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## The Impact of Brand-endorser Image Congruence on Chinese Consumers' Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions toward Luxury Fashion Brands

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*Keywords:* fit, influencer, fashion, China

**Introduction** The luxury brands have paid great attention to China market as they have experienced a continuous increase in sales in China despite of the decrease in other markets. Since many luxury brands strive to gain attention especially from young Chinese consumers, who spend much time on social network sites (SNS) interacting with others, many brands have created their own official Weibo accounts, WeChat accounts, and SNS accounts in order to establish their mobile presence and to communicate with Chinese consumers. One of the currently popular social marketing activities employed by luxury brands in China is collaborations with digital influencers, who are key opinion leaders in social media environments. Digital influencers have become powerful in the fashion industry since they influence other consumers who rely on their information about products and their tastes of fashion (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Although digital influencers are able to facilitate marketing messages to spread wide and fast, luxury brands' collaborations with digital influencers sometimes lead to criticism. Some consumers exhibit their disappointment with luxury brands expressing that digital influencers that the brands collaborated with are not considered to be fit with the brands' image (Pan, 2017). Previous research on brand extensions (Volkner & Sattler, 2006) and brand sponsorship (Speed & Thompson, 2000) asserts that perceived fit is important when brands devise marketing strategies with other brands, people, and events. Based on the literature, we aim to examine whether the perceived fit between a luxury brand and a digital influencer in a collaboration plays a critical role in developing consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the collaboration and the brand.

**Theoretical Background and Hypotheses** Cognitive dissonance theory, proposed by Festinger (1957), explains that when individuals experience dissonance in their beliefs, attitudes or behaviors, they feel discomfort, which influences them to reduce the uncomfortable feeling by changing their beliefs, attitudes or behaviors. According to the theory, if consumers perceive some dissonance in brands' marketing activities, the dissonance will cause uncomfortable feelings in consumers, which generates negative responses toward the activities. Moreover, the literature on brand extension and on sponsorship focuses on the concept of perceived fit between a brand and its extension (Speed & Thompson, 2000; Volckner & Sattler, 2006). When consumers perceive the high fit between the brand and the extension, positive responses are generated toward the extension while the poor fit leads to negative responses not only toward the extension but also toward the brand (Keller & Aaker, 1992). Similarly, the higher fit between a brand and an event is shown to generate greater responses toward the event's sponsor than the lower fit does (Speed & Thompson, 2000). Based on the literature, it is hypothesized that consumers' perceived fit between a luxury brand and a digital influencer will influence their

satisfaction with the collaboration, their attitudes toward the luxury brand, and their behavioral intentions toward the collaboration and the brand (likelihood to recommend the collaboration, purchase intention). It is also expected that the level of satisfaction with the collaboration leads to their likelihood to recommend the collaboration, their attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the brand.

**Method and Results** For data collection, we employed an online survey method. The survey was administered to Chinese adult consumers who were born after 1980, have ever purchased products from luxury fashion brands within the last 3 years, and have visited social network sites within the last 1 month. All measures of research variables were adapted from the previous research. After completing questions regarding pre-existing brand attitudes, participants were exposed to screenshots of a luxury brand's social network sites, which showed the brand's collaboration with a digital influencer. Then the participants were asked to complete the rest of the questionnaire. A total of 452 responses were used for data analysis (male=50.2%). Confirmatory factor analysis with the ML estimation (AMOS 23) showed that the model fitted the data well ( $\chi^2=141.808$ ,  $df=67$ ,  $p <.001$ ,  $CMIN/DF=2.117$ ,  $SRMR=.027$ ,  $CFI=.986$ ,  $TLI=.981$ ,  $RMSEA=.050$ ). Composite reliabilities, convergent and discriminant validity were satisfactory. Structural equation modeling revealed that the model fitted the data well ( $\chi^2=297.250$ ,  $df=111$ ,  $p <.001$ ,  $CMIN/DF=2.678$ ,  $SRMR=.047$ ,  $CFI=.969$ ,  $TLI=.961$ ,  $RMSEA=.061$ ), and showed that all hypotheses were supported.

**Discussion** The findings from this study have confirmed the previous theories on cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), brand extensions (Volckner & Sattler, 2006), and sponsorships (Speed & Thompson, 2000), suggesting that the perceived fit plays a key role in generating positive responses toward marketing activities and brands. The current study reinforces the role of perceived fit in the context of luxury fashion brands, showing that a good fit influences consumers to develop favorable attitudes and purchase intentions. Besides, the study demonstrates that the good fit leads consumers to feel satisfied with the collaboration, and to share and recommend the collaboration to their friends, which is important to the success of social marketing. The findings imply that, while luxury brands can leverage influencer marketing, brand marketers are recommended to consider the image fit between their brands and digital influencers since a poor fit may cause the dilution of brand image.

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