"What causes social media users to engage and mimic virtual influencers? The role of self-congruity"

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BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES

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WHAT CAUSES SOCIAL MEDIA USERS TO ENGAGE AND MIMIC VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS? THE ROLE OF SELF-CONGRUITY

Abstract

Influencer marketing has been widely utilized in marketing communication. With the growing interest in virtual influencers, this study aims to investigate why social media users would interact with virtual influencers. The research model was developed based on the self-congruity theory. The data were obtained by questionnaires distributed to social media users using judgmental sampling (respondents were above 18 years old and actively used Instagram within the past six months). The questionnaire was posted on social media, and 230 responses were collected and analyzed using a covariance-based structural equation. Influencer-brand fit was found to have a weak direct effect on engagement ($\gamma = 0.158$, $p < 0.05$), but insignificant direct effect on mimicry desire ($\gamma = 0.160$, $p > 0.05$). Value homophily significantly affects both engagement and mimicry desire directly ($\beta = 0.338$ and $\beta = 0.622$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, value homophily was found to fully mediate the virtual influencer-brand fit/mimicry desire relationship (B = 0.546, $p < 0.01$) and partially mediate the relationship of virtual influencer-brand fit/engagement (B = 0.229, $p < 0.01$). However, the mediating effect of mimicry desire on the virtual influencer-brand fit/engagement relationship was found to be non-significant (B = 0.065, $p > 0.05$). This study contributes to influencer marketing by highlighting value homophily as the most significant factor explaining why consumers respond to a virtual influencer when used as a message source in marketing communication.

Keywords	influencer, consumer response, message source, marketing communication, Thailand
JEL Classification	M30, M31

INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers (SMIs) have received much attention from both academics and practitioners based on their ability to persuade consumers to respond more favorably (i.e., through positive word of mouth and brand image) (De Veirman et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2021). Influencer marketing is the product of a collaboration between businesses and brand owners, with SMIs promoting products and brands (De Veirman et al., 2017) and eventually boosting followers' attitudes and opinions toward the posts or reviews (Yang et al., 2020). Furthermore, the contents of SMIs can be powerful because of their characteristics, such as attractiveness, expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness (Ki & Kim, 2019; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2021), making them excellent message sources in marketing communication. More recently, the practice of SMIs has introduced a new form of influencers, virtual or artificial intelligence influencers (AI influencers) (Sands et al., 2022a), which are referred to as virtual influencers (VIs).

The rise of interest in VIs resulted from numerous advantages compared to human influencers in agelessness, constant availability, and brand control to mitigate any risk to the VI's reputation. In addition,

there are cost reductions, effective native advertising with less frustration toward the ads, well alignment with the immersive platform, and enhanced brand communities (Moustakas et al., 2020; Sands et al., 2022b; Schwarz, 2022). However, since VIs has recently been introduced to the market, particularly in Thailand in 2021, there is a limited empirical study on how consumers interact with VIs in the literature. Nevertheless, the research conducted on VIs mainly focused on comparing the effectiveness of VIs with human influencers on consumer responses, yet mixed results were found (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Sands et al., 2022a). In addition, the question was raised about the challenge of VIs to attract and uphold the interest of followers or social media users (Moustakas et al., 2020).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW, AIMS, AND HYPOTHESES

The growth of influencer marketing attracts practitioners to incorporate influencers in endorsing brands. As a result, new categories of influencers (i.e., macro-, micro-, and nano-influencers) have been added and used for marketing purposes. Recently, virtual or artificial intelligence influencers (VIs or AI influencers) have been introduced (Sands et al., 2022a). However, previous studies on VIs thus far are at an early stage, and empirical studies are yet limited. Therefore, this study proposes a conceptual research model underpinned by self-congruity theory to understand how social media users respond to VIs.

To date, the form of VIs has been introduced as either human-like or anime-like (Choudhry et al., 2022). As for the anime-like, it can either be an animated human or a non-human, commonly referred to as an avatar (Choudhry et al., 2022; Sands et al., 2022a). Currently, several human-like VIs have been introduced in many countries, such as Lil Miquela in the USA, Rozy in South Korea, and Ai Ailyn and Callmewunni in Thailand, and more than 150 VIs on social media platforms around the world (Schwarz, 2022). In Thailand, for instance, Callmewunni (with approximately 240 posts on Instagram) first appeared on August 9, 2021. Since she was introduced, many brands in many industries, such as ANANDA Development (real estate), CIMB Thai (banking), SCG Home (retail), Yamaha (automobile), Dentyne (candy), and Dhipaya Insurance, have already reached out to Callmewunni as their VI. Furthermore, with human-like VIs designed to look and behave like a human, their public profiles and identities are also clearly posted on their Instagram accounts, allowing greater interactions by followers (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021).

