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The complex triad of congruence issues in influencer marketing

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Abstract

Finding a fitting endorser has proven to be one of the most delicate and critical tasks of influencer marketing. This research explores the relevance of the congruency of the influencer personality with (1) brand personality and consumers' (2) actual/ (3) ideal selves. Additionally, the (4) moderating role of involvement is considered, the impacts on post attitude/belief, brand trust and purchase intention are thereby studied. The novelty of this study lies in the integral examination of the types of congruencies and involvement in the context of influencer marketing as well as the consideration of their impact on the brand-related variables. Based on an online survey with 547 participants analyzed by means of structural equation modeling in SmartPLS, partly counterintuitive findings were produced. When the involvement level rises, congruence with consumers' actual selves becomes more important. Under low-involvement conditions, practitioners should pay more attention to influencers' fit with consumers' ideal selves. An adequate fit between brand and endorser is paramount and becomes even more important under high-involvement conditions. Overall, this study reveals that the three types of congruency and involvement interact in a very unique way in the context of influencer marketing.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Influencers are a robustly growing marketing communication channel. This is no wonder as they offer advantages over other modes of marketing communication. Compared with traditional advertising, they provide value by communicating more purposively with the target group and are perceived as more believable and less annoying (W. Li & Huang, 2016; Schouten et al., 2019). Even better, influencers offer a cost advantage (Gretzel, 2018; Nirschl & Steinberg, 2018).

However, conversely, these advantages also present challenges. A particularly large challenge is the question of finding a well-fitting influencer. As of 2019, the vegan influencer Alyse Parker endorsed the meat deliverer "Butcher Box." This poor fit of influencer and brand displeased both the fans of Alyse Parker and Butcher Box

(Parker, 2020). It is no wonder, however, that this failure occurred. As little research has been conducted on the congruence issue, practitioners are often baffled. Lacking alternatives, they wonder whether they can simply adapt the models that have been developed for traditional (celebrity) marketing (Childers et al., 2019). This approach might go wrong as celebrities and influencers differ in terms of some essential characteristics. While hybrids that share the characteristics of celebrities and influencers do exist (Chen, 2020), it can be stated that in contrast to celebrities, at least micro influencers are perceived and expected to be more authentic, closer to consumers and provide a more interactive communication experience (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In this work, the focus lies on micro influencers employing social posts as these are regarded as the future of influencer marketing (Geysler, 2017).

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In addition to this research gap, studies on congruence issues with influencers or celebrities have mostly not considered the role that product involvement might play. For example, as high-involvement products elicit consumers to process product-related messages more intensively, they might more strongly respond to a possible mismatch between the brand and endorser (J. G. Lee & Park, 2014). However, such speculations must be viewed with skepticism as theoretical elaborations suggest that involvement functions in very individual ways for influencer campaigns, which differ from other endorsement types (Ekstam & Bjurling, 2018; Trivedi & Sama, 2019). Taking these multiple research gaps together, the following question arises. What is the importance of congruence in the context of influencer marketing? What is the role of involvement in this context? Congruence can thereby be expanded into (1) congruence with the brand, (2) congruence with the actual self and (3) congruence with the ideal self of the user. When considering this diversification, it becomes apparent how differences between influencers and celebrities might affect their relevance. For example, the finding that “pure” influencers are considered to be “[people] like you and me” while “pure” celebrities are perceived to exist on a societal level that is far removed from its audience suggests that actual self-congruence might be of much greater importance for “pure” influencers whereas actual self-congruence is better suited to “pure” celebrities (Temperley & Tangen, 2006; Wiedmann et al., 2010).

Hence, the ultimate contribution of this study lies in the investigation of the aforementioned relationships with regard to influencers. An overarching framework encompassing all three types of congruencies is developed. Practitioners are provided with a holistic overview of the effects of the different types of congruence, which has not yet been provided by the extant studies. This framework becomes more refined by the fact that the impacts on post- and influencer-related variables are considered. In the prior research on influencer-related congruence issues, the focus has often been merely on influencer-related variables (Hermanda et al., 2019). Brand-related variables might nevertheless be relevant for a brand as the tangible consequences on it are an indicator of the success of the endorsement (Jin & Ryu, 2020).

In the remainder of this work, we first outline a conceptual framework including the three reference points of congruence and involvement based on Kelman's (1961) theory on opinion change, Kahle et al.'s (1986) social adaptation theory and Petty et al.'s (1981) elaboration likelihood model. The hypotheses are tested with data from an online survey of 547 participants. The analyses employ structural equation modeling using smart PLS. The results reveal that brand congruence appears to have a large effect on post-related variables. When the involvement level increases, the effect of brand congruence on post attitude increases. The impact of ideal self-congruence decreases with rising involvement, while the impact of actual self-congruence increases. The latter finding is a surprising contribution as it is not predicted by the theory. Overall, social media managers are provided with the contribution of a concept that enables them to select the appropriate appeal by matching congruity type with the audience's route to persuasion.

2 | CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Influencers

Influencers are individuals who create *valuable content*, have *high reputations in specific fields* (Cha et al., 2010; S. Kim et al., 2017) and are followed by *a large number of users* on online social networks (De Veirman et al., 2017).

As influencer marketing has become more popular in recent years, scholars have investigated its success factors. Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2018, 2020) presented an overview of the success factors of endorsers and influencers in particular and suggested five main categories of success factors: (a) endorser distinctive factors, which describe factors that are inherent to the endorser (e.g., attractiveness, trustworthiness); (b) perceiver congruence factors, which involve the interplay of the endorser with a targeted audience; (c) brand/product congruence factors, which describe the interplay of the endorser with the brand; (d) management factors, which include “behind-the-scenes” administrative issues such as the financial constraints of the endorsement and, finally, (e) communication factors, which are related to the issue of whether an endorser can communicate in an adequate way, for example, the suitability of his or her voice. Given the goals of the current work, the literature review will focus especially on literature addressing the categories of (a) perceiver congruence factors and (b) brand/product congruence factors. Influencer can be classified based on their amount of followers and influence as either mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers or nano-influencers. While the “bigger” types of influencers resemble celebrities, the smaller types of influencers (Geyser, 2017), on which the focus lies in the course of this research differ from celebrities by being perceived as to be more authentic, closer to consumers and provide a more interactive communication experience (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Moreover, issues regarding brand congruence has been outlined to be of particularly high importance for them as the endorsement of appropriate brands is part of their self-conception (Geyser, 2017).

The congruence of the influencer with the following constructs will be the subject of this research:

Brand personality is “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). It embodies knowledge and shapes brand perceptions (Freling & Forbes, 2005). Models conceptualizing brand personalities similar to those of humans have been developed (e.g., Aaker, 1997). Brand personality is regularly used as a vehicle to assess how similar (or dissimilar) a brand is to another entity (a new product category, another brand, an event, or an individual) (Fleck & Quester, 2007; Maille & Fleck, 2011). In this way, it also appears to be well suited for a comparison between a brand and an influencer.

The actual self is defined as the authentic self, which is related to who an individual is at present. Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) emphasized that the need for self-congruity accrues from the motivation to “[maintain] the coherence of a personal conceptual

system" (Epstein, 1992). Once such a set of beliefs is established, individuals strive to maintain it (Klipfel et al., 2014). The ideal self, in contrast, is defined as the individual's idea of how he or she would like to be (Dolich, 1969). It is shaped by an individual's imagination of ideals and aspirational goals (Lazzari et al., 1978; Wylie, 1979).

