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## When social media influencers endorse brands: the effects of self-influencer congruence, parasocial identification, and perceived endorser motive

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### ABSTRACT

Given the prevalence of social media usage among consumers in China and the rise of social media endorsements, it is important to understand the effects of social media influencers and their product endorsements on consumers. The present study explores the effects of self-influencer congruence on brand attitude, brand engagement, and purchase intention in China's dynamic social media context. The perceived motive of social media influencer's endorsement behavior, parasocial identification with social media influencers, and their roles in the endorsement process were examined. The results of this study suggest that a high degree of congruence between the image of a social media influencer and the consumer's ideal self-image leads to effective endorsement outcomes. Parasocial identification was found to mediate the relationship between self-influencer congruence and endorsement outcomes while perceived endorser motive was found to moderate the effects of self-influencer congruence on such outcomes through parasocial identification.

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perceived endorser motive;  
attitude; engagement;  
purchase intention

## Introduction

In addition to having the world's largest number of netizens – 829 million – China has the world's most active environment for social media (CNNIC 2018). According to eMarketer (2018), more than 600 million people accessed social media regularly in 2017, from video sharing platforms like TikTok and Youku, to microblogging and social networking sites like WeChat and Sina Weibo. A McKinsey survey of 5,700 Chinese internet users reported that 95% were registered users of at least one social media site and 91% visited one in the previous six months, compared with 67% in the United States (Chiu, Lin, and Silverman 2012).

Considering that, *wang hong* (网红) – a rising group of social media influencers who focus on turning their online fame into an actual business – have increasingly

become key opinion leaders (KOLs). Social media influencers refer to individuals who have built a sizeable social network of people following them and are seen as self-made micro-celebrities (Evans et al. 2017; De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; Jin and Phua 2014). Recent studies suggest that social media influencers are perceived as significantly more trustworthy to consumers when compared to traditional celebrities because (Gräve 2017). China's social media influencers are similar to their Western counterparts in many aspects. First, they are content producers with a large number of followers. For example, the famous YouTuber PewDiePie has more than 57 million global subscribers. As one of China's most popular social media influencers, Papi Jiang is best known for her satirical videos mocking everyday life, relationships, and social issues and has gathered 44 million followers across multiple Chinese platforms. Second, these influencers are persuasive opinion leaders who have strong influence on consumer product evaluation and the decision-making process (Escalas and Bettman 2017). A product recommendation is perceived as more authentic and credible when it is communicated by an influencer compared to that by an advertiser (Jin and Phua 2014).

Despite all these similarities with their Western counterparts, Chinese social media influencers have unique characteristics due to a much-fragmented social media environment. Restrictions on foreign websites and Western social media platforms have resulted in a flourishing home-grown social landscape on which Chinese-owned properties thrive and expand. An Ogilvy report (Social@Ogilvy 2015) identified thirty-six major social media sites in China that have a significant number of users. Consumers can no longer be reached by only one or two dominant platforms, but instead require a handful overlapping platforms that are in constant flux. A more fragmented and dynamic social media ecosystem requires influencers to be able to manage and produce content catering to various audience segments across different platforms.

In recent years it has become very popular for brands to use influencer endorsements, also known as influencer marketing, to amplify brand content through KOLs. Reports indicate that Chinese online retailers such as Tmall and Taobao are some of the leading platforms to make influencer marketing an integral part of their marketing promotional mix (eMarketer 2018). In North America, more than 60% of retailers collaborate with advocates to engage with audiences online (eMarketer 2019). Despite the growth, many challenges remain, from identifying influencers who could be a good fit for the brand to measuring campaign performance associated with influencer programs. Therefore, a deep understanding of consumer perceptions and the impact of influencer endorsement is crucial for today's advertising practitioners.

A growing number of research studies have started to focus on social media influencers. Previous studies have examined motivation factors in relation to engagement with brand accounts among consumers in China and the United States (Song, Lee, and Kim 2019; Chu, Lien, and Cao 2019; Bernritter et al. 2017), impact of influencer credibility on product evaluation (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017), and the effect of different types of endorsement content, such as paid versus organic (Kim and Song 2018). However, little attention has been paid to the relationship building process between consumers and social media influencers, and its impact on consumers' evaluation of endorsement content.

To fill this gap, this study provides a theoretical investigation on consumers' perception of social media influencers in relation to their self-concept by studying the congruence effect between consumers' self-image and their perceived image of an influencer. Subsequently, we sought to understand the relationship building process between consumers and influencers through investigating the construct of prosocial identification. Furthermore, this study identifies the role of perceived endorser motive in the processing of endorsement content. The findings of this study contribute to the theoretical advancement of influencer marketing by examining the mediating and moderating functions of parasocial identification and perceived endorser motive on the effectiveness of brand endorsement. In addition, the results offer practical implications for how brand can identify appropriate influencers that resonate with consumers on social media.