Previous research on VIs, even at the early stage, attempted to assess the effectiveness of VIs in comparison with human influencers and based their studies on interview methods (Choudhry et al., 2022; Moustakas et al., 2020). For instance, Moustakas et al. (2020) explored the effectiveness of VIs from the perspective of experts in digital media. As a result, a few issues were highlighted in associating VIs in marketing communication, including the potential challenges of using VIs (i.e., followers' interest, authenticity, investment, a risk to brand popularity), the opportunities to expand beyond the fashion industry, and the appropriate form of VIs (human-like vs. anime-like). Furthermore, Choudhry et al. (2022) engaged the followers of VIs on Instagram in interviews to understand why followers would engage with artificial figures. It was found that VIs are attractive because of their unique visual appeal, sense of mystery, and creativity in storytelling and content, which make them different from human influencers (Choudhry et al., 2022).

Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021) investigated the reaction differences of social media users to different forms of influencers, including human, human-like, and anime-like virtual influencers. The study gathered data from Instagram posts and comments of influencers and followers. They found that human-like virtual influencers received the lowest positive reactions, which contradicted the findings of Sands et al. (2022a). Sands et al. (2022a) concluded that consumers respond to both types of influencers equally. Thus, further investigation is essential based on the mixed results of consumer reactions to VIs.

As the context of this study revolves around artificial figures, the theory of anthropomorphism, which explains the phenomenon of human-like characters embedded into non-human bodies

(Portal et al., 2018), is appointed. The animated character has been extensively regarded in marketing disciplines to draw attention and create a bond with consumers (Vijayakrishnan et al., 2018). For example, an everyday use of animated characters can be employed in brand characters to convey the brand meaning to consumers, such as the brand's storyline, personality, and culture (Aaker, 1996; Hosany et al., 2013). In general, there are three categories of brand characters – either presented in the form of humans or non-humans – including animation (e.g., Mickey Mouse, Winnie the Pooh, Popeye), identity (e.g., Michelin Man, Ronald McDonald), and pure design (e.g., Hello Kitty, Rilakkuma) (Hosany et al., 2013). The common goal of all three categories is to create a brand character with a humanized persona to attract appeal and likability from consumers. Besides using animated characters in brand building, it is also commonly used in advertisements (Vijayakrishnan et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). For instance, favorite cartoon characters are used in advertising products such as toys, confectioneries, and children's foods to gain attention and purchase from kids. Therefore, the theory of anthropomorphism, when employed in a marketing context (e.g., brand personality, advertisements, and anthropomorphized products), can produce positive consumer emotions and brand/product evaluation (Zhang et al., 2020). In turn, anthropomorphism can create a more favorable consumer response, including brand attachment, sustainable consumption behavior, and willingness to buy (Zhang et al., 2020). These marketing outcomes exist because the consumers generate an emotional connection with the personality of the animated anthropomorphic figure.

The formation of emotional connection between human beings and anthropomorphic figures can be explained by the theory of self-congruity, which was first introduced by Sirgy (1982). It explains the fit between self-concept and product image, also termed "self-image/product image congruity theory" (Sirgy, 1982). A higher degree of congruence between self-concept and product image leads to the alignment with consumer behavior, which is called self-consistency (Sirgy, 1982). This can explain how an individual perceives their self-concept as compatible with a person's characteristics or object; it is more than

likely for that individual to create positive interaction, satisfaction, and attitudes (Lee & Jeong, 2014). As described by Sirgy (1982), there are four components of self-concept: the actual self, ideal self, social self, and ideal social self; many studies emphasized the actual and ideal self (Das & Khatwani, 2018; Koo et al., 2014; Quester et al., 2000; Sirgy, 1985; Wille et al., 2018). For instance, Koo et al. (2014) investigated actual and ideal self-congruity in evaluating online apparel. It was found that actual self-congruity affects product evaluation positively, whereby the ideal self-congruity contributes negatively. In addition, Quester et al. (2000) suggested that actual self-congruity is helpful when deciding the appeal of a product to be evaluated by customers.