2.2 | Current research situation

In the extant research on (a) perceiver congruence factors, many questions remain unanswered. While there is a tendency to affirm that the actual self-congruence between a user and an influencer can positively affect the influencer and the brand (e.g., Shan et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), the relevance of the desired self remains much more obscure. At best, the findings of Schouten et al.'s (2019) comparative study shed some light on this issue. Against their hypothesis, they found that influencer endorsements led to more wishful identification than celebrity endorsements. However, a study examining the desired self-congruence of an influencer as an independent variable and its impacts on influencer and brand-related constructs is still missing. Concerning the moderating effect of involvement, the current research situation is similarly very scarce. In particular, to date, no study has analyzed the moderating effect of involvement and desired self-congruence in the context of influencer marketing.

Concerning the (b) product-related factors, the extant body of literature has obtained conflicting results on whether influencer-product congruence is beneficial or unimportant (Breves et al., 2019; De Cicco et al., 2020; D. Y. Kim & Kim, 2020), and it has pinpointed the need for further research on this issue. Moreover, no study has examined the potential moderating effect of involvement in the context of influencer-product congruence.

In conclusion, the following key gaps in the research can be identified: The impacts of ideal self-congruence and product endorser-congruence in particular appear to be underexplored. Similarly, the moderating role of involvement on the different types of congruence has been very scarcely considered. It should be stressed that adapting findings developed for celebrities does not appear to be a solution in this context as the differences in the action mechanisms of the variables are not yet well understood and are often found to be very remote from that suggested by theoretical considerations and researchers' intuition (Schouten et al., 2019; Trivedi & Sama, 2019; Xiao et al., 2018).

2.3 | Basic theories

The relevance and methods of operation of three forms of congruence - (1) the brand, (2) the actual self or (3) the ideal self - are explained by two theories: (1) Kelman's (1961) theory on opinion change and (2) Kahle et al.'s (1986) social adaptation theory. Involvement is conceptualized by (3) Petty et al.'s (1981) elaboration likelihood model.

These theories have been found to work well together (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and have also been used simultaneously in the prior research (e.g., Y. Lee & Koo, 2016).

2.4 | Theory on opinion change

The theory on opinion change explains the impacts of the actual self and the ideal self. It is a fundamental theory of opinion formation and is designed to help investigators identify the motivations that underlie opinion-changing processes. The effect of brand endorsement on advertising effectiveness is determined by identification (with the endorser). When consumers believe that they share interests, values, or characteristics with an endorser, they are more likely to adopt the endorser's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. This belief can accrue either from *congruence with the actual self*, which is the degree to which individuals perceive that they have commonalities with another individual, or from *congruence with the ideal self*, which is the desire to be like another individual (Basil, 1996; Kelman, 1961).

2.5 | Social adaptation theory

Social adaptation theory illustrates the remaining form of congruence, specifically, the congruence between endorser and brand. This implies that the adaptive significance of information will determine its impact. The processing of information is based on the usefulness of adaptation. If a perceiver finds that a particular source of information does not facilitate adaptation, he or she will stop processing that source (Kahle & Homer, 1985). Based on this reasoning, Kamins (1990) demonstrated that the physical attractiveness of a celebrity endorser positively affects consumers' evaluations of a brand used to enhance one's attractiveness but is of no use if a brand's product has no relationship to physical attractiveness. In general, it can be assumed that when endorsers exhibit any type of high brand congruence, a high level of expertise and credibility is assumed by perceivers (Dwivedi & Johnson, 2013; Y. Lee & Koo, 2015).

2.6 | Elaboration likelihood model

The elaboration likelihood model explains the interplay of involvement with the three forms of congruence. It is based on two basic assumptions: (1) People are motivated to hold correct attitudes. (2) Although people want to hold correct attitudes, the amount and nature of issue-relevant elaboration in which people are willing or able to engage to evaluate a message vary with individual and situational factors.

The amount of cognitive processing performed for an attitude change depends on the involvement. Attitude changes occur through two routes: a peripheral route that minimizes cognitive processing and a central route that requires intense processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Low involvement occurs when the interest in a stimulus is low (Antil, 1984). The importance of persuasive arguments is small while superficial characteristics are important (Holzwarth et al., 2006; Petty et al., 1981; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Attitude change travels through the peripheral route along with simple cues associated with the issue (Roozen & Claeys, 2010). In contrast, in high-involvement conditions, consumers search for information more intensively (Coulter et al., 2003). They are devoted to learning about the true merits of a product and exert the necessary cognitive effort to process issue-relevant arguments (Petty et al., 1983). Elaboration becomes more likely. In this case, the attitude travels through the central route whereby a person exercises diligent consideration of the information (Roozen & Claeys, 2010). The research in cognitive and social psychology provides strong support for the view that, sometimes, people engage in “controlled,” “deep,” “systematic,” and/or “effortful” analyses of stimuli, and, other times, their analyses are better characterized as “automatic,” “shallow,” “heuristic,” and/or “mindless” (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

2.7 | Theory integration

The elaboration likelihood model can serve as a bracket that helps to tie together Kelman's (1961) theory on opinion change and (2) Kahle et al.'s (1986) social adaptation theory. Petty et al. (1981) suggested that many theories of attitude change could be roughly placed along the elaboration continuum. In their 1986 work, Petty and Cacioppo discuss their elaboration likelihood model with numerous other theories. They thereby convey information on how to harmoniously integrate other theories into their elaboration likelihood model. They provide the general statement that many other theories consider *either* only (1) low involvement situations, where attitude change travels along a peripheral route or (2) high-involvement conditions, where attitude travels along a central route. Therefore, when integrating a theory in the elaboration likelihood model, it must be checked for whether it is based on (1) low or (2) high involvement conditions. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) explicitly mention Kelman's (1961) theory on opinion change and classify it as a theory whose assumptions and conditions describe a process of attitude change driven by simple affective cues. Therefore, it would operate under low involvement conditions. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) do not refer to Kahle et al.'s (1986) social adaptation theory (probably because both works were published in the same year). Therefore, based on Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) general statement, in the course of hypothesis development, it will be explored whether the theory classifies as *either* superficial, symbolic information with no data on the true merits of the product or as argumentative, evidence-based information. An important addition to this issue is provided by the works of Y. Lee and Koo (2016) and Handriana and Wisandiko (2017), which forge a link between the elaboration likelihood model and social adaptation theory. For example, Y. Lee and Koo's (2016) work on celebrity endorsement uses both theories to infer that product endorser congruence on the level of expertise and

physical attractiveness is more intensively processed under high-involvement conditions.

3 | HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

In the following hypotheses, the roles of the three types of congruence will be introduced based on the example of the endorsement of “Butcher Box” by Alyse Parker. As most of the subjects of this study have not yet been investigated for influencers, other types of endorsers, especially celebrities and different types of online endorsers (e.g., online reviewers, bloggers), will be considered.

Although the findings on these types of endorsers can provide some clues, one must not lose track of their differences from influencers. Celebrities are regularly considered to be more aloof and distant from users than influencers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Schouten et al., 2019). However, other types of online endorsement (user-generated content, e.g., online reviewers) can be understood as being more grounded and similar to an average user (Schach, 2018). Overall, influencers can be located between celebrity endorsement and other forms of user-generated content (Newman, 2015). In the course of hypothesis development, it will be investigated whether such differences can impact the expected outcomes.

3.1 | The effects of congruence with the brand, the actual self and the desired self

The endorsement of the meat deliverer “Butcher Box” by the vegan influencer Alyse Parker angered the brand's fans. They stated that they found the endorsement incongruous and ridiculous (Parker, 2020). The reasons for this can be found in social adaptation theory, which states that the effectiveness of an endorsement is tied to the degree to which the image, personality, or expertise of the endorser fits the advertised product or brand (Basil, 1996; Kelman, 1961). Even a simple match between the physical characteristics of spokespersons and the perceived characteristics of brands produces effects in product evaluations (d'Astous & Bitz, 1995; Kanungo & Pang, 1973; McSweeney & Bierley, 1984).