## Theoretical background

### *Effectiveness of brand endorsement*

The effectiveness of brand endorsement is well documented in the literature (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983; Ohanian 1990; Bergkvist and Zhou 2016), providing insights into source effects, underlying endorsement processes, and the conditions under which the effects may be strengthened. Focusing on the qualities of an endorser, the *source credibility model* and the *source attractiveness model* suggest that the credibility of an endorser has a beneficial effect on consumers' acceptance of a message. Source credibility is commonly evaluated based on three dimensions: *expertise* refers to the extent to which a communicator is perceived as a source of valid assertions (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953); *trustworthiness* is the integrity and believability of a communicator (Erdogan 1999); and *attractiveness* is the impact liking a communicator has on the effectiveness of a message (McGuire 1985). While the extant literature has provided support for the importance of source credibility in endorsement research, this approach has been criticized in that it determines endorser effectiveness solely based on his or her qualities and overlooks other factors in the endorsement process (McCracken 1989).

Through the lens of *associative learning* (Anderson 1976), researchers found that the use of an endorser works as a positive associative link that transfers pleasant feelings about the endorser to the endorsed brand/product (Keller 1993). Similarly, the *meaning transfer model* (McCracken 1989) asserts that an endorser provides symbolic meanings to a brand/product via the associations consumers hold regarding the endorser. The cherished attributes and symbolic meanings can then be acquired by consumers through consumption as part of their self-image construction (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Yet, endorser effectiveness may not be the same due to the match between the endorser and the endorsed brand/product in terms of images and cultural meanings (McCracken 1989).

In support of that view, the *match-up hypothesis* delineates that when a *fit* exists between the image of an endorser and the image of a brand/product, consumers are likely to form positive evaluations toward the message and the brand/product (Kamins 1990). For example, when an endorser's physical attractiveness is congruent with an

attractiveness-related product (e.g. cosmetics), the match-up effect is likely to be evident (Kahle and Homer 1985). That is, the merit of the endorser-product matching information increases in the fit condition and, therefore, influences consumer evaluation as it is relative to consumers' existing knowledge structures and helps them adapt to the environment (Lynch and Schuler 1994). Koernig and Page (2002) applied the match-up hypothesis to service marketing and found that the match-up effect is significant only when the attractiveness level of a service provider is congruent with consumer expectations for the type of service. Adding to the general belief of 'what is beautiful is good', the empirical findings suggest that what is *expected* and *appropriate* regarding the endorser-product association is also important for enhancing the persuasiveness of brand endorsement (Wright 2016). As endorsers and brands/products can match up regarding a wide range of attributes, extant research has examined the congruency of expertise (Till and Busler 2000), trustworthiness (Kamins and Gupta 1994), attractiveness (Kahle and Homer 1985), personality (Batra and Homer 2004), and more. There are also other factors (e.g. cultural values) that may play an important role in determining endorser matchup effects (Choi, Lee, and Kim 2005).

### ***The effect of self-influencer congruence***

While most literature has focused on the endorser-product association, Choi and Rifon (2012) argued that consumers' relationship to an endorser is another important dimension of brand endorsement configuration. Because celebrity endorsers represent important cultural meanings and are considered a reference group that have significant relevance upon consumers' evaluations, aspirations, or behaviors (Escalas and Bettman 2005), they are likely to motivate consumers' acceptance or desire to consume endorsed brands and products as a way to obtain endorser-conveyed meanings and associations. Along that logic, Choi and Rifon (2012) found that the congruence between consumers' ideal self-image and a celebrity endorser's image significantly led to favorable consumer attitude toward the ad and increased purchase intention, while the congruence between the celebrity endorser and the endorsed product had a direct, positive impact on consumers' attitude toward the ad. Similarly, Xu and Pratt (2018) applied the ideal self-celebrity congruence model to examine the effect of social media influencer endorsement on the Chinese Generation Y in the context of destination marketing and found a positive effect of such congruence on visit intention toward the endorsed destination.

In addition to the positive effect that brand endorsement may have on consumer attitude and purchase intention, digital environment and innovative technology have created new ways for consumers to engage and interact with influencer-generated brand content. Consumer engagement activities on social media are highly dependent on the contextual conditions, and may vary based on different platforms, content, and involved subjects (Gavilances, Flatten, and Brettel 2018). Previous studies suggested that the levels of consumer engagement follow a continuum form from a lower level of engagement (e.g. consuming) to a higher level of engagement (e.g. contributing), and psychological disposition as well as motivation factors are important engagement antecedents that influence consumer responses towards brand content on social

media (Maslowska, Malthouse, and Collinger 2016). Because consumer engagement with brand content plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of social media advertising (Voorveld et al. 2018), it is, therefore, included in this research to give further insight into how consumers respond to brand endorsement on social media.

