



## Investigating the Dual Congruence Effects on Digital Influencers' Self-Brand Engagement

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Dual-Congruence Effect  
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### Abstract.

Influencer marketing nowadays has become a critical marketing communication tool. A review of the literature indicates a lack of insights on how digital influencers benefit the consumer-brand relationship. This study proposes a dual-congruence model to examine the formation of digital influencer's self-brand engagement in the influencer marketing context by empirically examining the following relationships: first, the influence of self-congruity and perceived congruence on parasocial interaction and influencers' brand credibility, respectively; second, the impact of parasocial interaction and influencers' brand credibility on digital influencers' self-brand engagement; and third, the mediating effect of parasocial interaction and influencers' brand credibility on the relationship aforementioned.

A self-administered online survey was conducted, which collected 413 valid respondents. The results for PLS-SEM analysis showed that all the hypotheses were getting support. This study's findings can assist digital influencers, and managers realize how to leverage digital influencers' brands on consumer engagement toward their brands.

## 1. Research Background

The flourish of social media makes digital influencers- people who have built sizeable social networks of followers, and their followers represent their popularity (see Torres et al. [44]) have become dominant in influencing consumer behavior (eMarketer [8]). The budget spent on influencers marketing is expected to surpass 370 million dollars in 2027 (Statista [42]) makes it an essential and critical marketing communication strategy to strengthen online brand engagement (Newberry [30]).

The review of influencer marketing related literature indicates that studies have paid attention to consumer attitude (Evans et al. [11]), brand awareness (Lou and Yuan

[27]), behavioral related intention (Lee and Watkins [24], Evans et al. [11], Dhanesh and Duthler [6]) toward the brand that digital influencers they endorsed. However, as digital influencers create their “own brand” or “self-brand” becomes a popular contemporary marketing strategy (e.g., Fournier and Eckhardt [12]), studies have largely ignored this issue (c.f., Van Grinsven and Das [46]), especially the lack of studies provides further insights on consumer-brand (i.e., influencers’ self-brand) relationship. Accordingly, investigating the mechanism of the consumer-brand relationship between followers and digital influencers’ self-brand becomes essential, which has been encouraged by academics (e.g., Moraes et al. [29]).

Brand engagement recognized as an important consumer-brand relationship outcome (France et al. [14]). In the influencer marketing related literature, engagement-related constructs gradually received studies attention (e.g., Hughes et al. [18], Lou et al. [26], Park and Lin [31]). More specifically, these studies suggest that perceived congruence or self-congruity play separate roles in strengthening the consumer-brand relationship, such as brand attachment (Rabbanee et al. [32]), brand love (Zhou et al. [50]), engagement with endorsed brand content (Shan et al. [37]). Surprisingly, little is known about if different types of congruence effects can benefit digital influencers’ self-brand engagement simultaneously. In addition, the underlying mechanisms between how different congruence effects on digital influencers’ self-brand engagement also lack well examined. This study, therefore, examines the process through which two types of congruence effects might affect digital influencers’ self-brand engagement.

This study refers to the fundamental process of internalization and identification applied to social media context (Kelman [19]; Sokolova and Kefi [40]) and utilizing theoretical frameworks from previous empirical studies according to two mediating mechanisms-brand credibility (which rooted signaling theory) from brand (Erdem and Swait [9]) and parasocial interaction (Horton and Whol [17]; Xiang et al. [48]). It is believed to provide more comprehensive knowledge and contribute to the extant influencer marketing literature. Specifically, this enables a better understanding of two individual processes between two congruence effects - self-congruity and perceived congruence - via parasocial interaction and self-brand credibility on influencers’ self-brand engagement.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development**

### **2.1. Brand signaling theory**

Based on information economics, the brand can be treated as a signal for delivering information in the asymmetrical information marketplace (Erdem and Swait [9], which is recognized as “brand signaling theory”. Among various brand signals, brand credibility is the most important characteristic of brand signal (Spry et al [41]). The concept of brand credibility has been defined as “the believability of the product position information contained in a brand” in the brand and advertising literature (Erdem et al. [10]). Findings in recent influencer marketing literature have confirmed the role of brand credibility on purchase intention and attitude (e.g., Lee and Kim [25]), which implies its prominent role in understanding consumer-brand relationships. As aforementioned, this study introduced brand credibility for understanding the mechanism between dual congruence effects on self-brand engagement in the current context.

