Influencer advertising: facilitating poor-fitting influencer posts

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Abstract
Purpose – Recent literature identifies the importance of influencer-brand fit, a congruence between the narrative of the social media influencer (SMI) and the branded product being reviewed, on purchase intentions. In creating brand-related content, SMIs can post content that can be either sponsored by the brand or unsponsored. This research merges these literature streams to examine how influencer-brand fit impacts purchase decisions and whether sponsorship status moderates this relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a 2 (poor vs good influencer-brand fit) × 2 (sponsored vs unsponsored post) experimental design (n = 198), the relationship between influencer-brand fit and purchase intention, the mediating role of SMI trust and the moderating role of perceived sponsorship are tested. The PROCESS macro was used to analyze direct and indirect paths.

Findings – The results demonstrate that influencer trust mediates the relationship between influencer-brand fit and purchase intention, highlighting the importance of a congruent influencer and brand image in both increasing influencer trust and purchase intentions. Surprisingly, despite the reductions in purchase intentions from conducting a poor-fitting review, purchase intentions are the same between a poor-fitting unsponsored review and a good fitting sponsored review.

Practical implications – Decision-makers of both corporations and SMI personal brands should consider influencer-brand fit when selecting SMI partners to sponsor and brands to work with, respectively, and should aim for good fit between both parties. SMIs should avoid conducting sponsored, poor-fitting product reviews to limit reductions in trust. Influencers seeking to branch out of their area of expertise can initially consider unsponsored content before venturing into sponsored partnerships. Companies seeking to widen their reach through poor-fitting SMIs should consider alternative strategies to sponsorship.

Originality/value – As sponsored content is common, it is necessary to merge the influencer-brand fit and influencer sponsorship literature. Additionally, this study considers the mediating role of influencer trust, an important variable in predicating purchase intentions as well as helping SMI grow their audience.

Keywords Social media influencer, Influencer-brand fit, Trust, Sponsorship, Social media marketing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
According to the Pew Research Center, 82% of consumers considered online product reviews and ratings during their pre-purchase decision-making stage (Pew, 2016). Recognizing the link between online reviews and sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), 90% of mid-to large-sized companies have integrated social media marketing into their overall marketing strategies (eMarketer, 2017). Recent studies show that 76% of users purchased a product that they first saw on social media (Wong, 2023). As a result, influencer advertising, a specific social media advertising component grew by 33% in the United States between 2020 and 2021 (Wertz, 2022), while it reached $4.14bn US dollars in 2022 (Wong, 2023), surpassing the forecasted spending of $3.7bn US dollars for 2022 (Wertz, 2022). In fact, many companies encourage social media influencers (SMIs) to generate product reviews through sponsorships in the form of direct payments and/or free/discounted products (Leung et al., 2022a;
Luca and Zervas, 2016). However, despite the growth of influencer advertising, the effect SMI sponsorship has on consumer behavior is in its early stages of discovery.

SMIs accrue both specialized knowledge and social capital within various online and offline communities, subsequently influencing their followers’ purchases (Lee and Eastin, 2021). Because of their reach and engagement with their niche communities, SMIs are attractive targets for brands looking for sponsorship opportunities (Hudders and Lou, 2022; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), which has led to the rise of influencer marketing. In selecting SMIs to sponsor, brands typically take a niche approach; seeking out SMIs whose specialties converge with the brand thereby obtaining a good influencer-brand fit (Breves et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2022b; Schouten et al., 2020). Contrarily, brands that are attempting to expand their consumer base, may aim for SMIs who appear to be incongruent with the brand, in terms of specialization, to broaden the brand’s reach, thereby pursuing a poor influencer-brand fit (Insider Intelligence, 2021). For instance, rather than sponsoring an automobile blogger, Volvo sponsored SMI Chriselle Lim, a motherhood influencer with over 1 million followers, to feature the brand on her Instagram posts (Barker, 2018). The objective of Volvo’s campaign was to appeal to the mom followers of Chriselle Lim and encourage an eco-friendly lifestyle. The campaign failed, in part, due to the incongruent fit between the jet-setting influencer’s lifestyle and the eco-friendly product being promoted (McMullan et al., 2022). Similar scenarios will become more common as brands continue to work with and subsequently incentivize SMIs for a variety of business objectives. This strategy seemed to hurt both the SMI and the brand, highlighting the importance of understanding the relationship between sponsored content and influencer-brand fit.

As demonstrated above, influencer-brand fit, refers to the extent to which the expertise, personality, image, or narrative of the SMI fits with the advertised product (Lee et al., 2022b; Schouten et al., 2020). In this vein, a critical relationship that remains unexplored in the literature is the effect of influencer-brand fit on purchase intentions while considering the post’s perceived sponsorship status. Additionally, extant literature on SMIs focuses on narrative strategies (e.g. disclosure statements) or sponsorship status of SMI posts (e.g. Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2021), with little to no examination of sponsorship alongside other decision-making factors. As a result, SMIs have limited strategic direction in selecting brands to work with.