Previously, the self-congruity theory has been appointed in various contexts, including tourism (tourist and destination image) (Sirgy et al., 2018; Sirgy & Su, 2000; Xu & Pratt, 2018), e-tailer (e-tailer's personality and shopper self-concept) (Das & Khatwani, 2018), and influencer marketing (audiences and influencers/endorsers) (Shan et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2021). Previous studies suggest that when consumers perceive their self-concept to be congruent with persons, objects, or brands, they tend to engage more (Islam et al., 2018; Lee & Jeong, 2014; Wu et al., 2020). Thus, the self-congruity theory is applied to explain that a higher degree of value similarity between two individuals will predict a higher probability of interaction between them. Comparably, the VIs who share the same values as the social media users tend to receive higher engagement by liking, sharing, and commenting on the posts. Another concept that describes the congruence between brand/product and endorsers is the match-up hypothesis (Feng et al., 2021; Park & Lin, 2020), which explains the fit of their characteristics in terms of image, attractiveness, expertise, and personality congruences (Janssen et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022). The match-up hypothesis is often referred to when evaluating endorsement effectiveness, makes it believable that endorsers are the good representative of a brand/product (Feng et al., 2021; Park & Lin, 2020).

Based on the match-up hypothesis and self-congruity theory, this study proposes two antecedents in the conceptualized model, including vir-

tual influencer-brand fit (VI-brand fit) and value homophily. VI-brand fit, as the first antecedent in this study, yields the effectiveness of the message source by evaluating the congruence between the influencer/endorsers and brand explained by the match-up hypothesis (Feng et al., 2021). Thus, the fit between the influencer and the brand is considered when choosing the right influencer. This construct is measured through the degree to which the influencers can create a cohesive association with brands or products (Monge-Benito et al., 2020) expressed through their characteristics and images. Moreover, the fit between the influencer and brand also can generate positive effects on cognitive, attitudinal, and conative evaluations by social media followers (Breves et al., 2019; De Cicco et al., 2021; Janssen et al., 2022). For instance, De Cicco et al. (2021) found that Instagram users are more likely to follow the influencer when they evaluate the fit between the influencer and the product as high. Thus, based on the match-up hypothesis, the fit between VIs and product/brand should yield a behavioral expression to interact with the VIs.

Another antecedent proposed in this study is the concept of homophily, which explains the interaction between similar individuals in their beliefs, values, emotions, and preferences (Ladhari et al., 2020). Homophily is composed of four dimensions, including attitude (i.e., sharing similar thinking and behavior), background (i.e., similar social class, economic situation), value (i.e., similar cultural and personal values), and appearance (i.e., looking similar to oneself) (Ladhari et al., 2020). Since this study evaluates the degree of homophily through the identities of the VIs on Instagram, the value dimension of homophily is focused. Moreover, the concept of value homophily is consistent with the theory of self-congruity, which explains how an individual views their present self-concept to be similar to that of another person, thus resulting in interaction with one another (Lee & Jeong, 2014). Kim and Kim (2022) investigated the effect of homophily on influencer attachment and found that this relationship is significantly positive. The same results are consistent with Xiao et al. (2021), who found that congruence between the influencer and self can enhance the willingness of social media users to spread the influencer recommendation to others

and increase the desire to mimic the influencers. Accordingly, based on the extant studies and the self-congruity theory, it is expected that if individuals evaluate VIs to hold similar values, the tendency to interact with VIs will be high.

While other studies focused on the effect of influencers on consumer brand evaluation, this study is particularly interested in social media users' interactions with VIs. Thus, consumer engagement with and desire to mimic VIs are identified as the dependent variables. The concept of consumer engagement can be defined as the intensity of engagement that results in behavioral responses such as recommendation, participation, and, eventually, purchase intention (Lee et al., 2020). It is also associated with the consumer management context that emphasizes the behavior that reflects a consumer and a firm relationship beyond any transaction (i.e., purchase) (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Patterson et al. (2006) discussed the definition of consumer engagement in the level of the consumer's presence (i.e., physical, emotional, or cognitive) associated with the firm. Thus, four dimensions of consumer engagement were identified: vigor (i.e., investing in time and energy), dedication (i.e., a sense of belonging when associated with the firm), absorption (i.e., positive emotions during the interaction), and interaction (i.e., the highest level of presence connecting the consumer with firm, brand, or representatives) (Patterson et al., 2006).