Consumers utilize a source of information only to the extent that it facilitates adaptation to environmental conditions. If there is a match between endorser and brand, the endorser becomes an effective source of information with regard to the effectiveness or benefits of the brand (Kamins, 1990). However, if congruence is lacking, unfavorable product evaluations will result because consumers must change their cognitive structures (Kanungo & Pang, 1973).

Numerous scholars have argued that celebrity-brand congruence is a determinant of endorsement effectiveness (e.g., Till et al., 2008; Till & Busler, 1998, 2000). Notably, Choi and Rifon (2012) argued that congruity enhances ad attitude while Kahle and Homer (1985) showed that congruity increases the trustworthiness of communication. However, the process of how and to what extent these findings transfer to influencers is unknown. In theory, there are two opposing schools of

thought arguing *either* for a *very high* or *very low* importance relative to other endorser types (Breves et al., 2019). Proponents of a *very high* importance of congruence argue that influencer marketing is experienced as regular communication without (pure) persuasive intentions. If media users notice a mismatch between the brand and the influencer, they might cognitively stumble over the unsuitable affiliation and consequently perceive the influencer and his or her message to be less credible. They are likely to assume a persuasive and commercial intent as they feel that the influencer wants to palm off the product on them (Evans et al., 2017; Koernig & Boyd, 2009). Therefore, congruence between influencers and brands would be of very high importance. Opponents of this line of thought argue that brand congruence is overshadowed by interpersonal connection. As media users perceive an influencer as one of them, they will seek highly personal advice. As long as this is provided, an actual connection between the influencer and the brand will be irrelevant (Breves et al., 2019).

In the empirical research, Schouten et al. (2019) hypothesized that this type of congruence will be *more pronounced* for influencers than celebrities. This was presumed to be the case because influencers are viewed as representative of particular domains of interest, such as “beauty vloggers,” while celebrities will not have developed such a distinct, exclusive specialty (Balog et al., 2008; Schouten et al., 2019). However, Schouten et al. (2019) could not confirm this hypothesis.

Overall, it must be noted that there are high theoretical discrepancies regarding the relevance of brand congruence. To make matters more complex, empirical results have been shown to work in a different way than scholars have predicted based on theory, which highlights the relevance of further investigating this issue.

H1. Congruence between the influencer and the brand has a positive effect on (a) *post attitude* and (b) *post belief*.

The endorsement of the meat delivery service “Butcher Box” by the vegan influencer Alyse Parker also incensed her followers. Her vegan followers stated that they could no longer identify with her (Parker, 2020).

This finding may be explained by the theory on opinion change. It states that a person who identifies with an endorser is more likely to adopt modeled behaviors and to engage in advocated behaviors (Basil, 1996). Individuals like similar sources more than dissimilar ones (Byrne, 1971). This preference facilitates the flow of information as perceived communication barriers are lower and communication volume becomes higher. Individuals also feel more comfortable choosing a similar source due to presumed common needs (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). Additionally, bearing in mind that consumers use brands to signal their identity and reaffirm their self-image (Bodner & Prelec, 2005; Dunning, 2005), actual self-congruence with the endorser facilitates perceivers to adopt their (positive) perception of the brand.

In the event of actual self-congruence, the persuasiveness of a celebrity endorser increases (Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Pradhan et al., 2014). This should be even more true for influencers. In contrast to celebrities, influencers are perceived as people “like you and me” (Kamps & Schetter, 2018; Wiedmann et al., 2010). In Djafarova and

Rushworth's (2017) qualitative interviews on the differences between celebrities and influencers, the participants expressed that it was highly important that an influencer was similar to them (e.g., in terms of personal taste, income or any other reference point). This was not true for celebrities who were perceived as aloof individuals who inhabit another world. This finding was reflected by Shan et al. (2020) who argue that the extent of consumers' actual self-congruence with an influencer leads to a more positive attitude toward brand content.

As research on the effect of similarity for genuine influencers is relatively scarce, further insight can be gained by considering other types of online endorsers: Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019) argued that a blogger who was perceived as similar to the information seeker was more influential. Electronic word of mouth (EWOM) stemming from demographically similar sources is more influential than information from dissimilar sources (Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Similarity is crucial in determining credibility perceptions and attitudes toward user-generated content (Ayeh et al., 2013). Of course, it cannot be definitively stated whether these findings developed for other, smaller types of online endorsers apply to influencers with the same strength (Schach, 2018).

H2. Actual self-congruence between the consumer and the influencer has a positive effect on (a) *post attitude* and (b) *post belief*.

Alyse Parker's endorsement of “Butcher Box” enraged a third group of followers. These were the followers striving toward a vegan diet. They expressed that they could no longer admire her as their role model and were highly disappointed (Parker, 2020). In light of these findings, the question arises as to the role played by identity in the context of an influencer endorsement. According to the theory on opinion change, individuals also identify with models that fit their perception of how they would like to be. These models are defined as an actual or imaginary individual conceived as having significant relevance upon an individual's evaluations, aspirations, or behavior (Park & Lessig, 1977). Hence, in an attempt to achieve their ideal self-image, consumers tend to conform to attitudes and behaviors if an endorser's image is congruent with their ideal self-image (Choi & Rifon, 2012).

Empirical findings show that consumers reject brands endorsed by celebrities who do not match their ideal self (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). Congruence with the desired self induces favorable responses to an advertisement (Choi & Rifon, 2012) and positively impacts ad attitude (Çakır & Çakır, 2015). It is, however, not guaranteed that these findings can be adapted to influencers. Celebrities are generally labeled as representing an aspirational reference group for consumers (Dwivedi et al., 2014). They are perceived as highly superficial individuals who exist on a level that consumers would like to reach but cannot actually do so (Temperley & Tangen, 2006). In contrast, consumers perceive influencers as being closer to themselves, less superficial and more down-to-earth, endowing them with great powers of persuasion (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) expressed that the promotion of fitness DVDs to address weight-related problems was more persuasive if carried out by influencers than

by celebrities. They argued that an influencer was likely to be perceived as having been overweight while a celebrity was considered to be above such ordinary problems. These findings, however, are refuted by Schouten et al. (2019), who found that desired self-congruence was even more important for influencers than celebrities. In light of these conflicting results, the verification of the relevance of ideal self-congruence appears to be a matter of high relevance. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H3. Ideal self-congruence with the influencer has a positive effect on (a) *post attitude* and (b) *post belief*.

3.2 | The moderating effect of involvement on congruence with the brand, actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence according to the elaboration likelihood model

The elaboration likelihood model suggests that, under high-involvement conditions, strong arguments offer more cues to remember than weak arguments and are thus more persuasive. In contrast, under low-involvement conditions, peripheral cues such as admiration of the source are likely to have great impact on persuasion regardless of the argument's strength. Because in high-involvement situations, individuals are more motivated to devote cognitive resources to the cognitively taxing and incremental process of assessing an endorsement of a brand, they pay attention to the quality of an argument and make inferences about the relationship between the brand and its endorser (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; J. G. Lee & Park, 2014; Sirgy & Su, 2000).

Empirically, it has been found that the impacts of endorser-product match develop in a stronger way when consumers are motivated and able to elaborate on information (J. G. Lee & Park, 2014; Peracchio & Tybout, 1996). These findings suggest that the congruence between brand and endorser requires a high amount of cognitive processing so that persuasion travels through the direct route. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H4. The level of involvement positively moderates the impact of congruence between the influencer and the brand on (a) *post attitude* and (b) *post belief*.