Understanding the impact of influencer-brand fit and sponsorship on consumer behavior is important for a few reasons. Following the theoretical framework of the match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990), corporate and cause-based sponsorship literature find that the effectiveness of the endorsement is based on the fit between the advertised product and sponsor (Chang and Liu, 2012; Fink et al., 2004). However, assuming sponsorship impacts consumer behavior the same way across different contexts can provide erroneous planning advice to both managers and influencers (Lin and Bruning, 2021). Moreover, in influencer advertising, brand mentions are not limited to sponsored brand posts but also play an important role in unsponsored posts as well. Existing research finds significant differences in the effect of sponsored posts on consumer behaviors versus unsponsored posts on consumer behaviors. Basically, unsponsored posts, also referred to as user-generated content, are less likely to be perceived as ads and are viewed more favorably (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022; Mayrhofer et al., 2020).

However, influencer-brand fit and influencer sponsorship literature have been advancing in isolation from each other, whilst the former is still in its early stages of understanding. Both research streams work in opposing directions, however both are relevant in each SMI post and highlight decisions that managers and SMIs need to undertake. To elaborate, this study draws on the match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) to examine influencer-brand fit and expect that good fitting SMI reviews will lead to higher purchase intentions. Studies on sponsorship show that sponsored content can diminish purchase intentions (Leung et al., 2022b; Giuffredi-
The novel contribution of this research is it merges and extends these two relevant and opposing research streams together by examining whether and how brands and SMIs can increase purchase intentions for branded products outside their specialized domains. Moreover, in merging these two research streams, this study uniquely combines and extends the match-up hypothesis examining endorser-endorsee fit (Kim and Park, 2023) with the model of persuasion knowledge used to understand skeptical consumer responses to advertising media (e.g. Boerman et al., 2017).

Managerially, understanding how influencer fit and sponsorship interact is financially important as sponsoring product reviews has grown past merely providing products to SMI (Kozinets et al., 2010) to paying up to $10,000 for a post (Chafkin, 2016) and retaining influencers as consultants (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). Sponsoring SMI is also the most lucrative form of income for SMIs, highlighting the importance of brand sponsorships (Bradley, 2023). Furthermore, the size of the influencer industry is growing; evidenced by the increase in the number and variety of SMIs (Dencheva, 2023; Hudders and Lou, 2022). Brand managers and media agencies are tasked with identifying suitable SMIs to integrate into their social media strategies while attempting to mitigate negative consumer attitudes towards sponsored content. Brand managers still need more guidance (Leung et al., 2022a), as is evident from the case of Volvo’s influencer partnership. Lastly, in choosing to post content outside a SMIs specialized domain, such as a fashion SMI posting about a flower subscription box or a pair of headphones, this research provides strategic advice to both SMIs and managers on whether pursuing a poor fit strategy is suitable for a sponsored or unsponsored context.

Literature review and hypotheses
Conducting product reviews is a common SMI activity (Jacobson and Harrison, 2022). Product reviews differ from consumer reviews in that product reviews are found on an influencer’s personal social media page, such as YouTube or a blog. Moreover, product reviews are unlike consumer reviews that are aggregated and posted on a seller’s website, such as Amazon.com or another platform dedicated to consumer ratings and reviews, such as HappyCow. SMIs conducting sponsored product reviews may signal to others that the SMI is popular and relevant as they were not only sought out by a brand but also received compensation. However, in situations of unsponsored product reviews, there is higher source credibility (Dou et al., 2012), meaning followers view the source of the information as less biased and more believable than sponsored reviews (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022), whilst sponsored posts activate consumer persuasion knowledge, suggesting that followers view the content more critically (Boerman et al., 2017).

More recently, SMIs have begun to find other avenues to increase credibility (Audrezet et al., 2018), including posting unsponsored brand related posts (Jacobson and Harrison, 2022). The context of sponsored posts and unsponsored posts warrants further investigation concerning influencer-brand fit. This is because existing research has strictly examined influencer-brand fit outside the context of sponsorship (e.g. Borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2022b; Schouten et al., 2020) thereby overlooking the interaction of sponsorship. Meanwhile, sponsorships and partnerships are becoming standard between brands and SMIs (Bradley, 2023). This omission is important to address given the growth and popularity of influencer sponsorship. Insight into the intersection of sponsorship and fit lends a clearer perspective for brands and SMIs when making strategic choices of selecting partners for influencer advertising.