Furthermore, consumer engagement can be viewed in three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, which explain consumers' interactions with an object (Hollebeek et al., 2014). However, in the social media context, consumer engagement can also be referred to as follower engagement which explains how the followers involve themselves and interact with the influencers (e.g., liking, sharing, and commenting on the influencer's content) (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). This study extends the view of consumer engagement apart from the interactions with the firm, brand, and product to encompass the interaction with the VIs by responding to their posts, such as liking, commenting, and recommending the VIs to friends to follow. This definition responds to the behavioral expression between Instagram users and VIs beyond behavioral responses such as purchases (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012).

Mimicry desire is the state where individuals want to intentionally duplicate the consumption behavior of others whom they view as their models (Ki & Kim, 2019). This concept is in line with the theory of social influence, which explains how the behavior of a specific person can influence others to act similarly (Venkatesh & Brown, 2001). A more general definition of mimicry can be defined as the possibility for one individual to imitate another individual's verbal and facial expressions, emotions, and behavior while interacting with another socially (Kulesza et al., 2014). However, in consumer behavior, mimicry is recognized as a way to create pleasant interactions between the mimicker and the mimicked (Ki & Kim, 2019). As mimicry communicates a sense of togetherness, which creates a bond between the interacting parties, the outcomes of mimicry are expected to be positive (Chartrand & Dalton, 2009). They include the desire to purchase a product, a willingness to donate, and increased purchases, all of which are predictable in the consumer behavior context (Kulesza et al., 2014) as long as the mimickers find some benefit from mimicry (White & Argo, 2011). Previously the research on mimicry desire has been focused on mimicking another human being (Ki & Kim, 2019; Kulesza et al., 2014; Xiao et al., 2021). However, this paper is one of a kind to investigate this construct in the context of mimicking artificial figures. Thus, the operational definition of mimicry desire in this study is how individuals will mimic VIs' lifestyles or activities based on what has been posted on Instagram.

Apart from the investigation on the direct effect of VI-brand fit and value homophily on engagement and mimicry desire, the previous studies also examined the indirect relationships among these variables. For example, Janssen et al. (2022) considered the relationships between the influencer-brand fit and the individual's evaluation of the advertisement, product, influencer, and purchase intention. It was found that the relationships were mediated by identification, especially for those influencers with a high number of followers. Simply choosing an influencer with similar characteristics to the brand does not cause an individual to evaluate the advertisement, product, or influencer, nor intend to purchase directly unless the individual assesses the influencer to be congruent to themselves. For instance, De Cicco et al. (2021) noted that the influencer-brand fit positively affects the individual to follow the influencer in the future if the evaluation toward the influencer is also positive (i.e., attitude toward the influencer, credibility). According to previous studies, the fit between influencer and brand might not directly affect consumer's behavioral expression but rather through the mediator such as influencer attitudes (Belanche et al., 2021; De Cicco et al., 2021), credibility (Belanche et al., 2021), and identification (Janssen et al., 2022). As a result, this study investigates the mediating role of value homophily in affecting the relationships of VI-brand fit/engagement and VI-brand fit/mimicry desire. In addition, the relationship between VI-brand fit and consumer engagement can be mediated by the desire to mimic, which represents an individual's attitude to the VIs. This mediating effect is consistent with Ki and Kim (2019), who found that the desire to mimic mediates the evaluation of the influencer and performance outcomes such as by word-of-mouth.

Based on the review of the theoretical ground, this study highlights the importance of self-congruity theory in the context of VIs. With the anthropomorphism theory explaining that human-like characters can be embedded into non-human bodies, this study anticipated that the responses by social media users to VIs should be similar to that of human influencers if VIs are perceived to have human-like characters. As a result, this study intends to investigate the effects of VI-brand fit and value homophily on social media users' responses, including engagement with and desire to mimic VIs. Both direct and indirect effects were examined, with value homophily and mimicry desire identified as mediators to capture a holistic understanding of the research model.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the factors influencing social media users to interact with VIs when taking a role of a message source in marketing communication. Further, this study proposes a conceptualized research model that includes the hypothesized relationships of VI-brand fit, value homophily, consumer engagement, and mimicry desire in the context of VIs.