Social media influencers are content creators with celebrity status (Lou and Yuan 2019) with which the image of a social media influencer may transfer to the endorsed product and brand (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). As consumers are likely to emulate the attitude and behavior of endorsers to be like them and they use brands and products as a means by which they express and enhance their self-concepts (Sirgy 1982), they may, therefore, conform to the behavior and attitude endorsed by a social media influencer when they find the influencer's image resonant with their ideal self (Choi and Rifon 2007; Basil 1996; Xu and Pratt 2018). This is, it is reasonable to expect that self-influencer image congruence may serve as a motivational framework in the same fashion to impact consumers' evaluation toward the branded messages, engagement with brand content on social media, and brand purchase intentions. A hypothesis is therefore put forth:

**Hypothesis 1:** The extent of consumers' self-influencer congruence will positively lead to a) attitude toward brand content, b) engagement with brand content, and c) purchase intention.

### ***Parasocial identification***

In addition to exerting influences on evaluative outcomes regarding brands/products, the congruence between a celebrity endorser's image and consumers' self-concept may even drive consumers to form parasocial identification, an imaginary relationship, with the endorser (Choi and Rifon 2007). Apart from social identification, which refers to an internalization process through which individuals identify with a social group (Tajfel and Turner 1986), parasocial identification is defined as the seeming face-to-face and one-sided quasi-interactions between a media viewer and a media character (Horton and Wohl 1956). It pertains to the imagined interactions between a media viewer and a personality who appears in the media, which as a result leads to the formation of parasocial relationships (Rubin and Perse 1987).

According to Nordlund (1978), if individuals whose primary needs for companionship or interpersonal interactions are unfulfilled to a reasonable extent in their social life, they are likely to fulfill these needs through alternative means. The performance of parasocial identification is thus legitimized by the assumption that individuals employ the same cognitive processes to evaluate media characters as they do to other people in everyday life (Rubin and Perse 1987). McQuail et al. (1972) suggested that a media viewer first determines the personality of a media character and then regards him or her as a surrogate of social relationships. In this regard, both the motive to compensate for loneliness and the dependency on media usage drive a media viewer to exhibit one-sided parasocial identification with a media character (Giles 2002; Giles and Maltby 2004).

Based on Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory, initiation of the identification process is due to the perceived image-congruence between an individual and a model, including a celebrity, TV personality, or social media influencer, to name a few. The higher image-congruence an individual perceives, the more likely he or she exhibits identification with the target model. The performance of parasocial identification in traditional media could also happen on social media, given the interactivity that consumers nowadays are able to not only closely follow but also immediately interact with media characters, such as social media influencers (Labrecque 2014). The repetitive contact with social media influencers provides opportunities for consumers to learn about social media influencers. Consumers could meanwhile assess the overlap between influencers' image and their self-concept. As such, parasocial identification might be facilitated and fostered. Thus, we suggest the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** The extent of consumers' self-influencer congruence will positively lead to parasocial identification with the social media influencer.

Among the limited number of studies focusing on the endorsement of social media influencers, few have documented the influence of identification with celebrity endorsers on consumer behavior in the realm of social media (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; Evans et al. 2017). Jin and Phua (2014) found that Twitter users who identified strongly with a celebrity endorser were socially influenced by the celebrity, generating a high level of product involvement and intention to pass along marketing content. This finding resonates with observations from early studies on traditional media, which demonstrated the mediating role of parasocial identification in determining how consumers enact a modeled behavior suggested by a celebrity (Basil 1996). Therefore, we expect that an influencer whose image is congruent with a consumer is likely to elicit the consumer's strong parasocial identification, and subsequently, to positively impact the overall perception and engagement with brand content on social media. This gives rise to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3:** Consumers' parasocial identification with the social media influencer will mediate the relationship between self-influencer congruence and a) attitude toward brand content, b) engagement with brand content, and c) purchase intention.

### *Perceived endorser motive*

Perceived endorser motive is found as a key determinant that influences the effectiveness of brand endorsement (Carr and Hayes 2014; Djafarova and Rushworth 2017). With its roots in attribution theory, which assumes that individuals make causal inferences of other's behaviors by attributing beliefs, perceptions, and intentions (Kelley 1972), perceived endorser motive refers to consumers' causal inferences or beliefs about why a celebrity or a spokesperson promotes a product (Rifon et al. 2004). Previous research revealed that consumers exhibit correspondent inferences when evaluating celebrity endorsed advertisements, although they are less likely to have a specific knowledge of what the endorser actually set to achieve (Cronley et al. 1999). Consumers seek to determine the cause or motive for the endorser's willingness to be associated with the product. According to Heider (1958), there are two plausible