In their discussion, Petty and Cacioppo (1986) indicated that actual and ideal self-congruence might be more relevant under low rather than high involvement conditions. Although this is an issue that has been acknowledged to be theoretically relevant, relatively little consideration has been given to it. It has been generally stated that studies exploring the interplay of involvement and personality issues are limited (Ekstam & Bjurling, 2018). Fleck et al. (2012), for example, have mentioned that it might be relevant to refine their results on the questions of congruence of celebrity endorsers for different involvement conditions. The role of involvement might even vary among types of social media endorsements. For example, under high involvement conditions, endorsements by influencers have been found to generate higher brand

attitudes than other forms of social media endorsements (Ekstam & Bjurling, 2018). It is thus apparent that involvement is a variable that varies individually, and the question of how it interacts with the three types of congruence in influencer marketing is relevant.

Johar and Sirgy (1991) used the elaboration likelihood model to introduce their concept of the "self-congruity route." The self-congruity route to persuasion describes a psychological process in which consumers focus on source cues and match those cues to their actual and/or ideal self-concept. This route is employed when the involvement level is low as actual/ideal self-congruity classifies as lowly cognitively taxing, holistic and simplistic criteria (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). However, there are also examples of contradictions to this theory. Under high-involvement conditions, consumers tend to rely more on cues; require more information and, in general, think harder. Therefore, it is possible that consumers also process the forms of the actual self and the ideal self in a stronger way (Racherla et al., 2012). In the context of online product reviews, Racherla et al. (2012) found that the effect of perceived similarity between consumer and reviewer was *even greater* under high involvement conditions.

We are now faced with the contradictory scenario of the findings of Johar and Sirgy (1991) and those of Racherla et al. (2012). Against this backdrop, it has to be discussed which of these studies developed the most pertinent results. It becomes apparent that while Johar and Sirgy (1991) consider *multiple variables*, Racherla et al. (2012) merely focus on manipulating *the one and only variable* actual self-congruence. Against this backdrop, it can be assumed, that Racherla et al.'s (2012) participants only processed actual self-congruence in a stronger way because the other relevant information that would normally have been processed under high involvement conditions were missing. Perhaps actual self-congruence was used as a proxy to guess this information. Hence, based on this discussion, it can be supposed the evaluation of the actual and ideal self-congruence of the endorser does not require much cognitive processing and is therefore based on symbolic information. This contradictory situation renders an investigation into this issue highly interesting, and to verify our assumption, we propose the following hypotheses.

H5. The level of involvement negatively moderates the impact of actual self-congruence with the influencer on (a) *post attitude* and (b) *post belief*.

H6. The level of involvement negatively moderates the impact of ideal self-congruence with the influencer on (a) *post attitude* and (b) *post belief*.

3.3 | From post perception to brand behavior

Was the anger of the fans of "Butcher Box" or Alyse Parker a rather superficial occurrence, affecting mainly the single endorsement, or did it have deeper, more lasting consequences for the brand?

In reviewing the literature reviews of influencer endorsements in the context of congruence issues, it becomes apparent that most

studies have focused on the impacts on the perception of the influencer or the post. In contrast, the impacts of influencers on brand trust and purchase intention have been found to be underexplored (Hermenda et al., 2019; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Kolarova, 2018). However, for the brand's decision regarding the endorsement, the tangible consequences of that decision are also a matter of high relevance (Jin & Ryu, 2020). In particular, purchase intention can be understood as a widely used marketing tool to estimate the effectiveness of a marketing strategy, which can be used to predict sales and market share (Morwitz, 2012). Therefore, we go a step further in exploring the effects on brand trust and purchase intention.

Trust in a brand can be built through engagement and relationships with the brand (Habibi et al., 2014); however, trust can also be transferred. Trust transfer occurs when initial trust in a target (a person, a group, or an organization) turns into trust in another target (Stewart, 2003). For example, consumers' trust in another consumer's communication in a social media brand community can be transferred to trust in an associated brand (Liu et al., 2018). Trust can alter the favorableness of consumers' opinions and increase the perceived trustworthiness of the endorsed brand (F. Li & Miniard, 2006). This suggests that trust in a social media influencer could also transfer to a brand that the influencer uses or recommends (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the fundamental question of whether purchase intention can be impacted by influencers is controversial. Some scholars affirm this possibility (Lisichkova & Othman, 2017; McCormick, 2016) while others negate it (Hermenda et al., 2019).

To reconcile these positions, it has been supposed that influencers generally do not directly influence purchase intention; however, there could be an indirect effect through perceptual or behavioral variables (Jamil & Rameez ul Hassan, 2014; Johansen & Guldvik, 2017). Therefore, it can be suggested that brand trust could work as a variable impacting purchase intention as brand trust can be a building block for purchase intention (Dodds et al., 1991).

H7. (a) Post attitude and (b) post belief have positive effects on *brand trust*.

H8. Brand trust has a positive effect on *purchase intention*.

4 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

4.1 | Analyzed brands: Nike and Mercedes

To select suitable brands, a pretest ($n = 30$) was conducted. In the course of the pretest, the participants assessed eight brand scenarios for the perceived level of involvement on a six-item scale adapted from Laurent and Kapferer (1985). All brands were famous throughout Germany where the present research was performed (Junker, 2018). This factor is an important prerequisite because perceptions of brand personality traits are formed by a consumer's prior contact with a brand (Plummer, 1985). The results revealed that the involvement

level differed the most and with the highest significance level for the two following scenarios: A Nike unisex sports bag as a low-involvement product ($\text{Nike}_{\text{involvement}} = 1.980$, $\text{SE}_{\text{Nike}} = 0.084$, $\text{Mercedes}_{\text{involvement}} = 3.997$, $\text{SE}_{\text{Mercedes}} = 0.069$, $p < .05$, $t = 2.101$). A subsequent variance analysis comparing the brands by means of Mäder's (2004) personality scale identified that significant differences between the brand personality of Mercedes and Nike were perceived ($p < .01$).

4.2 | Pretest and stimulus material

The stimulus material consisted of an influencer profile including a post about the endorsed product. To avoid legal issues, profile pictures of existing influencers were simulated with images of similar-looking individuals from image databases. These pictures were completed with the characteristics of the influencers (e.g., field of interest, life motto) inspired by the real role models.

The investigation required influencers to fit well (badly) with the analyzed brands Mercedes and Nike. To select an appropriate set of influencers, a pretest was conducted ($n = 30$), in which the participants assessed the personalities of the *Mercedes* and *Nike* brands as well as a set of 12 influencers on a scale adapted from Mäder (2004). The scale includes five personality constructs: "Attractiveness," "Reliability," "Temperament," "Stability" and "Naturalness." This scale was explicitly developed to measure the personality of a brand *and* an endorser, offering an advantage for the present study (e.g., the scale of Aaker, 1997).

To assess the fit of the brands and influencers, the squared Euclidean distance of the perceived differences of all five personality constructs was calculated (Pradhan et al., 2014). The pretest revealed the following results: the well-fitting endorser of Nike (Nr. 3, inspired by the real influencer "Chick'N'Kicks") was a sporty-looking young woman. Her life motto was "good vibes, good kicks and power." The well-fitting endorser of Mercedes (Nr. 1, inspired by the real influencer "Grey Fox") was an elegantly dressed gentleman. His field of interest was high-quality products of refined design and fine artisanship. Finally, influencer Nr. 2 (inspired by the real influencer "Hawtchocolate Christina"), who was predetermined to be a bad fit for Mercedes *and* Nike, was a shy-looking young woman whose main interest was food products, especially chocolate. (The stimuli can be found in Figure 1.)