Influencer-brand fit
A social media site’s narrative is the general impression or sense of the SMI’s site developed through interacting with its content. In essence, the primary topics the posts and content
center around, such as a technology blog or a fashion YouTube channel, creates the narrative. A narrative is episodic in nature, as it is created over time as each subsequent post (episode) is fit into the preceding chain of posts (Rettberg, 2008). Therefore, in this study, influencer-brand fit refers to the perceived similarity between the narrative of the SMI’s site and the branded product being reviewed. This conceptualization of fit is similar to the way fit is conceptualized in the celebrity or cause sponsorship (Chang and Liu, 2012; Mazodier and Merunka, 2012) and brand extension (Aaker and Keller, 1990) literature and the more recent influencer advertising literature (Kim and Park, 2023; Lee et al., 2022b). Accordingly, good fit refers to situations when the branded product being reviewed is related to the topics normally discussed on the SMI’s site. Conversely, poor fit occurs when the branded product being reviewed has little similarity or relevance with prior posts or the site’s overall narrative. Poor-fitting strategies are used by companies aiming to reach the broadest possible audience, whilst good fitting strategies prioritize a targeted market (McMullan et al., 2022).

SMI-brand fit is an emerging topic in the literature; thus, we draw on related areas of research to highlight the match-up hypothesis (Kim and Park, 2023). The match-up hypothesis perspective stipulates that an endorser’s effectiveness is due, in part, to the match or appropriateness of the product being endorsed (Lee et al., 2022b). A key aspect in the match-up hypothesis is the relevance of the match. For instance, when an attractive endorser, such as a celebrity, endorses a beauty product, the effectiveness of the information disseminated increases, thereby influencing consumers (Wright, 2016). Numerous studies in the fields of celebrity endorsements and brand extensions confirm the findings of the match-up hypothesis (Breves et al., 2019; Wright, 2016).

Prior research on brand extensions demonstrates that fit, the degree of perceived similarity between the parent brand and the extension, is the strongest contributor to purchase intentions (Keller and Aaker, 1992; Völckner and Sattler, 2007). Corporate sponsorship discovers the same positive impact of fit on brand image. Furthermore, sponsoring events that fit with the brand improves brand affect, brand trust, and brand loyalty (Mazodier and Merunka, 2012). Research in the field of celebrity sponsorships demonstrates that when the endorser’s perceived expertise and the brand being endorsed match, product evaluation and purchase intention increase (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016; Woisetschläger et al., 2010). The findings within these related fields support the match-up hypothesis perspective that stipulates congruence between the image of the endorser and the endorsed brand enhances endorsement effectiveness (Kim and Park, 2023).

Within the influencer advertising research literature, Schouten et al. (2020) compared consumer responses towards SMI posts versus celebrity advertising to find that a good fit between the product and the endorser led to more positive attitudes towards an ad or post. In their study on micro SMIs, Lee et al. (2022b) find that congruity between SMI and product image led to positive attitudes towards the brand and higher e-word of mouth. Similarly, Breves et al. (2019) find that SMIs who post content that has a good fit with their overall expertise and narrative, had higher perceived credibility and higher positive consumer attitudes (Kim and Park, 2023).

Previous research has examined positive attitudes towards the brand or post in an unspecified sponsorship content. Extrapolating from the celebrity sponsorship research, this study examines the impact of fit on purchase intention, thereby extending the match-up hypothesis to the fit between SMIs and brands. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

**H1.** Influencer-brand fit positively influences purchase intentions.

**Sponsorship**

Social media users create online content as an identity building project and to gain social capital (Hudders and Lou, 2022; Schau and Gilly, 2003). As social media sites and usability...
developed, some content creators acquired numerous followers and began looking for ways to transform their social capital into economic capital (Wasko and Faraj, 2005). Due to the dialectical nature between brands and consumers, marketers have now developed sponsorship strategies that encourage SMIs to promote their brands’ products and messages to their online followers in return for monetary or non-monetary compensation (Leung et al., 2022a).

Online sponsorship often consists of product “seeding”, in which a product is given to a SMI to talk about, preferably in positive terms, on their social media platform(s) (Kozinets et al., 2010). Online sponsorship also includes various ways in which the SMI can obtain financial payments. For instance, SMIs can receive payment through affiliate links, where the influencer receives a monetary benefit for each purchase made by consumers who visited the online store through a link on the SMI’s webpage. Alternatively, brands can provide direct cash payments to the SMI for reviewing the product on their social media platform(s). While SMIs can receive different forms of compensation (product, money) either directly (sent by company) or indirectly (affiliate link), in this research we refer to sponsored posts as a post that is written in exchange for any form of direct compensation to the SMI. This is because prior research has found that indirect and direct compensation both reduce consumers’ attitudes towards the product being reviewed (Lu et al., 2014). Thus, regardless of the sponsorship method, merely being sponsored leads viewers to perceive the content to be an ad.