## 2.2. Parasocial interaction

Parasocial interaction (hereafter, PSI) explains the one-sided illusionary personal relationship between a media user (e.g., member of an audience) and a media character through advertisements or programs (Horton and Wohl [17]). Although the relationship is one-sided, in the current context, digital influencers can influence followers' perceptions and behaviors due to the existence of PSI (see Sakib et al. [36]). Following Sakib et al. [36], the current study also recognized PSI as a two-way, more interactive context of influencer marketing, especially on social media. PSI has been extensively investigated in the media and communication literature (see Zheng et al. [49]). In the social media-related context, it is recognized as a critical factor in fostering consumer-brand relationships (Sakib et al. [36]). Accordingly, this study introduced parasocial interaction for understanding the mechanism between dual congruence effects on brand engagement.

## 2.3. The relationship between self-congruity and parasocial interaction

By following self-congruity theory (Sirgy [38]) and Kressmann et al.'s [21]), this study defined self-congruity as similarity, consistency, or match between the digital influencers' brand image and followers' image. Parasocial interaction (hereafter, PSI) explains the one-sided illusionary sense of mutual awareness and intimacy with media personas (e.g. celebrities, news hosts, characters) (Horton and Wohl [17]), which recognizes media personas as "real friends" (Xiang et al. [48]). While followers perceived a congruence between the digital influencer's self-brand image and their self-image, it seems to promote positive psychological outcomes (Lam et al. [23]).

France et al. [14] indicated that brand self-congruity as customer-centered influences on customer-brand engagement, which implies that individuals with high brand self-congruity will present a higher level of customer-brand engagement. Motivated by this logic, this study argues that if the digital influencer's self-brand image representing followers' personal image, the followers are more likely to show feelings of intimacy and closeness toward the digital influencers. Thus, parasocial interaction will raise. Accordingly, this study hypothesized:

H1: Follower's higher self-congruity leads to higher parasocial interaction.

## 2.4. The relationship between perceived congruence and digital influencers' brand credibility

Perceived congruence refers to the follower's perception of similarity between the digital influencer and their brand (c.f., Bergkvist et al. [2]). Digital influencers' brand credibility refers to 'the believability of the product position information contained in a digital influencer's self-brand (c.f., Erdem and Swait [9]). As the follower's perception of similarity or congruence between the influencer and their self-brands, the "meaning" of digital influencers will transfer" to their self-brand (c.f., Torres et al. [44]). That is to say, the higher perception of congruence between two entities will make self-brand become more convincing. In other words, the "congruence" between digital influencers and their self-brand implies the brand delivering a strong signal in the asymmetrical

information marketplace, that increase its credibility (c.f., Erdem and Swait [9]). The relationship between perceived congruence on brand credibility-related construct has been found in the sponsorship literature (Rifon et al. [33], Wang [47]). Findings in recent influencer marketing literature have confirmed the role of brand credibility on purchase intention and attitude (e.g., Lee and Kim [25]). So far, although there are few interested in the relationship between perceived congruence and digital influencer's self-brand credibility in the influencer marketing context, according to the aforementioned findings and reasons, this study, therefore, proposes the following:

H2: Followers who perceived higher congruence between the digital influencers and their self-brands lead to higher influencers' brand credibility.