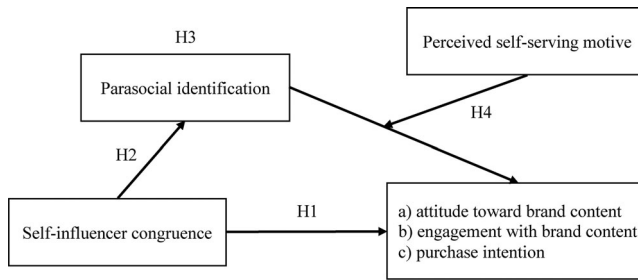
causes for an endorser's promotion of a product: (1) personal factors internal to the endorser, and (2) situational factors external to the endorser. For instance, when consumers infer monetary incentives as the motivating factor for product endorsement, they might subsequently discount the intrinsic motive behind the brand endorsement, such as his or her belief in the qualities or features of the product, unless the endorsers have explicitly stated that the brand recommendations are their own objective opinions and not a result of monetary incentive or other forms of compensation from a sponsor (Kelley 1972).

However, the current practice of influencer marketing through endorsements on social media has posed challenges for consumers in differentiating paid brand endorsements from electronic word-of-mouth or subjective product reviews. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) guidelines state that 'influencers should clearly and conspicuously disclose their relationships to brands when promoting or endorsing products through social media' (FTC 2017). Common FTC recommended disclosure language includes '#sponsored', 'promotion', 'paid content', or '#ad'. China has also tightened its legal regulation on digital advertising and celebrity endorsement in recent years. In 2015, China passed the draft amendments to the Advertising Law, which has directly brought social media practices within its scope, despite it not having specific endorsement guidelines addressing the type of suggested disclosure language in social media influencers' brand posts (Abkowitz 2016). Social media influencers sharing or retweeting a brand's posts without explicit disclosure of receiving monetary incentive from the sponsor is a common practice in China.

In light of that, studies in the area of celebrity endorsement indicate that consumers cognitively infer a motive for the endorsement behavior when evaluating advertising messages (Silvera and Austad 2004). The perceived endorser motive focuses on whether consumers perceive an endorser's motive as either being altruistic or self-serving (Drumwright 1996). In the case of self-serving motive, consumers may infer that celebrities are seeking to enhance their own image, reputation, or popularity by associating with a well-known brand. By contrast, consumers, who perceive celebrities' motive as altruistic, may believe that they genuinely concern about the welfare of their followers and care about getting helpful information to them.

Previous research has documented the diverse effects of perceived endorser motive on brand outcomes. Kim, Lee, and Kim (2017) found that perceived endorser motive moderates the relationship between attitude toward the brand and behavioral intention. Rifon et al. (2004) discovered mediation of perceived endorser motive in the congruence effects on sponsor credibility. While prior research primarily investigated the influences of altruistic motive on consumers' brand evaluations, it is reasonable, based on the reviewed literature, to argue the effects of self-serving motive in such process. Specifically, a lack of congruence between an endorser's image and consumer's ideal self-image would stimulate consumer's cognitive assessment about motive of the endorsement with doubts (Hastie 1984) and in turn attribute the motive as self-serving, which leads to greater resistance toward the persuasive messages (Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman 1981). Taken together and applied to the current research, it is expected that a perceived self-serving motive will discount the influence of





**Figure 1.** Overall hypothesized relationships.

parasocial identification on consumers' evaluation of the endorsement. In other words, the hypothesis is posited:

**Hypothesis 4:** Perceived self-serving motive will negatively moderate the indirect effect of self-influencer congruence on a) attitude toward brand content, b) engagement with brand content, and c) purchase intention through parasocial identification.

Figure 1 demonstrates the overall hypothesized relationships for the present research.

## Methods

### Data collection

An online survey was conducted among adult social media users in China recruited by a market research firm. The questionnaire was first developed in English and then translated into Chinese. Back-translation was conducted by a bilingual third-party company to ensure the accuracy of translation. A national sample was recruited with respondents from various age groups, both genders, geographic regions, population density, and education level to achieve a representative sample that can best shed light on social media usage in China.

The screening questions asked respondents if they were active social media users and if they followed any social media influencers; these questions were used to collect data from the target population. Respondents were also asked to identify and list the name of an influencer they followed on social media. Respondents who were not active social media users or failed to identify any social media influencers were excluded from analysis. The identified influencers were cross-checked with a list of the most influential social media influencers in China published by *Internet Week* magazine in 2016. The cases wherein an influencer was incorrectly identified were excluded from the analysis.

