruence leads to high (low) consumer–product congruence. Greater consumer–product congruence then generates more favorable attitudes toward the sponsored product, as well as higher intentions to purchase and recommend it. We confirm our proposed perception (congruencies) → evaluation (attitudes) → behavioral intentions (purchase and recommend) chain and thereby contribute to previous literature. Notably, we investigate an influencer rather than a celebrity, consider all influencer–product–consumer congruencies, and evaluate their impacts on consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following sentences (1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree"):

Congruence between consumer and influencer (adapted from Casaló et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2012)
Zoella is congruent with my values.
Zoella matches my personality.
I feel identified with Zoella.

Congruence between influencer and product (adapted from Xu & Pratt, 2018)
Zoella has a good match with the product.
The compatibility between Zoella and the product is high.
The alignment between Zoella and the product is high.
Zoella and the product have a high fit.

Congruence between consumer and product (adapted from Xu & Pratt, 2018)
The product matches my style.
The compatibility between the product and me is high.
The alignment between the product bag and me is high.
The product fits my style.

Attitude toward the product (adapted from Silvera & Austad, 2004)
I think that this product is interesting.
I think that this product is pleasant.
I think that this product is likeable.
I have a favorable opinion about the product.

Intention to purchase the product (adapted from Müller et al., 2018; Sia et al., 2009; Xu & Pratt, 2018)
I would consider purchasing the product.
I would contemplate the option of buying the product.
It is likely that I am going to purchase the product.
Next time I need this type of product, I will probably buy this one.

Intention to recommend the product (adapted from Bigne et al. 2001)
I will recommend the product to other people.
I will say positive things about the product to other people.
I will encourage friends and relatives to buy the product.

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