### **2.5. The relationship between parasocial interaction and influencer's self-brand engagement**

In this study, influencer's self-brand engagement refers to the followers' positively valenced influencer's self-brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions (c.f., Hollebeek et al. [16]). Parasocial interaction reflects an involved relationship between the audience and the media character that allows followers to strengthen a common interest between the two and eventually result in higher levels of enthusiasm (Cheung et al. [3]).

Accordingly, followers can exchange their ideas toward the brand with their social connection by commenting on the brand, expressing their likes and dislikes, etc. Therefore, followers' affective ties with digital influencers may indicative of an engaging relationship between followers and digital influencers' self-brand. In other words, parasocial interaction are expected to enhance followers' engagement with digital influencers' self-brand. In the marketing field, parasocial interaction has been found to enhance consumers' engagement toward corporate social networking sites (Men and Tsai [28]). Findings in Tsai and Men [45] revealed that parasocial interaction is the key to attracting consumer brand engagement. Since there is no further study investigating the relationship between parasocial interaction and digital influencers' self-brand engagement, according to the aforementioned reasons, this study proposes the following:

H3: Followers who perceived higher parasocial interaction leads to higher influencers' self-brand engagement.

### **2.6. The relationship between influencer's brand credibility and influencer's self-brand engagement**

According to Rifon et al. [33], brand credibility implies the message delivered by the trustable or believable brand becomes more persuasive. As followers' engagement toward the digital influencers' self-brand can be recognized as a kind of personalized response toward the brand, the more persuasive message that followers receive, the more positive response will be, which has implied a link between brand credibility and brand engagement. So far, the credibility-related construct has been found to benefit consumer reactions toward the brand or product. Studies in celebrity endorsement or influencer

marketing related context, the role of endorser credibility has been found to trigger consumer reactions (La Ferle and Choi [22]) and product evaluation (Djafarova and Rushworth [7]). Accordingly, this study proposes that if the followers perceived higher credibility toward the influencers' self-brand, they are more likely to engage with this self-brand. Therefore, this study proposes:

H4: Followers who perceived influencers' high brand credibility leads to higher influencers' self-brand engagement.

## **2.7. The mediating role of parasocial interaction and brand credibility**

As discussed earlier, it can be assumed that similarity between influencers' self-brand image and followers' personal image may through strong parasocial relationship that offer a strong reason to respond toward the brand by commenting on the brand, expressing their likes and dislikes, etc. The engagement toward self-brand would be stronger once a popular digital influencer connects to the followers and is able to establish a strong parasocial relationship. Studies also suggest parasocial interaction's mediating role in explaining the brand's response in the social media context. (Kim et al. [20]). Therefore, parasocial interaction with digital influencers might mediate the relationship between self-congruity and self-brand engagement.

In the advertising related literature, Becker-Olsen and Hill [1] found that high-fit sponsorships build brand relationships that ultimately lead to brand engagement, which implies the need to explore the mediating role between perceived congruence on brand engagement. Brand credibility have been acknowledged in explaining consumer response toward the brand in the advertising related literature (c.f., Rifon et al. [33]). Accordingly, it is plausible that followers are likely to reward the digital influencers' self-brand as they perceive the congruence between two dyads (i.e., influencers and their self-brand) when they trust its position. Taken together, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H5: Parasocial Interaction mediates the relationship between self-congruity and self-brand engagement toward digital influencers' brand.

H6: Digital influencers' brand credibility mediate the relationship between perceived congruence and brand engagement toward digital influencers' self-brand.

Based on the literature review and the proposed hypotheses, this study graphs the conceptual framework in Figure 1.