4.3 | Survey design

The study employed an online survey with five-point scales to measure the answers of the subjects. Overall, eight variables were considered: Brand Congruence, Actual Self-congruence, Ideal Self-congruence, Involvement, Post Attitude, Post Belief and change in Brand Trust and Purchase Intention. Change was explicitly selected to avoid skewing the results by prior attitudes/intentions or a subjective previously developed desire for the concrete product. In the context of the Mercedes brand, a hypothetical purchase intention ("If I could



FIGURE 1 Stimulus material [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

afford...") was applied as not all of the participants had the necessary solvency. Actual and Ideal self-congruence were measured on one-item scales adapted from Reed (2004). Involvement was measured with a six-item scale adapted from Laurent and Kapferer (1985). A four-item scale adapted from Aaker (2000) was used to measure post attitude. Beltrami's (1982) six-item scale was employed to measure post belief. Finally, two-item scales adapted from Wiedmann et al. (2014) were used for Brand Trust and Purchase Intention.

4.4 | Data collection and analysis

The data collection occurred in Germany via a randomized online survey shared on the popular German research platforms SurveyCircle, PollPool and Thesius as well as among students of German universities from May through September 2019. Only participants who stated that they knew and followed at least one social influencer were eligible for participation. Data on 605 participants were collected. After running the rigorous algorithm Time_RSI, which detects invalid answers by means of the criteria of speed and consistency (Leiner, 2013), valid data from 547 participants (65.3% female, average age: 25 years) were employed. The age distribution was as follows: Age₁₈₋₂₀: 12.6%, Age₂₁₋₂₅: 54.9%, Age₂₆₋₃₀: 24.3%, Age₃₁₋₃₅: 3.3%, Age_{older than 35}: 4.7%. The distributions of occupations were as follows: Student: 58.9%, Employee, 31.0%, Self-employed: 4.3%, Retiree: 1.2%, Other: 4.6%. The relatively young average age and the higher relative proportion of females may be rooted in the fact that influencer marketing appeals more to the younger generation and to women (Nirschl & Steinberg, 2018).

Manipulation checks were carried out by means of variance analysis in SPSS. To reveal the relationships between the variables, we then built a reflective structural equation model in SmartPLS. PLS SEM was appropriate due to its ability to solve the entire system of

equations simultaneously through iteration using maximum likelihood (ML) rather than estimating the parameters of each equation independently (Hayes et al., 2017). This consisted of an obvious advantage in light of the complexity of our model involving numerous sequential constructs. Moreover, SEM also has the non-negligible advantage of accounting for random measurement error when estimating relevant effects involving latent variables (Hayes et al., 2017).

4.5 | Theoretical model

We examine and build on our conceptual framework (Figure 2a-c). We assess the effect of brand congruence, actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence on brand trust in analysis 1 (Figure 2a). In analysis 2, we examine the effect of brand congruence, actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence on the intermediary variables post attitude and post belief and their impact on brand trust (Figure 2b). In analysis 3, we extend our conceptual model (Figure 2c) to examine the moderating role of involvement on the relationship among brand congruence, actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence on the one side and post attitude and belief on the other side.

4.6 | Manipulation checks

In the course of the questionnaire, the participants were randomly assigned (1) to a group with either high or low personality congruence between influencer and brand and (2) to a *high* or *low* involvement group.

To verify whether the manipulation of the stimulus material in terms of (1) personality congruence between the influencer and the brand as well as (2) involvement level was perceived as intended, manipulation checks were performed using ANOVAs. The ANOVA on personality congruence between influencer

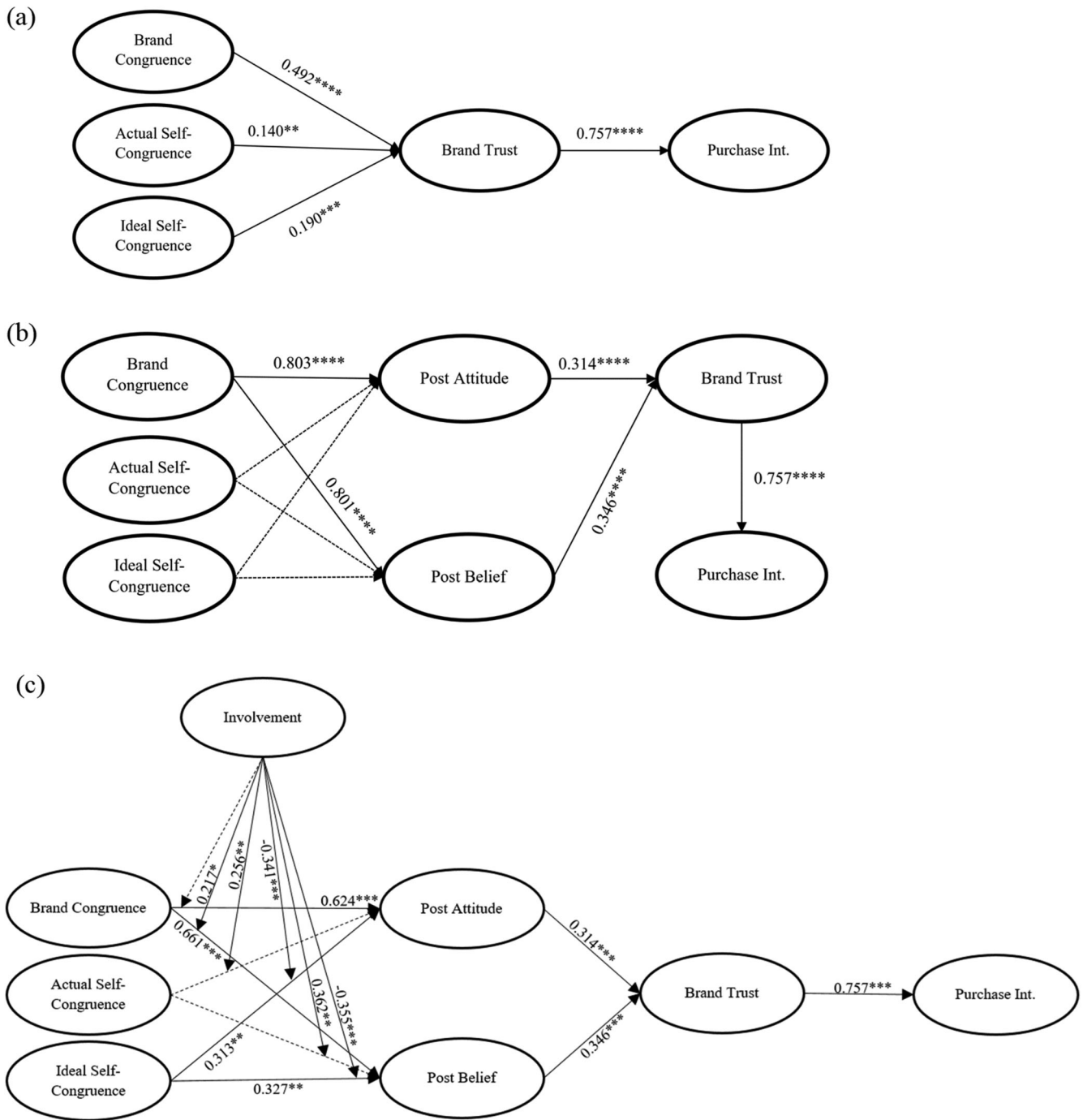


FIGURE 2 (a) Results of study 1. (b) Results of study 2. (c) Results of study 3. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$. **** $p \leq .0001$

and the brand ($N_{Low_Congruence} = 280$, $N_{High_Congruence} = 267$) ascertained a significant difference among the compared groups ($M_{Low_Congruence} = 1.757$, $SE_{Low_Congruence} = 0.060$, $M_{High_Congruence} = 4.075$, $SE_{High_Congruence} = 0.059$, $p < .0001$, $t = 455.339$). Similarly, the ANOVA on involvement ($N_{Low_Involvement} = 282$, $N_{High_Involvement} = 265$) produced significant results ($M_{Low_Involvement} = 2.358$, $SE_{Low_Involvement} = 0.051$, $M_{High_Involvement} = 3.081$, $SE_{High_Involvement} = 0.060$, $p < .0001$, $t = 152.149$).