Thus, several hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: VI-brand fit has a direct effect on engaging with a VI.

H1b: VI-brand fit has a direct effect on the desire to mimic a VI.

H2a: Value homophily has a direct effect on engaging with a VI.

H2b: Value homophily has a direct effect on the desire to mimic a VI.

H3a: The relationship between the VI-brand fit and the engagement with a VI is mediated by value homophily.

H3b: The relationship between the VI-brand fit and the desire to mimic a VI is mediated by value homophily.

H3c: The relationship between the VI-brand fit and the engagement with a VI is mediated by the desire to mimic.

2. METHODOLOGY

5-point measurement scales were adapted from the existing scales composed of 3 items of VI-brand fit from Lee et al. (2022) (e.g., virtual influencer X is a believable brand representative). Next, four items of value homophily were taken from Ladhari et al. (2020) (e.g., virtual influencer X posted a message on Instagram that made me feel that we have similar cultural values). Eight items of consumer engagement were adapted from Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut (2020) (e.g., I think I would go to virtual influencer X's Instagram to explore). Finally, four items of mimicry desire were from Ki and Kim (2019) (e.g., I aspire to the lifestyle of virtual influencer X posted on Instagram). All scales achieved acceptable reliability scores above 0.70 (0.81-0.95) (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The items were initially adapted in English and translated into Thai, and to ensure accuracy, a back-translation was done (Chen et al., 2021).

Given that two VIs have been introduced in Thailand, this study provided the existing images/posts from one of the VIs with the most active Instagram posts to be the representative. Since this study did not filter the presence of familiarity with the VI, the respondents can evaluate all constructs based on these images, which should facilitate the respondents to fill out the questionnaire. The first set of images and posts illustrates the lifestyle of the chosen VI, such as a post on eating out, surf skating, or memes, and the second set on posts with the endorsed brands.

The questionnaire was distributed by publicly posting the link to the Google form on social media networks (i.e., Facebook, Line, and Instagram accounts) (Saima & Khan, 2021). A judgmental sampling technique was employed for this study by asking two screening questions. Thus, the qualified respondent must be older than 18 and have recently visited their Instagram accounts in the past six months to ensure that they are active Instagram users. This study engages users from Instagram as it is the most populated platform by influencers (Casaló et al., 2020). All age groups above 18 years old are included in the investigation as the use of influencers is gradually expanding to the older generations (Jiradechakul, 2021). To ensure that the sample size is adequate for structural modeling, Hair et al. (2010) suggest that the minimum sample size should be at least five times the observed (19 items) and latent variables (4 constructs), which yield a sample size of 115. However, according to Reinartz et al. (2009), samples are recommended to avoid the non-convergence issue. Thus, to achieve the minimum sample size appropriate for the structural equation modeling, at least 200 respondents were aimed. This study was able to obtain 230 usable responses for further analysis.

This study investigates the measurement model and path analysis using covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM). The analysis was two-fold: confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the measurement model and path analysis for hypothesis testing. The acceptable model fit can be considered based on the rule of thumb with CMIN/DF less than 3 ($p < 0.05$); the goodness of fit indices (GFI) above 0.90; the comparative fit indices (CFI), and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) above 0.92; the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)

less than 0.08 (Hair et al., 2010). In responding to the common method bias, the common latent factor (CLF) was conducted by comparing the standardized regression weight with and without CLF. It was found that common method bias does not exist in this model, as all the observations are below the acceptable value of 0.20 (Afthanorhan et al., 2021).

3. RESULTS

The demographic profiles of respondents mainly were females (70.4%) from generations Z (43.9%) and Y (39.1%). In addition, most respondents were pursuing their bachelor's degree (65.2%) with a monthly income between 15,001-30,000 THB (46.1%). Accordingly, three items of consumer engagement were removed from the model due to the high modification indices. Finally, the model was continued with 16 items remaining for the four constructs. However, to avoid the unidentified issue and be able to capture the meaning of the construct, at least three items were obtained for each construct (Reinartz et al., 2009). As for the result of the CFA, it yielded the acceptable fit: CMIN/ DF = 2.123 (p = 0.000); CFI = 0.974; TLI = 0.967; GFI = 0.906; RMSEA = 0.070; SRMR = 0.031.