Recognizing that content appears to be an ad activates persuasion knowledge (Boerman et al., 2017; Myers et al., 2024) and leads followers to critically evaluate the product review, decreasing purchase intentions (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). The accumulated knowledge that consumers develop regarding marketer tactics, in this case social media marketing tactics to convince or persuade consumers, allows consumers to adapt their responses to the persuasion attempt (Eisend and Tarrahi, 2021). This process is referred to as the model of persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994). The model is commonly used in sponsorship literature to understand the effect of sponsored social media content on consumer attitudes and decision-making (e.g. Boerman et al., 2017; Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022).

Existing studies on influencer-brand fit have overlooked sponsorship status, thereby ignoring the growing field of influencer sponsorship. This gap in research is potentially problematic for management decision-making. First, marketers are left wondering what impact sponsorship status has on the interpretation of fit and product reviews. Not knowing whether sponsored good fitting reviews or unsponsored poor-fitting reviews leads to higher purchase intentions can result in the implementation of ineffective influencer marketing strategies. Second, in a growing and increasingly competitive environment where sponsored posts are becoming the norm, SMIs who receive sponsorship requests from a variety of brands, are left guessing how to make an effective decision. This uncertainty is evident in McMullan et al.’s (2022) research examining tensions between companies and influencers; the authors suggest that the choice of good versus poor, but with wide reach, fit is a dilemma both influencers and firms face. This uncertainty necessitates an empirical study to examine the context with sponsorship.

When combining influencer-brand fit together with perceived sponsorship, it is expected that sponsorship will negatively moderate the influencer brand-fit-purchase intentions relationship. Poor fit indicates that the SMI does not have the expertise and credibility to review the product thereby challenging their authenticity (McMullan et al., 2022). Coupled with the critical attention given to sponsored reviews (Woodroof et al., 2020) that stems from persuasion knowledge, consumers should be less likely to indicate an intention to purchase products in poor-fitting, sponsored reviews. Thus, both poor fit and sponsorship motivate a consumer to evaluate a review critically, compared to good fit and unsponsored reviews. The
latter type of reviews indicates the SMI has the competency to evaluate the product, is relevant to the product being reviewed and is less susceptible to compensation bias (Giuffredi-Kahr et al., 2022). Accordingly, we propose:

\( H2 \). Perceived sponsorship negatively moderates the influencer-brand fit and purchase intentions relationship.

**Online influencer trust**

Conducting product reviews can also influence attitudes towards the SMI (Ballantine and Yeung, 2015). For SMIs interested in generating economic capital from accrued social capital, it is important to maintain trust and authenticity so that viewer metrics continue to increase (Audrezet et al., 2018), as compensation varies based on certain follower thresholds. For example, it is estimated that online influencers with 10,000 to 100,000 viewers are paid $250 for a sponsored post while influencers having over 1.5 million viewers earn $10,000 per sponsored post (Chafkin, 2016). Subsequently, posting social media content that reduces trust can affect the SMI’s revenue stream.

Having high trust is an important determinant in developing and sustaining a substantial following (Lee et al., 2022a). Trust refers to the perception that the SMI has the necessary competencies to adequately review the product and is not concealing valuable information nor purposefully misleading (Bickart et al., 2015). When considering the influencer-brand fit, we suggest that fit positively affects influencer trust. This is because creating content such as product reviews in line with the site’s narrative suggests the SMI has the necessary skills and credibility to judge the product (Aaker and Keller, 1990). Further, a study comparing product-endorser fit between a celebrity and a non-celebrity found that when the fit between the endorser and the brand was high, higher levels of perceived trust was evidenced (Koernig and Boyd, 2009). Additionally, celebrity-product endorsement sponsorship research suggests that match-up between the celebrity and the brand leads to greater perceived trust and subsequently higher purchase intentions (Mishra et al., 2015). Conversely, conducting reviews outside the SMI’s narrative signals the SMI has moved to a new domain in which they may lack the competency to adequately evaluate the product and may be biased (Ren et al., 2023). Consumers may wonder why a poor-fitting product is being reviewed leading the consumer to suspect information is being concealed. Schouten et al. (2020) find that influencer-brand fit leads to higher ratings of perceived trust than poor fit. The current research extends extant research by suggesting that as the perceived trust in the SMI increases due to good fit, so too should purchase intentions. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

\( H3 \). Perceived influencer trust positively mediates the influencer-brand fit and purchase intentions relationship.