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Model validation

5.1.1 | Reliability and validity

Combining the hypotheses with the results, the structural equation models displayed in Figure 2a-c can be obtained. The model evaluations are displayed in Tables 1-5.

	Cronbach's alpha	Average variance extracted	Composite reliability
Post Attitude	0.956	0.884	0.968
Post Belief	0.943	0.816	0.957
Brand Trust	0.969	0.970	0.985
Involvement	0.614	0.623	0.908
Purchase Intention	0.949	0.949	0.974

TABLE 1 Measurement model evaluation**TABLE 2** R² and Q²

	R ²	Q ²
Study 1		
Brand Trust	0.381	0.253
Purchase Intention	0.572	0.543
Study 2		
Post Attitude	0.686	0.454
Post Belief	0.679	0.444
Brand Trust	0.408	0.396
Purchase Intention	0.572	0.543
Study 3		
Post Attitude	0.692	0.571
Post Belief	0.685	0.514
Brand Trust	0.408	0.396
Purchase Intention	0.573	0.543

The models were first checked for common method bias by means of Harman's (1976) single factor method. The common factor explained 43% of the variance; this was smaller than 50%, and no common method bias was present (Eichhorn, 2014).

To evaluate the internal validity of the experiment, the age and gender composition of the experimental groups were evaluated. The results indicated that there were no significant differences across the conditions with respect to participant age ($F(1, 547) = 0.347, p = .932, \eta^2 = 0.005$). A frequency analysis revealed that participant gender was approximately evenly distributed across experimental groups ($\eta^2 = 1.717, p = .424$).

We then checked the reliability and validity of the models. As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of each variable was 0.614–0.969, indicating moderate to excellent reliability (Cronbach, 1951). Composite reliability was 0.908–0.985 across the set of constructs indicating internal consistency (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Netemeyer et al., 2003). The average variance extracted was 0.623–0.949 (Table 1) across the set of constructs signaling the model's convergence (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All of the factor loadings were greater than 0.7, which means that the questions are highly correlated with the corresponding variables (Hulland, 1999).

The level of discriminant validity was determined by means of the Fornell–Larcker criterion, the exclusion of cross-loadings and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (Hair, Sarstedt, et al., 2014; Henseler et al., 2015). The Fornell–Larcker criterion, according to which the

average variance of each latent construct must outpace the construct's highest squared correlation with any other latent construct (Hair et al., 2012), was fulfilled in all models (Table 3a–c). Moreover, all models were free of cross loadings. However, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of Ad Attitude/Post Belief was problematic as it was >0.850 in model 2 and model 3. All other ratios were between 0.108–0.790 in model 1, 0.108–0.790 in model 2, and 0.042–0.836 in model 3 (Table 4a–c), affirming discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015).

5.1.2 | Model fit and evaluation

As shown in Table 2, the coefficient of determination (R²) of all variables ranged from 0.31–0.572 in model 1, 0.408–0.686 in model 2 and 0.408–0.692 in model 3; this indicates moderate explanatory power in model 1 and moderate to substantial explanatory power in models 2 and 3 (Henseler et al., 2009). The predictive power of the endogenous constructs was high in all models as Q² was 0.253–0.543 in model 1, 0.395–0.543 in model 2 and 0.396–0.571 in model 3 (Table 2) across the set of endogenous constructs (Hair, Ringle, et al., 2014; Hair, Sarstedt, et al., 2014). The risk of multicollinearity was low as the VIF value was 1.000–2.108 in model 1, 1.000–4.263 in model 2 and 1.000–4.238 in model 3. It thus remained beneath the critical threshold of 5 in all models (Kline, 2016).

Most path coefficients and moderating effects were influential, significant ($p < .05$) and had small-to-large effect sizes. Exceptions were actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence on brand trust in model 1; actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence on post attitude and post belief in model 2 and, in model 3, the paths from actual self-congruence to post attitude (H2a) and post belief (H2b) as well as the moderating effect of involvement on the relationship between brand congruence and post attitude (H4a) (Table 5a–c).

A key finding from analysis 1 is that - without taking into account involvement - brand congruence seems to be the only impactful form of congruence.

Analysis 2 reproduces these results with respect of the impacts of the three forms of congruence on post attitude and post belief. Only brand congruence is able to impact these two constructs if involvement is not considered. This indicates support only for H1a and H3a.

From key findings from analysis 3, it can be stated that brand congruence and ideal self-congruence both have significant positive effects on post attitude (H1a, H3a) and post belief (H1b, H3b) while

TABLE 3 Squared correlations among latent variables

(a) Model 1					
	Brand trust	Ideal self-congruence	Actual self-congruence	Brand congruence	Purchase intention
Brand Trust	1.000	-	-	-	-
Ideal Self-congruence	0.137	1.000	-	-	-
Actual Self-congruence	0.109	0.526	1.000	-	-
Brand Congruence	0.288	0.025	0.012	1.000	-
Purchase Intention	0.572	0.117	0.101	0.207	1.000

(b) Model 2							
	Actual self-congruence	Brand congruence	Brand trust	Ideal self-congruence	Post attitude	Post belief	Purchase intention
Actual Self-congruence	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-
Brand Congruence	0.012	1.000	-	-	-	-	-
Brand Trust	0.109	0.288	1.000	-	-	-	-
Ideal Self-congruence	0.526	0.025	0.137	1.000	-	-	-
Post Attitude	0.040	0.672	0.380	0.056	1.000	-	-
Post Belief	0.036	0.667	0.385	0.053	0.765	1.000	-
Purchase Intention	0.101	0.207	0.572	0.117	0.293	0.293	1.000

(c) Model 3								
Latent variable	Post attitude	Ideal self-congruence	Brand trust	Brand congruence	Actual self-congruence	Involvement	Post belief	Purchase intention
Post Attitude	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideal Self-congruence	0.056	1.000	-	-	-	-	-	-
Brand Trust	0.380	0.137	1.000	-	-	-	-	-
Brand Congruence	0.672	0.025	0.288	1.000	-	-	-	-
Actual Self-congruence	0.040	0.526	0.109	0.012	1.000	-	-	-
Involvement	0.002	0.018	0.000	0.009	0.024	1.000	-	-
Post Belief	0.765	0.053	0.385	0.667	0.036	0.005	1.000	-
Purchase Intention	0.293	0.117	0.572	0.207	0.101	0.006	0.293	1.000

actual self-congruence were *not* found to have an effect (H2a, H2b). The level of involvement *positively* moderates the effects of brand congruence and ideal self-congruence on post belief and the effect of ideal self-congruence on post attitude (H4b, H6a, H6b). It *negatively* moderates the effect of ideal self-congruence on post attitude and post belief (H5a, H5b). It has no moderating effect on the relationship of brand congruence on post attitude.

Post attitude and post belief have a positive effect on brand trust (H7a, H7b), which in turn has a positive effect on purchase intention (H8).

6 | DISCUSSION

6.1 | Theoretical implications

In this study, the effects of influencers' congruence with a brand as well as the actual and ideal self of the consumer on post attitude and believability were investigated. The moderating effects of

involvement were recorded. In addition, the subsequent effects of post attitude on post believability on brand trust as well as the effect of brand trust on purchase intention were substantiated.

In line with social adaptation theory, brand congruence was found to have a significant positive effect on post attitude and belief. The effect of brand congruence is the strongest compared to those of the other two types of congruencies. In this way, a controversial question of influencer marketing has been answered. Breves et al. (2019) outlined that congruence between brand and influencer might be either of *very high* or *very low* importance for the influencer. Our research is in line with the arguments of the proponents of very high importance, stating that any mismatch of influencer and brand would heavily disrupt viewers' trust as they would assume a purely commercial endorsement motive (Evans et al., 2017; Koernig & Boyd, 2009).