Table 1 illustrates the values of the standardized loadings, reliability scores (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The standardized loading values of all constructs range between 0.739-0.963, which is acceptable at a value above 0.50 (Hair et al., 2010). As for the reliability of the constructs, this study employed both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability in which the acceptable value should be above 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) and found all achieved acceptable values (0.918-0.953). Finally, the AVE values range between 0.738-0.840, which are acceptable above 0.50 (Hair et al., 2010). Thus, the convergent validity is met for all the values of standardized loading, reliability, and AVE (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010).

As for the discriminant analysis, it is suggested by the Forell-Larcker criterion that the value of AVE of a construct should be greater than any of the squared correlations for any pair of the constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 2 illustrates that the values of squared correlations of all constructs range between 0.416-0.671, which are lower than the AVE values of all constructs (0.738-0.840). Therefore, discriminant validity is achieved.

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity of the constructs

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Loading	CR	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE
VI-Brand Fit				**0.940**	**0.937**	**0.840**
IBF1	3.409	0.961	0.906			
IBF2	3.478	1.031	0.963			
IBF3	3.526	1.039	0.878			
Value Homophily				**0.918**	**0.924**	**0.738**
HOMO1	3.339	0.885	0.883			
HOMO2	3.343	0.971	0.897			
HOMO3	3.409	0.947	0.907			
HOMO4	3.430	0.883	0.739			
Engagement				**0.940**	**0.940**	**0.759**
ENG1	3.552	1.026	0.773			
ENG2	3.191	1.061	0.881			
ENG3	3.265	1.142	0.894			
ENG4	3.430	1.087	0.927			
ENG5	3.209	1.125	0.874			
Desire to Mimic				**0.953**	**0.950**	**0.836**
MIM1	3.126	1.093	0.939			
MIM2	3.130	1.037	0.873			
MIM3	2.987	1.038	0.930			
MIM4	3.043	1.052	0.913			
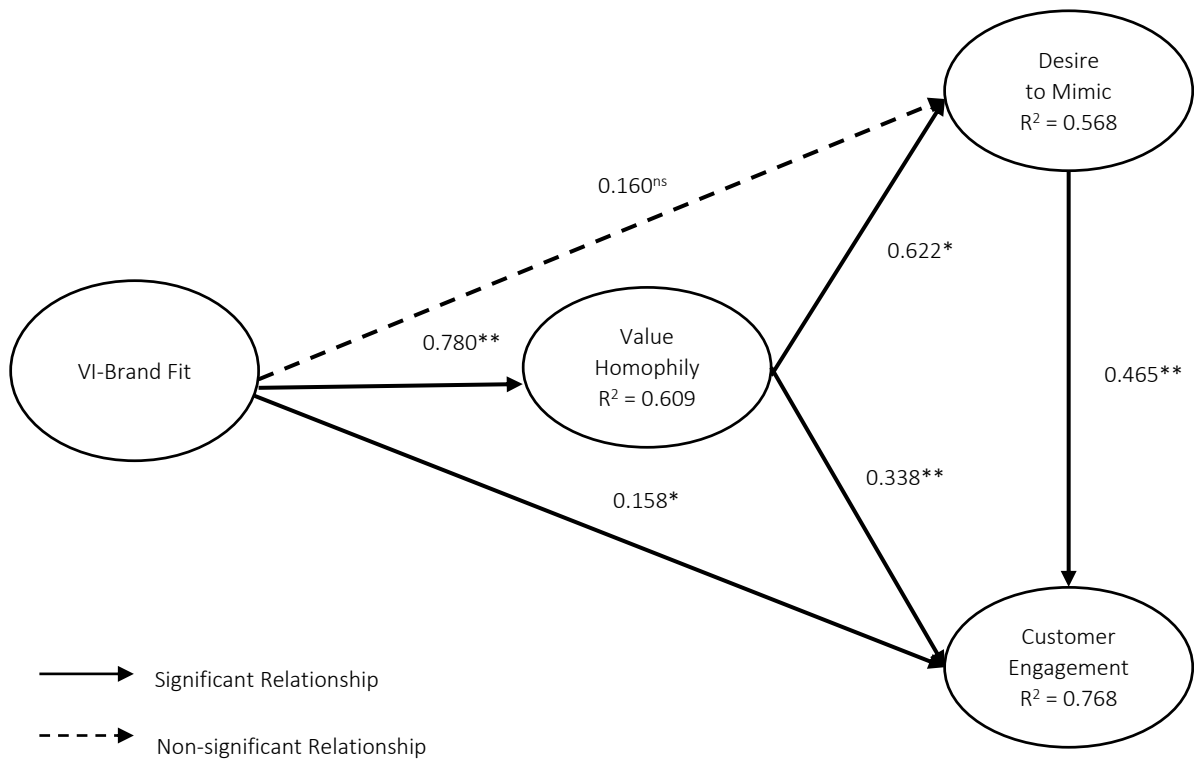
Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 1. Model fit of path analysis

