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The Interplay of Cause and Fit on Consumer Responses to an Instagram Post

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Purpose/Rationale: Fashion and beauty influencers have become a strong voice on social media platforms such as Instagram, where they share their daily life activities and make product recommendations based on their expertise and previous experience (Freberg et al., 2011). However, perceived fit between the influencer and brand needs attention in research. In line with categorization theory (Sujan & Bettman, 1989), when consumers are exposed to marketing stimuli, they categorize the stimuli to organize abundant information, thereby making the process more manageable. In this sense, the perceived fit can enhance consumers' positive attitudes and behavioral intentions (Charry & Demoulin, 2014). Additionally, brands have increasingly initiated cause-related marketing practices (i.e., charity-affiliated brand purchases), particularly given fashion's scrutiny for its negative impact on the environment and social issues (Beeler, 2017). However, there is a lack of research that seeks to identify a specific social media strategy that includes both cause and fit in generating positive consumer responses. This experimental study is designed to fill this gap.

Conceptual and Hypothesis Development: Categorization theory alleges that consumers tend to categorize objects based on previously defined categories stored in memory (Sujan & Bettman, 1989). This way, categorization allows consumers to achieve efficient processing of the marketing stimuli. When social media influencers post advertising stimuli containing a cause-related message for a brand that may or may not be a good fit with the influencer, Instagram users may react to the post differently, leading to different attitudes and intentions. Thus, we aim to examine the effects of cause message and fit between an endorser and brand on consumer responses to Instagram posts, by focusing on attitudes toward the influencer promoting a consumer product (i.e., authenticity, attractiveness, and expertise). Given that influencers' and brands' goals through social media marketing are often to enhance customer relationship capabilities (Wang & Kim, 2017), we also test the influence of cause and fit on intentions to the follow the influencer and purchase the promoted product or brand.

Based on the above, we hypothesize that cause and fit will have main and interaction effects on consumers' attitude towards the social media influencer such as (a) attractiveness, (b) authenticity and (c) expertise, and future intentions such as (d) intention to follow the influencer and (e) intention to purchase the same product/brand promoted by the influencer.

Methods: We first developed experimental stimuli as Instagram posts by consulting consumer behavior experts. With female social media influencers who have more than one million followers and promote skin care products, we designed Instagram posts with two levels of cause (cause vs. non-cause) and two levels of fit (high fit vs. low fit). For the cause Instagram post, the message included "They're donating 5% of the profits this month to Girls Inc., an organization dedicated to raising a strong generation of women"; for the non-cause post, the message included

"My skin has never felt softer since starting their products." For high-fit, we used the brand Curology; for low-fit, we used the brand Arm and Hammer.

An online US female consumer panel, aged 18-40 as the majority of Instagram users ("Which Social Media," 2020), participated in the survey via MTurk. After each respondent was asked to watch a 30-second video clip that shows the Instagram images of the influencer, each respondent was assigned to one of the four experimental groups. The final sample consisted of 237 respondents. The survey questions consisted of three attitudes toward the influencer (attractiveness, authenticity and expertise) and two intentions (intention to follow the influencer, and intention to buy the same product/brand promoted by the influencer). These measures were modified from the existing studies (e.g., Erdogan, 1999; Ki & Kim 2019; Zhao et al., 2016), and rated on 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Construct reliabilities of all factors were satisfactory (> .70). To control the impact of extraneous variables, familiarity with the influencer and familiarity with the brand were entered as covariates.

Results:

The manipulations of the stimuli were successful: cause ($p < .001$) and fit ($p < .05$). The hypotheses were tested with two-way ANOVAs (cause vs. non-cause and high fit vs. low fit). The covariate of familiarity with the influencer was significant for all four dependent variables ($p < .001$), while the covariable of familiarity with the brand was not significant for all of them. Main effects of cause existed on four dependent variables (i.e., authenticity, expertise, intention to follow, and purchase intention) ($F = 4.52$, $p < .05$), with higher scores for respondents who were exposed to a cause (vs. non-cause) Instagram post. Main effects of fit existed on expertise, intention to follow, and purchase intention ($F = 4.79$, $p < .05$), with higher scores for the low-fit group than the high-fit group between the influencer and brand. Interaction effects existed on attractiveness ($F = 9.98$, $p < .01$), expertise ($F = 5.93$, $p < .05$) and intention to follow ($F = 8.22$, $p < .01$).

Discussion: The results show that cause-related marketing messages generate positive effects on authenticity, expertise, intention to follow, and purchase intention. On the other hand, a low-fit (vs. high-fit) post yielded more positive responses on expertise, intention to follow, and purchase intention. This result contradicts previous findings in the traditional advertising context (e.g., Nan & Heo, 2007). Future research can employ different stimuli to further explore the role of fit in consumer responses in the Instagram setting. When examining the interplay of cause and fit, the post which included a cause-related message and high-fit had a higher effect on attractiveness. The positive effect of a cause-related message provides practical implications that brands should consider implementing cause-related marketing with a high-fit when using influencers to promote their products. However, when the post did not include a cause-related message, the low-fit had a positive effect on attractiveness, expertise, and intention to follow. Further research is needed to further explore this unexpected finding. Nonetheless, this study proves the significant interplay of cause and fit in generating positive consumer responses, which requires marketers to use both factors in promoting products in Instagram posts.

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