In contrast to what the theory on opinion change had predicted, actual self-congruence was not found to have an effect. Due to a relative lack of prior research on this issue, this hypothesis was also based on other forms of online endorsements such as user-generated content; however, the findings of Schach (2018) should be considered as

TABLE 4 Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio

(a) Model 1		Actual self-congruence	Brand congruence	Brand trust	Ideal self-congruence	Purchase intention				
Actual Self-congruence										
Brand Congruence		0.108								
Brand Trust		0.336	0.545							
Ideal Self-congruence		0.725	0.159	0.375						
Purchase Intention		0.327	0.467	0.790	0.352					
(b) Model 2		Actual self-congruence	Brand congruence	Brand trust	Ideal self-congruence	Post attitude	Post belief	Purchase intention		
Actual Self-congruence										
Brand Congruence		0.108								
Brand Trust		0.336	0.545							
Ideal Self-congruence		0.725	0.159	0.375						
Post Attitude		0.205	0.836	0.64	0.242					
Post Belief		0.194	0.841	0.648	0.236	0.920				
Purchase Intention		0.327	0.467	0.79	0.352	0.568	0.572			
(c) Model 3.		Post attitude	Ideal self-congruence	Brand trust	Brand congruence	Actual self-congruence *	Brand congruence *	Ideal self-congruence *	Post believability	Purchase intention
Post Attitude										
Ideal Self-congruence		0.242								
Brand Trust		0.64	0.375							
Brand Congruence		0.836	0.159	0.545						
Actual Self-congruence		0.205	0.725	0.336	0.108					
Involvement		0.036	0.161	0.071	0.071	0.194				
Brand Congruence *		0.093	0.051	0.069	0.039	0.062	0.042			
Actual Self-congruence *		0.078	0.132	0.033	0.062	0.206	0.077	0.16		
Involvement		0.037	0.118	0.007	0.052	0.134	0.123	0.211	0.781	
Ideal Self-congruence *		0.037	0.118	0.007	0.052	0.134	0.123	0.211	0.781	
Involvement		0.037	0.118	0.007	0.052	0.134	0.123	0.211	0.781	
Post Believability		0.92	0.236	0.648	0.841	0.194	0.055	0.081	0.097	0.05
Purchase Intention		0.568	0.352	0.79	0.467	0.327	0.123	0.068	0.033	0.572

TABLE 5 Model evaluation

(a) Model 1									
	β /Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	Confidence interval (2.5%-97.5%)		t	f ²	VIF	
				lower limit	upper limit				
Actual Self-congruence -> Brand Trust	0.140**	0.139	0.054	0.134	0.144	2.600	0.015	2.108	
Brand Congruence -> Brand Trust	0.492****	0.492	0.031	0.489	0.495	15.756	0.380	1.026	
Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention	0.757****	0.757	0.026	0.755	0.759	29.551	1.339	1.000	
Ideal Self-congruence -> Brand Trust	0.190***	0.190	0.055	0.185	0.195	3.441	0.027	2.138	
(b) Model 2.									
	β /Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	Confidence interval (2.5%-97.5%)		t	f ²	VIF	
				lower limit	upper limit				
Actual Self-congruence -> Post Attitude	0.070	0.070	0.037	0.067	0.073	1.906	0.007	2.108	
Actual Self-congruence -> Post Belief	0.060	0.060	0.035	0.057	0.063	1.692	0.005	2.108	
Brand Congruence -> Post Attitude	0.803****	0.803	0.018	0.801	0.805	44.379	1.997	1.026	
Brand Congruence -> Post Belief	0.801****	0.801	0.017	0.800	0.802	46.211	1.946	1.026	
Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention	0.757****	0.757	0.026	0.755	0.759	29.479	1.339	1.000	
Ideal Self-congruence -> Post Attitude	0.058	0.058	0.036	0.055	0.061	1.619	0.005	2.138	
Ideal Self-congruence -> Post Belief	0.058	0.058	0.036	0.055	0.061	1.610	0.005	2.138	
Post Attitude -> Brand Trust	0.314****	0.314	0.073	0.308	0.320	4.300	0.039	4.263	
Post Belief -> Brand Trust	0.346****	0.346	0.074	0.340	0.352	4.710	0.048	4.263	
(c) Model 3									
	β /Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	Confidence interval (2.5%-97.5%)		t	f ²	VIF	
				lower limit	upper limit				
Post Attitude -> Brand Trust	0.314****	0.313	0.072	0.308	0.320	4.361	0.039	4.238	
Ideal Self-congruence -> Post Attitude	0.313**	0.322	0.121	0.303	0.323	2.654	0.016	2.143	
Ideal Self-congruence -> Post Belief	0.327**	0.325	0.124	0.317	0.337	2.642	0.016	2.143	
Ideal Self-congruence * Involvement -> Post Attitude	-0.341*	-0.354	0.15	-0.354	-0.328	2.345	0.01	2.42	
Ideal Self-congruence * Involvement -> Post Belief	-0.355*	-0.354	0.154	-0.368	-0.342	2.328	0.01	2.489	
Brand Trust -> Purchase Intention	0.757****	0.756	0.026	0.755	0.759	29.201	1.336	1	
Brand Congruence -> Post Attitude	0.624****	0.639	0.085	0.617	0.631	7.316	2.013	1.044	
Brand Congruence -> Post Belief	0.661****	0.677	0.083	0.654	0.668	7.956	1.933	1.045	
Brand Congruence * Involvement -> Post Attitude	0.217*	0.2	0.095	0.209	0.225	2.315	0.013	1.043	
Brand Congruence * Involvement -> Post Belief	0.164	0.147	0.094	0.156	0.172	1.761	0.006	1.046	
Actual Self-congruence -> Post Attitude	-0.126	-0.125	0.142	-0.138	-0.114	0.938	0.013	2.216	
Actual Self-congruence -> Post Belief	-0.216	-0.199	0.139	-0.228	-0.204	1.549	0.01	2.214	
Actual Self-congruence * Involvement -> Post Attitude	0.256*	0.256	0.171	0.242	0.270	1.557	0.006	2.462	

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

(c) Model 3								
	β /Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	Confidence interval (2.5%-97.5%) lower limit	Confidence interval (2.5%-97.5%) upper limit	t	f ²	VIF
Actual Self-congruence * Involvement -> Post Belief	0.362**	0.341	0.169	0.348	0.376	2.142	0.01	2.53
Involvement -> Post Attitude	-0.052	-0.044	0.07	-0.058	-0.046	0.912	0.019	1.06
Involvement -> Post Belief	-0.094	-0.077	0.08	-0.101	-0.087	1.233	0.019	2.53
Post Belief -> Brand Trust	0.346****	0.346	0.072	0.340	0.352	4.789	0.047	4.238

* $p \leq .05$.** $p \leq .01$.*** $p \leq .001$.**** $p \leq .0001$.

this work warned that the mechanisms used to derive these findings might not be adaptable to influencers. In fact, influencers can be seen as closer to celebrities, for whom congruence with the ideal self, not with the actual self, is more important. This also aligns with Schouten et al. (2019), who found no significant difference in similarity issues between influencers and celebrities, which, consequently, contradicts Djafarova and Rushworth (2017).

This presumption might also be reflected by the fact that, in line with social adaptation theory, ideal self-congruence was found to have significant relevance. Again, a contribution to clarifying a controversial question was presented. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) argued that congruence with the ideal self was not expected from influencers. However, Schouten et al. (2019) found that congruence with the ideal self is not only relevant for influencers but even more relevant than for celebrities. Overall, the predictions of the theory on opinion change can only be partially confirmed. These findings, at first glance, stand in conflict with the results of Sokolova and Kefi (2020) who found that actual self-congruence was relevant for influencers. Although they did not control for involvement, it can be assumed that their results are relevant for high-involvement products as they analyzed influencer endorsements for luxury brands. This would be in line with our results as the importance of actual self-congruence was demonstrated to rise with the level of involvement.