### Measures

#### Parasocial identification

The measures in this study were adapted from prior research. Parasocial identification was measured using 12 items from Schramm and Hartmann's (2008) identification with media characters scale, a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Respondents were asked to think about the social media influencer

they previously identified while answering the questions. Items included: 1) I carefully follow the behavior of this social media influencer; 2) I am aware of the aspects of this influencer that I really like; 3) I would like to know people who are similar to this influencer; 4) I hardly ever think about why this social media influencer does certain things; 5) I often wonder if this influencer is similar to me or not. The 12 items were summed to create a parasocial identification scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ).

### **Self-influencer congruence**

To assess the self-influencer congruence, participants were first asked to rate the image of the social media influencer they identified on a 7-point, 15-item, bipolar scale adopted from Choi and Rifon's study (Choi and Rifon 2012). The image dimensions were rugged-delicate, excitable-calm, uncomfortable-comfortable, dominating-submissive, thrifty-indulgent, pleasant-unpleasant, contemporary-noncontemporary, organized-unorganized, rational-emotional, youthful-mature, formal-informal, orthodox-liberal, complex-simple, colorless-colorful, and modest-vain. In contrast, consumer's ideal self-image was measured at the end of the questionnaire followed by demographic questions. The ideal self-scale was identical to the influencer image scale for the purpose of obtaining a congruity index score by comparing the ratings of the same dimensions. The index of congruity between social media influencer's image and consumer's self-image ( $I_{index}$ ) was obtained using the absolute-difference formula suggested by previous literature (Erickson 1997; Sirgy 1985), where  $I_{influencer}$  = perceived influencer image and  $I_{self}$  = ideal self-image of the respondent.

$$I_{index} = \sum_{i=1}^n |I_{influencer} - I_{self}|$$

### **Perceived self-serving motive**

Rifon et al.'s (2004) scale was adopted to measure consumers' perceived self-serving motive in a social media context. Respondents were asked to indicate their feelings toward the following statements based on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). These statements included: 1) social media influencers recommend brands because ultimately they care about their followers; 2) social media influencers are not genuinely concerned for the welfare of their followers; 3) social media influencers care about getting useful information to their followers; 4) social media influencers recommend brands to persuade me to buy their products; 5) social media influencers recommend brands because they ultimately only care about their profits; 6) social media influencers recommend brands to create a positive self-image (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ). Items 1 and item 3 were reverse coded.

### **Dependent measures**

Three 7-point semantic differential items measure social media users' attitudinal responses to brand-related posts on social media generated by an influencer: 'bad/good', 'negative/positive', and 'unfavorable/favorable' (Muehling 1987). According to Schivinski, Christodoulides, and Dabrowski (2016), consumer's engagement with brand-related social media content was measured by the following six statements

based on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). These statements included: 1) I read posts, including texts, pictures, and videos, related to the brand; 2) I comment on posts related to the brand; 3) I share posts related to the brand; 4) I 'like' posts related to the brand; 5) I create posts about the brand. Purchase intention toward the advertised brand was measured by the following three statements based on 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): 1) I am considering purchasing the brand; 2) It is likely that I will purchase the brand; and 3) I am likely to make future purchases of the brand. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the dependent measures are .85 for attitude, .87 for engagement, and .91 for purchase intention.

## Results

### Sample characteristics

A total of 1,000 completed responses were collected between January 2017 and April 2017, generating 513 respondents who followed influencers on social media. Respondents were from 33 provinces across mainland China, including Tier 1 cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, as well as Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities such as Hefei, Hangzhou, and Anshan. The geographic location of all respondents is shown in Figure 2.

According to a 2015 report published by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC 2015), 94% of social media users in China are under 50-year-old. Our



Figure 2. Geographical distribution of the respondents. Source: Yan Shan.

**Table 1.** Demographic profile.

	Percentage	Frequency	M (SD)
Gender			
Male	37.2	191	
Female	62.8	322	
Age			
18–34	80.3	412	
35–54	19.7	101	
Education			
High school or below	2.1	11	
Bachelor's degree	87.1	447	
Postgraduate degree	10.7	55	
Average hours spent on social media			15.76 (9.932)
Electronic devices used to access social media			
Laptop	18.1	93	
Tablet	4.3	22	
Smartphone	77.4	397	
How many social media platforms do you actively use?			
1–3	43.6	223	
4–6	47	241	
7 or more	9.6	49	
How many times did you use social media in the past week?			22.2 (40.08)
The most used social media			
WeChat	90.4	464	
Sina Weibo	85.6	439	
QQ Zone	60.2	309	
Baidu Forum	39.6	203	
Tencent Weibo	28.1	144	
Renren	30.6	157	
Zhihu	26.5	136	
Tianya Forum	26.1	134	
YY Live	22.4	115	
Douban	20.1	103	
Momo	16.4	84	

sample ( $N=513$ ) is consistent with this observation (18–34 years old = 412, 80.3%; 35–54 years old = 101, 19.7%), with a higher percentage of females (322 females, 62.8%). Compared with average internet users in China, our respondents are more educated (97% versus 42% with a bachelor's degree or higher) and are more actively involved with social media: 56% of respondents actively used more than three social media platforms, and they spent 15.76 hours per week on social media on average. The top three most frequently used social media are WeChat (90.4%), Sina Weibo (85.6%), and QQ Zone (60.2%). Respondents indicated that smartphone is the major electronic device used to access social media (77.4% smartphone users, 18.1% laptop users, and 4.3% tablet users). Complete demographic characteristics of the sample are provided in Table 1.