## **3. Method**

### **3.1. Measurements**

This study developed a self-administered survey consisting of 29 items. All the measurements for each construct in this study were adapted from the existing literature, with the wording changed slightly to fit the current research context. In this study, self-congruity was adjusted to three items developed by Sirgy et al. [38]. Congruence between the digital influencer and their brand was used a three-item scale from Teng

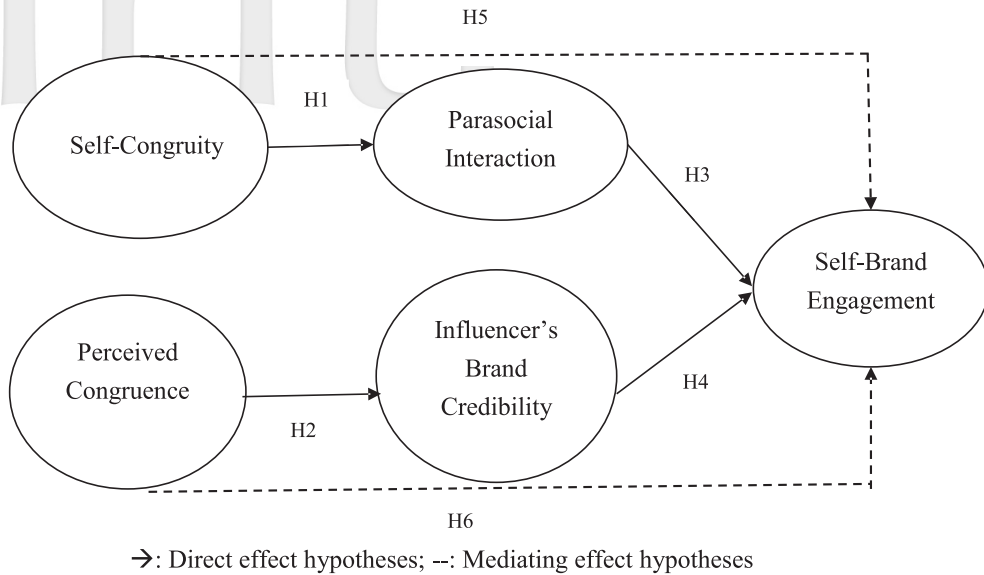


Figure 1: Conceptual framework.

et al. [43]. Parasocial interaction was adapted Zheng et al. [49], six-item scale. The Erdem and Swait's [9] brand credibility scale was adapted toward digital influencers' self-brands. Finally, to measure the research outcome variable, self-brand engagement, this study used Hollebeek et al. [16] brand engagement's ten-item scale. All research scales used seven-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

### 3.2. Data collection

Considering the purpose of this study, digital influencers' brand was chosen based on the following criteria: Digital influencers who have the highest number of followers or subscribers that have been building their personal brand for more than a year. Twenty respondents were invited to participate in the pretest; the questionnaires were then modified to ensure readability based on their suggestions. The final questionnaire was distributed to those who have followed or subscribed to these selected digital influencers via PTT (the most popular BBS platform in Taiwan).

In total, 413 useful questionnaires were received. Females (64.6%) are higher than males (35.6%), with a majority age ranging between twenty to twenty-nine (77.2%). 46.2% of them are a full-time student, and 95.6% of the respondents had a college degree or above. Moreover, 85% of the participants indicated that they usually use YouTube to watch the influencers' video and have 68.3% viewing approximately one to four times per week.

### 3.3. Analytical techniques and measurement properties

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used in this study

(Hair et al. [15]). This study used SmartPLS 3.0 M3 (Ringle et al. [34]) for analysis. Following Chin [4] and Hair et al. [15], all the reflective measurement model was to assess internal consistency reliability, indicator reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

The results show that all the CR values of the five constructs for the data set ranged from 0.904 to 0.967, exceeding the 0.7 thresholds (Hair et al. [15]) and suggesting acceptable internal consistency. All the outer loadings were higher than 0.7, implying that all constructs exhibited satisfactory indicator reliability. For the convergent validity, all the CR and AVE values were ranged from 0.904 to 0.967 and 0.748 to 0.799; respectively, all values are higher than the threshold .70 and .50, respectively (Fornell and Larcker [13]) indicates a good convergent validity. For discriminant validity, Table 1 showed that all the square roots of the AVEs were greater than the off-diagonal correlations among the constructs. In addition, the results showed that none of the cross-outer loading problems were achieved for any of the research constructs. Both support the discriminant validity of each construct. Taken together, the measurement in this study has convergent and discriminant validity.