As sponsored reviews are believed to be biased due to their commercial nature (Giuffredi-Kahr et al., 2022), it is expected that sponsorship would diminish the perceived influencer trust-purchase intention relationship. While SMIs deny that receiving compensation affects their opinion, it is widely suspected that compensation results in more positive product reviews; and, accordingly, sponsored product reviews typically receive lower credibility ratings (Boerman et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2014). Because of the compensatory nature of the posts, sponsored posts fall within the domain of a paid marketing communication tool (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998), thereby activating persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994), indicating that the content will be received far more critically than unsponsored content. As such, we suggest that perceived sponsorship negatively influences the perceived trust-purchase intentions relationship.
$H4$. Perceived sponsorship negatively moderates the perceived influencer trust-purchase intentions relationship.

To sum up our theoretical reasoning, Figure 1 presents the model to be tested.

**Method**

A 2 (poor vs good influencer-brand fit) × 2 (sponsored vs unsponsored post) experimental study was used to collect the data.

*Pre-test*

Pre-existing beliefs and brand familiarity may influence consumers’ opinions (Rhee and Jung, 2019). Therefore, common to sponsorship research (Ballantine and Yeung, 2015), a fictitious brand and SMI were employed in this study to reduce pre-existing attitudes. Consumers often come upon product reviews by SMIs they are unfamiliar with, thus making the use of a fictitious influencer particularly suitable for this study. Accordingly, a pre-test, with forty (45% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 35$) Amazon Mechanical Turk (M-Turk) participants, showed that a fictitious brand, Yiven, had low awareness but average opinions towards the brand [1]. Maven, the fictitious SMI used in this study, also received low familiarity ratings in the same pre-test. The product tested in this study was wireless headphones made by a fictitious brand (Yiven). As for the choice of product in the treatment post, wireless headphones are a newer technology and an appropriate product for our sample.

*Study participants and procedures*

Participants, with a 95% or greater worker acceptance rate, were recruited through M-Turk and received a small monetary compensation for their participation (Hancock et al., 2023). Additional best practices applied included number of HITs approved over 100 and respondents being located in the United States (Goodman and Paolacci, 2017). M-Turk is commonly relied upon because it is one of the least expensive options to collect surveys and provides a more diverse sample than traditional student samples (Buhrmester et al., 2011). A total of 222 participants completed the survey, however 24 participants failed the
sponsorship manipulation check. The final useable sample was 198 participants (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). Participants were randomly assigned into one of the four treatment groups. First, participants received a brief introduction of the brand, Yiven (see Appendix 1). Then, on the next page, those in the good fitting condition were presented with a technology orientated review posted by a technology SMI while the poor-fitting condition were presented with the same review but by a gossip orientated SMI (see Appendix 2). The review ended with either a sponsored or unsponsored disclosure statement (see Appendix 3). Next, participants completed the measures used in this study. Overall, the experimental stimuli are appropriate as consumers frequently visit blogs prior to making a purchase (GrowthBadger, 2021; Pew, 2016) and marketers continue to rely on bloggers as part of the SMI marketing campaigns (Bailis, 2020; Oster, 2020).

Measures
All measures demonstrated acceptable reliability (see Table 2). Further, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using structural equation modeling (AMOS) resulted in acceptable fit: $\chi^2$(df) = 26.05 (22); comparative factor index (CFI) = 0.99; Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.99; normed fit index (NFI) = 0.98; root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) = 0.03 and standardized root of mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.02. First, the average variance extracted (AVE) are higher than 0.50, indicating convergent validity. Second, the AVE square root for each construct is greater than the shared variances (intercorrelations) among the other constructs demonstrating divergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Multicollinearity does not appear to be problematic as all variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 1.50, despite significant correlations (see Table 3). Accordingly, all multi-item indicators were averaged together to form a composite variable. Additionally, participants specified the type of benefit the endorser received for this post, to serve as a sponsorship manipulation check (1 = Money and product from the brand, 2 = Product was a gift, 3 = No benefit, they bought the product, 4 = Do not remember, 5 = Did not say). A perceived sponsorship variable was created by assigning participants one of two dummy codes. Specifically, participants were assigned a 1 (perceived sponsored) if they indicated the endorser received money and/or product from the brand and a 0 (perceived unsponsored) if they indicated the endorser bought the product with their own money. Demographic questions were asked before the survey ended; this included our reported control variable: age. However, we also ran separates tests controlling for gender. Gender was not significant, and the results were similar to those reported here. Therefore, we only report the tests that controlled for age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>110 (55.6%)</td>
<td>88 (44.4%)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–25</td>
<td>10 (5.1%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>25–35</td>
<td>86 (43.4%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>36–45</td>
<td>57 (28.8%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>46–55</td>
<td>25 (12.6%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>56–65</td>
<td>17 (8.6%)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>66+</td>
<td>3 (1.5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean = 38.49</td>
<td></td>
<td>Table 1.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source(s): Table by author

Sample characteristics
Manipulation check
Independent-samples *t*-test confirmed that those in the good fit condition more strongly agreed that the product mentioned fit with the SMI than those in the poor fit condition (*M*<sub>good</sub> = 6.05, *M*<sub>poor</sub> = 3.82, *t*(165.79) = −11.25, *p* < 0.000).