### ***Self-influencer congruence index***

The resulting self-influencer congruence index represents the sum of the distances perceived by a consumer between his or her ideal self-image and the social media influencer's image as identified by the same consumer, across all measured characteristics. The self-influencer congruence index score ranged from 0 to 58 with a mean of 16.27, a standard deviation of 8.53, and a median of 15. This indicates that the smaller the self-influencer congruence index score, the more congruent the individual

**Table 2.** Correlation matrix of the constructs.

	Correlation matrix					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Parasocial identification	1	-.29**	.44**	-.48**	.56**	.42**
2. Self-influencer congruence		1	-.07	.24**	-.17**	-.24**
3. Perceived self-serving motive			1	.28**	-.41**	-.29**
4. Engagement with brand content				1	.37**	.69**
5. Attitude toward brand content					1	.41**
6. Purchase intention						1
Mean	5.03	16.27	4.81	2.52	5.67	5.23
SD	.84	8.53	.68	.79	.90	1.04

\*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed).

**Table 3.** Results of path analysis.

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Self-influencer congruence	→	Attitude toward brand content	-.06	.014	-4.049	**
	→	Engagement with brand content	-.15	.026	-5.637	**
	→	Purchase intention	-.09	.016	-5.629	**
	→	Parasocial identification	-.34	.050	-6.937	**

\*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed).

perceives the social media influencer compared to his or her ideal image. In addition, Pearson correlation analyses were performed to understand the relationships among variables. The results of the correlational analyses presented in Table 2 showed that all correlations were statistically significant.

### Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested with a path analysis using AMOS 7. The first set of hypotheses examined the direct effects of self-influencer congruence on attitude toward brand content (H1a), engagement with brand content (H1b), purchase intention (H1c), and parasocial identification (H2). The results (Table 3) indicated that self-influencer congruence exerted significant influence on attitude toward branded content ( $B = -.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ), engagement with brand on social media ( $B = -.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ), purchase intention ( $B = -.09$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and parasocial identification ( $B = -.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ). It should be noticed that a negative coefficient  $B$  indicated a positive relationship between self-influencer congruence and attitude, engagement, purchase intention, and parasocial identification. As explained earlier, a smaller value of self-influencer congruence index should be interpreted as having a higher degree of congruence between consumer's ideal self-image and the perceived image of a social media influencer. Therefore, H1a, H1b, H1c, and H2 were supported.

### Tests of mediation effects

In order to test H3, the mediating role of parasocial identification in the effect of self-influencer congruence on brand outcomes, three mediation models with each of the brand outcomes were estimated. The bootstrapping procedure ( $N = 5,000$  samples) with model 4 of the PROCESS macro was employed (Hayes 2013). For H3a (Table 4), the model ( $F(2, 510) = 116.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ) showed that the direct effect of self-influencer

Table 4. Mediation analysis.

Antecedent	Consequent											
	Parasocial identification (M)			Attitude toward brand content (Y <sub>a</sub> )			Engagement with brand content (Y <sub>b</sub> )			Purchase intention (Y <sub>c</sub> )		
	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p
Self-influencer congruence (X)	-.34	.05	< .001	-.004	.01	.73	-.03	.03	.39	-.05	.02	< .01
Parasocial identification (M)	—	—	—	.15	.01	< .001	.53	.03	< .001	.12	.01	< .001
Constant	66.00	.91	< .001	8.00	.72	< .001	10.80	1.8	< .001	9.60	.93	< .001
	F(1, 511) = 48.03, p < .001			F(2, 510) = 116.85, p < .001			F(2, 510) = 226.52, p < .001			F(2, 510) = 60.94, p < .001		
Indirect effect of X on Y through M	β = -.05, SE = .01, 95% CI = -.07 to -.04			β = -.18, SE = .01, 95% CI = -.24 to -.13			β = -.04, SE = .01, 95% CI = -.06 to -.03					