### 3.5. Testing the hypotheses

This study followed Hair et al. [15] to test the hypotheses, using a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure with 5000 resamples to calculate the t-value. The result in Table 2 revealed that all of the proposed hypotheses are sound and are empirically confirmed. The results showed the positive, significant relationship between self-congruity and parasocial interaction ( $\beta = 0.842$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), strongly supporting H1. Perceived congruence exhibits a positive and significant relationship with influencer brand credibility ( $\beta = 0.739$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), confirming H2. This study found support for H3, which predicted a positive relationship between parasocial interaction and brand engagement ( $\beta = 0.619$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). H4 states that influencer brand credibility positively impacts brand engagement, supported by the results ( $\beta = 0.287$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

To test the significance of the mediating effects of parasocial interaction and influencer brand credibility, this study followed the procedure by Hair et al. [15]. In the first step, this study tested whether the direct effects of self-congruity on brand engagement were

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation, and correlation matrix.

	Mean (SD)	SC	PI	PC	IBC	SBE
SC	4.391(1.324)	<b>0.889</b>				
PI	4.417(1.337)	0.842	<b>0.894</b>			
PC	5.291(1.139)	0.568	0.625	<b>0.871</b>		
IBC	5.147(1.117)	0.665	0.751	0.739	<b>0.874</b>	
SBE	4.635(1.275)	0.779	0.835	0.617	0.752	<b>0.865</b>

Notes: Square root of the AVE is on the diagonal; CR: 0.92(SC), 0.96(PI), 0.90(PC), 0.96(IBC), 0.97(SBE). SC= Self-Congruity; PI: Parasocial Interaction; PC: Perceived Congruence; IBC: Influencer Brand Credibility; SBE: Self-Brand Engagement.

Table 2: Research hypothesis testing ( $n = 413$ ).

Hypotheses Relationship	Coefficient	C.R.	Supported
H1: Self-Congruity $\rightarrow$ Parasocial Interaction	0.842	53.172***	Yes
H2: Perceived Congruence $\rightarrow$ Influencer's Brand Credibility	0.739	27.287***	Yes
H3: Parasocial Interaction $\rightarrow$ Self-Brand Engagement	0.619	12.892***	Yes
H4: Influencers' Brand Credibility $\rightarrow$ Self-Brand Engagement	0.287	5.638***	Yes

\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $P < 0.001$  SMC: PI=0.709; Influencers' Brand Credibility=0.546; Self-Brand Equity=0.731.

significant when the mediator was excluded. The bootstrapping routine was performed according to the previously described specifications. The result revealed the significant, positive effect of self-congruity ( $\beta = 0.229$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) on brand engagement. In the second step, the mediator (i.e., parasocial interaction) was included. The effect of self-congruity via parasocial interaction on consumer brand engagement had a significantly positive effect ( $\beta = 0.366$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, to test the significance of the mediation, this study computed the variance accounted for (VAF = indirect effect/total effect). For self-congruity  $\rightarrow$  parasocial interaction  $\rightarrow$  brand engagement, the result yielded a VAF value of 0.614, which indicated its partial mediating role as suggested by Hair et al. [15]. The exact process was applied for testing mediating role of influencer brand credibility. The value of variance accounted for (VAF = indirect effect/total effect) showed that the perceived congruence  $\rightarrow$  influencer brand credibility  $\rightarrow$  brand engagement sequence yielded the VAF value of 0.860, which indicated its full mediating role as suggested by Hair et al. [15]. All the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Mediating test.

Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	VAF
SC $\rightarrow$ PIT $\rightarrow$ SBE	0.229***	0.366***	0.596	0.614
PC $\rightarrow$ IBC $\rightarrow$ SBE	0.030***	0.185***	0.215	0.860

Notes: SC: Self-Congruity; PI: Parasocial Interaction; PC: Perceived Congruence; IBC: Influencer Brand Credibility; SBE: Self-Brand Engagement VAF= Indirect effect/Total effect; \* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $P < 0.001$

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Conclusion and discussion

This study investigated the influence of two congruence effects (i.e., self-congruity and perceived congruence) on digital influencers' brand engagement through two intermediate mechanisms (i.e., parasocial interaction and digital influencers' brand credibility). Overall, the empirical results of the PLS-SEM analysis support all of the hypotheses (i.e., direct effects). Moreover, both parasocial interaction and brand credibility also have partial and full mediating effects, respectively, on the relationship between self-congruity, perceived congruence, and brand engagement.



The effect of self-congruity on parasocial interaction is found in the current study, where the effect of perceived congruence on digital influencers' brand credibility has similar to findings in advertising-related context (e.g., Rifon et al. [33]; Wang [47]). Parasocial interaction is found to have a positive and significant impact on self-brand engagement. This is in line with recent brand engagement literature findings, such as Men and Tsai [28] and Cheung et al. [3]. With regard to the fourth hypothesis, perceived influencers' brand credibility is found to have a positive and significant relationship to higher influencers' self-brand engagement, which is in line with the previous findings that relate to engagement and influencer credibility (Chu et al. [5]; Djafarova and Rushworth [7]).

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to a better understanding of how different congruence effects contribute to brand engagement toward digital influencers' self-brands in available influencer marketing studies. It demonstrates the importance of including two intermediate mechanisms by combining parasocial interaction and brand-signaling theory in the models evaluating the proposed relationship. This study not only extends previous understanding of the effectiveness of influencer marketing on "endorsed brand" but also goes beyond previous studies such as Shan et al. [37], Rabbanee et al. [32], Zhou et al. [50], who has demonstrated either self-congruity or congruence directly affects the consumer-brand relationship in the digital marketing field.

## 4.2. Managerial implications

According to the findings, possible applicable brand strategies are suggested to the influencers that would like to build their self-brand. These results indicate two routes: first, self-congruity's effect on self-brand engagement is partially mediated by the effect of parasocial interaction, and second, the relationship between perceived congruence and self-brand engagement is also partially mediated by the effect of influencer's brand credibility.

In terms of the first route, influencers should understand followers' idiosyncratic preferences of different influencers and comprehensively monitor the evaluation of self-image among other followers like themselves. Influencers can try to use a unique way that uniformly communicates their self-brand personality or image congruent with their followers' image. Carefully considering building a comfortable interaction via social media with their followers is also necessary. By doing this, followers may think they experience digital influencers' families and are more likely to engage toward influencers' self-brand.

Regarding the findings of the second route, influencers can pay attention to their self-brand's attribute that is related to their product attributes or digital influencers' image. They can also develop a memorable slogan or some specific event to communicate with their followers. Accordingly, followers will be more likely to accept brand-related information digital influencers deliver and perceive it as credible. Consequently, this will benefit self-brand engagement.

## 4.3. Limitations and future research

According to this study's nature, some research limitations provide avenues for future research. Firstly, this study only conducted digital influencers on one social media-

YouTube to investigate the proposed model of this study. Future research is suggested to conduct consumer brand engagement of digital influencers across social media platforms (such as Instagram, Facebook, Line, etc.). In addition, the sample of influencers in this study is too scattered; future research can choose the single style influencers (i.e., big stomach influencers, beauty influencers, or knowledge influencers) for consumer brand engagement. Finally, in this study, the sample of this study did not focus on a specific audience (i.e., heavy users). Future research is suggested to compare how heavy and light users' difference on consumer brand engagement of digital influencer personal brand.

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