Hypothesis testing
We tested the hypotheses by running a regression using the PROCESS macro (Model 15: Hayes, 2013) with purchase intentions as the dependent variable, influencer-brand fit as the independent variable, perceived influencer trust as the mediating variable and perceived sponsorship as the moderating variable. Lastly, we controlled for age by entering it as a covariate. Table 4 displays the full results of the analysis with a bootstrap sample of 10,000 cases at a 95% confidence interval (CI).

### Table 2.
Measurement items and descriptive values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs and items</th>
<th>Mean/SD</th>
<th>Factor loading</th>
<th>Reliability CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent variable</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Influencer-brand fit</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you rate the fit between the (blogger) and (Yiven’s) products?</td>
<td>4.87/1.81</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all logical - Very logical</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all appropriate - Very appropriate</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very bad - Very good</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mediating variable</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived influencer trust (Source: Bickart et al., 2015)</td>
<td>4.67/1.21</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Blogger) is honest</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Blogger) is someone I feel I can trust</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Blogger) would never try to mislead me</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.76</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent variable</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Purchase intentions (Source: Lu et al., 2014)</td>
<td>5.39/1.10</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would consider buying this product</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will purchase this (brand) the next time I need a (product)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Note(s):** All scales measured on a 7-point Likert scale (Strongly (dis)agree), unless noted. **Source(s):** Table by author

### Table 3.
Correlation matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>IBF1</th>
<th>IBF2</th>
<th>IBF3</th>
<th>PBT1</th>
<th>PBT2</th>
<th>PBT3</th>
<th>PI1</th>
<th>PI2</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IBF1</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBF2</td>
<td>0.92</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>IBF3</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.87</td>
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**Note(s):** All correlations are significant at the 0.01 level. IBF, influencer-brand fit; PBT, perceived blogger trust; PI, purchase intentions. **Source(s):** Table by author
Contrary to expectation, SMI brand-fit does not have a direct effect on purchase intentions, as the CI values contain zero ($\beta = 0.00$, lower level confidence interval (LLCI) $= -0.11$ and upper level confidence interval (ULCI) $= 0.11$). Accordingly, H1 is not supported. However, perceived sponsorship significantly moderates the influencer-brand fit-purchase intentions relationship ($\beta = 0.16$, LLCI $= 0.01$ and ULCI $= 0.31$). Thus, H2 is supported. To better understand the moderation effect, we plotted the estimated means at three levels of influencer-brand fit (see Figure 2). Poor represents the mean of the values one standard deviation below the mean, moderate represents the mean of the values within one standard deviation around the mean and good represents the mean of the values above one standard deviation of the mean (Hayes, 2015).

Influencer-brand fit has a positive relationship on perceived influencer trust ($\beta = 0.34$, LLCI $= 0.26$ and ULCI $= 0.42$) and perceived influencer trust has a positive relationship on purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.54$, LLCI $= 0.37$ and ULCI $= 0.71$), thereby supporting H3. However, perceived sponsorship does not moderate the perceived influencer trust-purchase intentions relationship, as the CIs include zero ($\beta = -0.19$, LLCI $= -0.43$ and ULCI $= 0.05$). Accordingly, H4 is not supported. While not hypothesized, the results confirm that perceived sponsorship reduces purchase intentions ($\beta = -0.36$, LLCI $= -0.60$ and ULCI $= -0.11$). Regarding the control variable, as age increases so do purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.02$, LLCI $= 0.01$ and ULCI $= 0.03$).

**Discussion and conclusion**

Consumers tend to trust product related information provided by other consumers more than corporate provided product information (Giuffredi-Kåhr *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, consumers are increasingly going online to learn about products by reading product reviews written by fellow consumers (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), who over time may amass the sizable following necessary to attract a brand’s attention thereby becoming SMIs (Hudders and Lou, 2022). Brands know that consumers learn about products from reading blogs and, predictably, brands frequently sponsor SMIs to conduct a product review. Our study
supports existing research by demonstrating that sponsoring product reviews decreases purchase intentions. A key finding of this study is that poor-fitting unsponsored reviews receive similar purchase intentions as good fitting sponsored reviews.