congruence on attitude toward brand content was not significant ( $B = -.004$ , 95% CI =  $-.03$  to  $.02$ ), but the indirect effect through parasocial identification was significant ( $B = -.05$ , 95% CI =  $-.07$  to  $-.04$ ). A full mediation was found and supported H3a. For H3b, the model ( $F(2, 510) = 226.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ) showed that the direct effect of self-influencer congruence on engagement with brand content was not significant ( $B = -.03$ , 95% CI =  $-.09$  to  $.03$ ), but the indirect effect through parasocial identification was significant ( $B = -.18$ , 95% CI =  $-.24$  to  $-.13$ ). A full mediation was found and supported H3b. For H3c, the model ( $F(2, 510) = 60.94$ ,  $p < .001$ ) showed that both the direct effect of self-influencer congruence on purchase intention ( $B = -.05$ , 95% CI =  $-.08$  to  $-.02$ ) and the indirect effect through parasocial identification ( $B = -.04$ , 95% CI =  $-.06$  to  $-.03$ ) were significant. A partial mediation was found, which supported H3c.

### Tests of moderating effects

H4 proposed the moderating role of perceived self-serving motive in the indirect effect of self-influencer congruence on brand outcomes through parasocial identification. As such, H4 was tested using the bootstrapping procedure (5,000 samples) with model 14 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2013). Three moderated mediation models with each of the brand outcomes were estimated. For H4a (Table 5), while the model showed no interaction between parasocial identification and perceived self-serving motive on attitude toward brand content ( $B = -.002$ ,  $p = .32$ ), the estimates of each indirect effect were all significant when the moderator, perceived self-serving motive, was one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one standard deviation above the mean ( $\beta_{\text{one SD below the mean}} = -.05$ , 95% CI =  $-.06$  to  $-.03$ ;  $B_{\text{mean}} = -.04$ , 95% CI =  $-.06$  to  $-.03$ ;  $\beta_{\text{one SD above the mean}} = -.04$ , 95% CI =  $-.06$  to  $-.03$ ). None of the 95% confidence intervals included zero, indicating perceived self-serving motive as a significant moderator in the indirect effect of self-influencer congruence on attitude toward brand content through parasocial identification. The negative path coefficients thus supported H4a.

For H4b, the model demonstrated that the interaction between parasocial identification and perceived self-serving motive on engagement with brand content was significant ( $B = -.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Further, the estimates of each indirect effect were significant when the moderator, perceived self-serving motive, was one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one standard deviation above the mean ( $\beta_{\text{one SD below the mean}} = -.17$ , 95% CI =  $-.23$  to  $-.12$ ;  $B_{\text{mean}} = -.14$ , 95% CI =  $-.19$  to  $-.10$ ;  $\beta_{\text{one SD above the mean}} = -.12$ , 95% CI =  $-.16$  to  $-.08$ ). The negative path coefficients provided evidence to support H4b. Lastly, for H4c, the model showed no interaction between parasocial identification and perceived self-serving motive on purchase intention ( $B = -.001$ ,  $p = .70$ ). Yet, the estimates of each indirect effect were significant when the moderator, perceived self-serving motive, was one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one standard deviation above the mean ( $\beta_{\text{one SD below the mean}} = -.04$ , 95% CI =  $-.06$  to  $-.02$ ;  $B_{\text{mean}} = -.04$ , 95% CI =  $-.05$  to  $-.02$ ;  $\beta_{\text{one SD above the mean}} = -.03$ , 95% CI =  $-.06$  to  $-.02$ ). With negative path coefficients, H4c was supported.





## Discussion

Using influencers to promote products and brands on social media has become an increasingly important strategy among marketers and advertisers. Previous studies on influencer endorsement have largely focused on the source credibility of social media influencers, suggesting that influencers are perceived as more favorable regarding trustworthiness and similarity to oneself compared to traditional celebrities (Lyons and Henderson 2005; Gräve 2017). However, the relationship building process between consumers and influencers and its impact on consumers' evaluation of influencer endorsement has been overlooked. To fill this gap, the present study explores the effects of self-influencer congruence on brand attitude, engagement with brand content and purchase intention in China's dynamic social media context. The perceived motive of social media influencer's endorsement behavior, parasocial identification with the social media influencer, and their roles in the endorsement process were examined. The results of this study suggest that a high degree of congruence between the image of a social media influencer and the consumer's ideal self-image leads to effective endorsement outcomes. When a social media influencer's image is congruent with a consumer's ideal self-image, consumers are more likely to develop favorable brand attitude and be influenced in purchase decisions. These findings are consistent with previous literature in suggesting a positive influence of a self-endorser match-up on product evaluation and judgement (Choi and Rifon 2012).