The role of involvement in the context of congruence issues was found to be underexplored even for traditional celebrity endorsers (Fleck et al., 2012). Moreover, involvement was supposed to function differently for influencers than for other endorser types (Ekstam & Bjurling, 2018; Trivedi & Sama, 2019). In accordance with the elaboration likelihood model, a positive moderating effect of involvement on brand congruence and a negative effect on ideal self-congruence were found. However, in contrast with the predictions, the moderating effect on actual self-congruence was positive. These findings are in line with a relatively isolated study by Lin and Yeh (2009) on celebrity endorsements. As an explanation/interpretation of these results, it was stated that for high-involvement products, consumers make the cognitive effort to determine what truly suits *themselves* due to the

relatively high financial risk of the investment (Choi et al., 2005; Zhu et al., 2019). Alternatively, the considerations of Racherla et al. (2012) may provide an explanation as they state that under high involvement conditions, consumers generally consider a greater variety of information including actual self-congruence.

Finally, the subsequent effects on brand trust and purchase intention were similarly investigated. In this way, clarification was provided of an issue that has been found to be underexplored (Hermenda et al., 2019; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Kolarova, 2018) but of high relevance for brands (Jin & Ryu, 2020). The results essentially confirm that *attitude toward* and *trust* in a post have an effect on brand trust; brand trust, in turn, can positively impact purchase intention. In this way, it was shown, at least indirectly, that influencers can have an impact on purchase intention.

6.2 | Managerial implications

Brand managers continue to struggle with questions of how influencer marketing is defined, what its value is, and how it should be managed. Against this backdrop, they use partially traditional advertising models (e.g., designed for celebrities) (Childers et al., 2019), which obviously produce some limitations with reference to influencer marketing. The findings of this study suggest various strategies that can be effectively employed to enhance consumers' attitudes and trust in influencers' brand-related posts as well as brand trust and purchase intention.

Based on the results of this study, to increase post attitude and post belief, social media managers can be given the following advice: Under low involvement conditions, they should primarily consider congruence with the brand. As a secondary objective, congruence with the ideal self should be envisaged. Conversely, congruence with the actual self does not need to be considered.

However, when the involvement level rises, social media managers *should* consider influencers' congruence with the actual self while congruence with the ideal self can be given less consideration.

Similarly, the impact of congruence with the brand on post belief (but not on post attitude) becomes more important under high involvement conditions.

The findings on the impacts of the three types of congruence on post attitude and post belief should also be acknowledged by influencers when considering whether to accept an endorsement. Influencers may be tempted to accept any endorsement in exchange for an endorsement fee (Breves et al., 2019). However, this study shows that a misfit of certain types of congruence might elicit unfavorable perceptions of their posts.

Furthermore, brand managers should be aware that post attitude and post belief can indeed have a positive impact on brand trust. In turn, brand trust has a positive impact on purchase intention. In this way, brand managers can be reassured that influencers can indeed increase brand trust and purchase intention.

6.3 | Limitations and future research

This study was conducted in Germany, that is, in a Western cultural setting. Therefore, specific cultural values might have impacted the results. Research from an eastern cultural perspective in the context of celebrities has suggested that the relevance of actual self and desired self might vary among eastern and western cultural contexts (Zhu et al., 2019). Therefore, in future research, the results of this study could be compared with one performed in an eastern cultural context.

In further research, more than two (extreme) levels of congruence could be employed. Meyers-Levy and Tybout (1989) suggested that a moderate level of incongruence between an expectation and an object could be beneficial if it is perceived as unexpected and interesting. This might even elicit a positive effect on ad and brand attitude (Harmon-Kizer, 2014). Against this backdrop, it could be investigated whether a mismatch may have contradictory effects in the context of influencer marketing.

Our study introduced involvement as a moderating variable. However, it also did not exclude the existence of further moderators of the three types of congruence. For example, long-term bonding might decrease the effect of congruence between influencer and brand (Breves et al., 2019).

Our research has shown that favorable influencer marketing not only impacts post perception but that it also has an impact on brand-related constructs. Future research could go a step further and consider the impacts on the revenues of a brand. In this way, interesting questions such as “What is the financial value of finding an influencer who is more congruent with the brand?” could be answered. To go a step further, it would be expedient to develop an algorithm that assesses the three types of congruence and can suggest influencers based on the brand and the target group.

An important limitation of this study is that we considered only material goods. In future research, service endorsements could also be considered. The extant research on influencers in the context of service marketing has suggested that due to their intangible nature (it is impossible to touch or see a service) and the impossibility of returning it,

consumers perceive the consumption of a service as riskier and therefore devote more cognitive processing to its purchase (Meffert et al., 2018). Against the backdrop of our study, whether brand congruence and actual self-congruence are more important for services could be investigated. Moreover, future studies could seek to replicate the reported results using divergent types of influencers, including more diverse brands, and incorporating different settings to generalize the findings.

This study represents consumers' viewpoints on influencer communication. However, to explore the process from a different perspective, it would be worthwhile to also record the opinions of influencers and practitioners on congruence issues. Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020) indicated that the perceptions of consumers, influencers and practitioners on the success factors of an endorsement might vary.

Furthermore, the possibility of personality transfer from an influencer to a brand or vice versa could be investigated. As it is possible that the repeated paring of the two subjects could provoke a perceived convergence (Ambroise et al., 2014), brands may “shape” an influencer's personality over time by means of repeated endorsements (or vice versa). It could also be investigated whether congruence could be to some extent staged. The research on celebrities has demonstrated that the perception of congruence with a brand can be impacted by the script of the advertising object (Pringle, 2004; Pringle & Binet, 2005).

7 | CONCLUSION

Brand congruence and ideal self-congruence are relevant success factors of influencers. When involvement increases, the importance of brand congruence increases. Actual self-congruence becomes more important when involvement rises while the importance of ideal self-congruence decreases. In this way, controversial and underexplored issues of influencer marketing have been addressed. In further research, the results of this study could be generalized and expanded by considering further types of congruence, more settings and more product types as well as other moderators and success factors.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and/or ethical restrictions.

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APPENDIX A.

Items (Manifest Variables) Overview

- Involvement_1: I attach great importance to [name of brand product].
 - Involvement_2: [name of brand product] interests me a lot.
 - Involvement_3 (reverse): [name of brand product] leaves me totally indifferent.
 - Involvement_4: It would give me pleasure to purchase [name of brand product] for myself.
 - Involvement_5: When you buy [name of brand product], it is a bit like giving a gift to yourself.
 - Involvement_6: When you purchase [name of brand product], you are never certain you made the right choice.
- Please describe your overall feelings toward the post
- Post_Attitude_1: bad <-> good
 - Post_Attitude_2: unpleasant <-> pleasant

Post_Attitude_3:	unfavorable <-> favorable	Brand_Trust_1:	I trust the brand in a stronger way.
Post_Attitude_4:	negative <-> positive	Brand_Trust_2:	I rely on the brand in a stronger way.
Post_Belief_1 (reverse):	convincing <-> unconvincing	Purchase_Intention_1:	I am more likely to purchase a product by the brand if I have the financial possibility.
Post_Belief_2:	not credible <-> credible	Purchase_Intention_2:	It is more probable that I would consider the purchase of a product by the brand (if I have the financial opportunity).
Post_Belief_3:	unacceptable <-> acceptable		
Post_Belief_4:	untruthful <-> truthful		
Post_Belief_5:	believable <-> unbelievable		