When determining whom to sponsor, managers may target SMIs who specialize in a similar field to their brand or they may seek out SMIs outside their brand’s field, with the aim of widening the brand’s reach, as was highlighted earlier with the case of Volvo and the fit versus reach tension was discussed in McMullan et al. (2022). While existing studies have investigated influencer-brand fit’s role on follower attitudes towards the post and the brand and purchase intentions (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2022b; Schouten et al., 2020), they have overlooked the critical role sponsorship plays in how consumers evaluate product reviews; we address this gap. An independent t-test comparing purchase intentions shows that good fitting unsponsored reviews received the highest purchase intentions ($M_{unspon-poor} = 5.51$, $M_{unspon-good} = 6.11$, $t(93.74) = 3.60, p = 0.001$). Accordingly, despite failing to find a direct relationship between fit and purchase intentions, our results confirm and extend the match-up hypothesis by showing that influencer-brand fit improves purchase intentions when the product review is unsponsored. Previous research conducted using the match-up hypothesis model was limited to celebrity sponsorships in advertising (Wright, 2016), this research uniquely incorporates influencer-brand fit to empirically demonstrate the applicability of the match-up hypothesis in the social media context, where the endorser is not a celebrity who is paid for a long-term sponsorship deal, but a SMI who may be paid for one single post.

One explanation for not finding a direct relationship between fit and purchase intentions, may stem from the power of perceived influencer trust accounting for most of the variance. Thus, trust in the influencer may be the most important criteria for launching a successful SMI marketing campaign.

Additionally, we also contribute to the literature by showing that the positive relationship between influencer-brand fit and purchase intentions extends to sponsored product reviews,
beyond what is examined in extant literature (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Additional independent t-test results demonstrate a sponsored poor-fitting review has the lowest purchase intention ratings, while unsponsored good fitting review has the highest purchase intentions ($M_{\text{unspon-good}} = 6.11$, $M_{\text{spon-poor}} = 4.66$, $t(94.12) = 8.06$, $p < 0.000$).

Combining both the match-up hypothesis and the model of persuasion knowledge provides an understanding that when a brand and SMI lack a match or congruency, in a context where the content is being paid for thereby triggering persuasion knowledge, it leads to a highly critical consumer and, subsequently, lower purchase intentions.

What is surprising to discover is there is no difference in purchase intentions between a sponsored good fitting review and an unsponsored poor-fitting review ($M_{\text{spon-good}} = 5.11$, $M_{\text{unspon-poor}} = 5.11$, $t(87.29) = -0.01$, $p = 0.989$). The similarity between these conditions shows the importance of merging the influencer-brand fit and sponsorship literature together. Now, decision makers can effectively evaluate marketing strategies, knowing that unsponsored product reviews posted by poor-fitting SMI are just as effective as sponsoring good fitting reviews. Thus, one managerial implication from this research is that managers should find ways to encourage SMI to conduct product reviews outside their domain of expertise without directly sponsoring them. Examples of such approaches include inviting SMI to product launches to help SMI become aware of new products in the marketplace and giving SMI early and possibly discounted, rather than free access to products, which requires strict disclosures. For instance, events provide an opportunity to showcase products earlier than when it launches in the market. A hair dryer brand could invite SMI whose primary narrative is about homemade meals to a product pre-launch event to inform them about the product, thereby increasing the likelihood that the SMI may in fact purchase the product and use it in their content. Strategies as such can allow brands to extend their reach without the obvious implications of sponsorship when facing situations of low influencer-brand fit.

Further, our findings incorporate the role of perceived influencer trust to demonstrate its mediating role between influencer-brand fit and purchase intention. Product review readers are more likely to act on posts that they perceive as trustworthy (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Wiedmann and Von Mettenheim, 2021). This study demonstrates that perceived influencer trust has a positive relationship with influencer-brand fit, such that good fitting reviews improve perceived influencer trust. This improvement in trust may stem from a recognition that the SMI has the competency necessary to evaluate the branded product. However, perceived sponsorship did not moderate the perceived trust-purchase intention relationship, as expected. Perhaps, while considering that sponsored posts are a type of paid communications (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998), consumers do not evaluate trust and sponsorship together. In essence, the direct relationship between perceived sponsorship and purchase intentions carries all the bias related to the paid message (Lu et al., 2014). Similarly, perceived influencer trust accounts for the credibility of the claims, regardless of sponsorship status.

SMI have created personal brands worth millions of dollars and these businesses require strategic decision-making (Sternlicht, 2022). The key managerial implication for SMI stemming from this research is that when branching out of a SMI specialization, it is recommended that SMI do so in unsponsored posts rather than posting sponsored content. Content that is clearly unsponsored is unlikely to activate consumer's persuasion knowledge, thereby reducing the skepticism in interpreting the content as was demonstrated in the work of Myers et al. (2024). This provides an ideal opportunity for a SMI to branch out of what is expected in the match-up hypothesis. To demonstrate, if a mental health parenting SMI intended to start posting about clothes, then before doing sponsored posts with brands on the topic of clothes, the SMI could do a few unsponsored posts to mitigate both sponsorship and poor fit effects. This would give SMI an opportunity to explore more fields and approach a
more diverse set of brands, in the long run, without jeopardizing the preferred behavioral outcomes that are expected in influencer advertising. SMIs have been found to calibrate their content in an effort to attract compensation and gradually expanding their field of expertise may be one way to enhance their revenue generating capability (Jacobson and Harrison, 2022).