Given the vibrant social media context in China, this study extends this line of research by confirming that consumer engagement is also elevated as an outcome of self-influencer congruence. Effectively engaging consumers with brand-related social media content can further benefit brands as it positively impacts consumer acceptance to brand messages, attitude, and behaviors (Schivinski, Christodoulides, and Dabrowski 2016). Even social media influencers are distinct from traditional celebrities (Gräve 2017), they are still considered an aspiration group that consumers find personally relevant and function as a source of information for brand evaluations in the current context (Escalas and Bettman 2005). The selection of brands and products endorsed by social media influencers that match consumers' ideal self allows consumers to obtain some of the important meanings and associations that these influencers represent and incorporate them in the process of constructing, maintaining, and enhancing their self-concepts (Escalas and Bettman 2017; McCracken 1989).

Previous studies have documented the imagined interactions between a media viewer and a personality who appears in traditional media (Rubin and Perse 1987). In the same vein, the findings indicated that the performance of parasocial identification could also happen in a social media context. Despite the reality of not truly knowing influencers, consumers feel as if they do intimately know them through interactions on social media, forming interpersonal relationships with them. The present study found that a higher degree of self-influencer congruence leads to greater parasocial identification with the social media influencer. In addition, consumers' parasocial identification mediates the relationship between self-influencer congruence and endorsement effectiveness. Our findings explain how endorsement works in the current social media environment. According to social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986), identification occurs when individuals confirm to the attitude or behavior advocated by influencers

on social media. When consumers find an influencer's image desirable and resonant, they may aspire to be like the influencer and enhance their ideal self-image through purchasing and using the product endorsed by the influencer.

Additionally, this study contributes to the endorsement literature by identifying the role of perceived endorser motive in consumer responses to an influencer's endorsement. The results of the present study suggest that consumers' assessment specifically of an influencer's self-serving motive functions as a crucial moderator in the relationships between self-influencer congruence and endorsement outcomes through parasocial identification. Although consumers' self-influencer congruence may indirectly, through parasocial identification, affect their attitude toward brand content, engagement with brand content, and purchase intention in a positive way, such evaluative processes would be impeded by the detection of egocentric motive from the influencer. These results could be explained by the theory that skepticism toward the influencer's motive in endorsing a brand enhances information processing (Rifon et al. 2004). When consumers consider why social media influencers endorse products or brands, they may generate more thought processing and therefore pay more attention to the statements in the persuasive messages. As their cognitive elaboration increases, counter-arguments about the persuasive messages might be engendered and in turn hinder the endorsement's effectiveness (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). The findings enrich the current endorsement literature by delineating how endorsement works and its influence on consumers' brand evaluations.

The results of our study have practical implications for marketers and social media managers. Despite previous studies indicating that the number of followers a social media influencer maintains has a positive impact on consumers' evaluation of an endorsed brand (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders 2017), our study suggested that social media influencers are more effective when there is a 'fit' between the endorser and targeted consumer. Successful social media managers should carefully select influencers who can resonate well with target consumers to enhance positive brand association, subsequently to increase product sales. Recent backlash against some of the most popular social media influencers has raised ethical concerns among marketers about the practices of influencer marketing and how brands can beat the growing vlogging backlash and influencer fraud (Romano 2018; Sloane 2018). For instance, YouTube star Logan Paul, whose followers numbered around 15 million, drew a massive backlash in 2018 for posting a video showing a dead body in a forest in Japan known as a locale for suicide. A recent New York Times report revealed that celebrities or influencers often buy fake followers to boost their social media profiles (Confessore, et al. 2018). Our study provides empirical evidence that brands and social media managers need to do more research into potential influencers by looking beyond the numerical indicators on social platforms, such as popularity, number of followers, etc. As Audunsson (2018) stated, the focus of influencer marketing has shifted from who to work with to how to activate them. The findings of this study demonstrated that endorsement effectiveness is not autonomous from the psychological associations between consumers and influencers. Therefore, companies should invest resources to leverage the impact of such self-influencer connection, monitor the performance of these social media influencers, and keep track of their content quality.

Apart from its important findings, the study has limitations that need to be addressed. First, we measured the self-influencer congruence by using a 'difference score'. Criticisms of difference scores have mostly centered on issues associated with its reliability and validity. For instance, Cronbach (1958) argued against the use of profile similarity measures in perception research. Johns (1981) criticized researchers for using any type of simple difference or profile similarity measure. Therefore, an alternative measure for self-influencer congruence might be adopted for future research. Second, this study investigated the discrepancy between an influencer's image and consumer's ideal self-image. However, previous literature suggested that there are several kinds of self-concept; future studies should examine the congruity between an influencer's image and consumer's other domains of self. Additionally, this study focused on the self-serving motive and its influence on endorsement effectiveness. Other motivations should be examined by future research, such as altruistic motive. Finally, our study employed a self-reported survey questionnaire among social media users while different research methods (e.g. experiments) might be used to explore the relationships between the constructs we identified.

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