On the flipside of the SMI-brand relationship, brand managers may choose to sponsor SMI that do not fit with the product being promoted in order to reach a larger market, as Volvo did with a fashion influencer (Barker, 2018) or to diversify their market segments. This research finds that when sponsoring SMIs it would work in the brands’ favor to select good fitting influencers to avoid enhancing the negative effect sponsorship has on the purchase intentions of poor-fitting product reviews.

In terms of the control variable, age appears to elevate purchase intentions. This finding suggests that sponsored reviews work better with older consumers, perhaps because they lack the social media navigation skills that younger consumers have. From a public policy perspective, this finding suggests that older consumers may need additional consumer and advertising protections on social media sites to avoid being misled. Lastly, the most active bloggers range from 21 to 35 years old, with 51 years and older only accounting for 7.1% of bloggers (TechJury, 2021). As the population ages and older citizens are becoming more familiar with the Internet, additional research is needed to understand how age influences influencer advertising. For instance, do digital natives and older consumers differ in their reactions to sponsored reviews?

Limitations and future research directions
One limitation of this research is we did not measure actual purchasing behavior. Future research should build on this work by using actual purchase data. Perhaps, data related to purchases made through affiliate links could offer specific guidance on when to seed products into poor-fitting blogs. Then, the SMI can still generate income without the trust and purchase intention reductions that come with receiving free product or cash. Additionally, future research could examine how far SMIs can go in terms of creating content that has a poor fit with their current narrative, similar to research done in brand extension literature. For instance, future research can test good, moderate and poor-fitting reviews (Barone et al., 2000). This study also employed the use of a fictitious brand and influencer to limit the impact of existing attitudes. Additional research is needed to understand if and how pre-existing attitudes towards a brand and SMI interact when consumers evaluate product reviews. Moreover, while we controlled for age and gender, additional variables may have impacted the results that were not measured. Lastly, the study utilized a fictitious product review. While the fictitious product review was inspired by real reviews, future research could utilize real user-generated content, especially if click-through data are obtained from actual product reviews.

Note
1. Yiven awareness was measured with one item (μ = 1.17), opinion towards the brand was measured with three items (μ = 3.98), averaged together following a reliability analysis (α = 0.98). Maven familiarity was measured with one item (μ = 1.38. All scales used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)).

References


Appendix 1
Yiven introduction
Yiven has been manufacturing high-end headphones and stereo equipment for approximately 15 years. During this time, they have earned a positive reputation with audiophiles and connoisseurs of music by designing their audio equipment to meet the high standards of those who expect a rich and transcendent listening experience. Their products are available directly from the company, via an online store, and through a select group of retailers who specialize in top quality audio equipment.

Appendix 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good fit</th>
<th>Poor fit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Maven’s Insights” is my blog about high tech gadgets and equipment. I’ve been keeping you informed about leading-edge technology for five years now, making sure you know what you need to know to pick the best products</td>
<td>“Maven’s Insights” is my blog about the Hollywood social scene. I’ve been keeping you informed about scandals and hook-ups for five years now, making sure you know what you need to know about all the celebrity gossip</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A1. Influencer-brand fit stimuli

Appendix 3
Product review and disclosure statement
Today, I am reviewing the new wireless headphones by Yiven. In my opinion, the best thing about these wireless headphones is the sound quality. It uses a patented ToneEnhancer technology, which exceeded my expectations.

However, the battery life is at best, satisfactory. My other wireless headphones can last about 12 h of normal use, I was able to listen to the Yiven set for the same amount of time before needing to charge them. It would be nice to have longer listening time, but 12 h seems to be normal.

The signal distance was about what you’d expected. I was able to walk around my house and even sit on the back porch while listening to a podcast.

Additionally, the Yiven easily worked with my MacBook, so I didn’t have to download any drivers. Just insert the little device into the headphone outlet. Actually, the wireless headphones are quite stylish, and the protective color coating looks durable. They’re also lightweight, which I like since I use my headphones when I walk the dog.

Overall, I give Yiven’s new wireless headphones mixed ratings across all the main categories I look for.

Sound Quality: 5 Stars
Battery Life: 3 Stars
Signal Distance: 4 Stars
Convenience: 4 Stars

[Sponsored disclosure] In full disclosure, Yiven has paid me for this blog post and sent me the wireless headphones for free.

[Unsponsored disclosure] In full disclosure, I bought these wireless headphones with my own money and have no connection to the company.

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