Table 2. Discriminant validity

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Value Homophily	0.738			
2. IV-Brand Fit	0.608	0.840		
3. Consumer Engagement	0.653	0.521	0.759	
4. Desire to Mimic	0.558	0.416	0.671	0.836

Note: The AVE is on the main diagonal. Others represent squared correlations between latent variables. All correlations are significant at $p < 0.01$.

For the path analysis, the model achieved the acceptable fit with CMIN/ DF = 2.085 (p = 0.000); CFI = 0.975; TLI = 0.968; GFI = 0.910; RMSEA = 0.069; SRMR = 0.030. The model illustrates direct and indirect relationships of the constructs, including VI-brand fit, value homophily, consumer engagement, and desire to mimic, as shown in Figure 1. This model can explain adequate variance with a squared multiple regression (R^2) for consumer engagement ($R^2 = 0.768$) and partially explain value homophily ($R^2 = 0.609$) and the desire to mimic ($R^2 = 0.568$). Thus, the model yields a satisfactory level of predictive power.

This study analyzes the significance of the hypothesized relationships of all the constructs using the bootstrapping of 1,000 subsamples at 95% confidence. Table 3 illustrates the total, direct, and indirect effects found in the model. For example, to influence the consumer to engage with the VIs, it was found that value homophily ($\beta = 0.338$, $p < 0.01$) has a higher direct contribution compared to VI-brand fit ($\gamma = 0.158$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, H1a and H2a are accepted. Similarly, the direct effect on the desire to mimic the VIs found value homophily has a significant positive contribution ($\beta = 0.622$, $p < 0.01$), whereas the direct contribution of VI-brand fit was not found to be significant ($\gamma = 0.160$, $p > 0.05$). Accordingly, H2b was accepted but not H1a. Thus, the VI-brand fit does not directly relate to the desire to mimic VIs.

This study investigated the mediating effects of value homophily and the desire to mimic. For the relationship between VI-brand fit and engagement, it is partially mediated by value homophily which yields the unstandardized regression weight of 0.229 (CI = 0.109 to 0379, $p < 0.01$), thus, H3a was accepted. Likewise, hypothesis H3b was accepted

Table 3. Total, direct, and indirect effects

Total	Est.	Direct	Est.	Indirect	Est.	Bootstrap 0.95 CI	
						Lower	Upper
IBF → ENG	0.722**	IBF → ENG	0.158*	IBF → HOMO → ENG	0.229**	0.109	0.379
				IBF → MIM → ENG	0.065	-0.009	0.158
				IBF → HOMO → MIM → ENG	0.196**	0.124	0.300
IBF → MIM	0.645**	IBF → MIM	0.160	IBF → HOMO → MIM	0.546**	0.391	0.745
HOMO → ENG	0.627**	HOMO → ENG	0.338**	HOMO → MIM → ENG	0.351**	0.215	0.550
HOMO → MIM	0.622**	HOMO → MIM	0.622**				

Note: IBF = VI-Brand Fit; ENG = Consumer Engagement; HOMO = Value Homophily; MIM = Desire to Mimic.

as the value homophily performs a mediator role in the relationship between the VI-brand fit and the desire to mimic the VIs (B = 0.546, CI = 0.391 to 0.745, p < 0.01). Thus, this suggests that value homophily fully mediates the relationship between the VI-brand fit and the desire to mimic. Another mediator hypothesized to influence the relationship between VI-brand fit and consumer engagement is the desire to mimic, which was found to be non-significant (B = 0.065, CI = −0.009 to 0.158, p > 0.05). Thus, H3c was rejected. However, merely mediating by the desire to mimic might not be sufficient to explain the link between VI-brand fit and consumer engagement. This study also found another mediating effect: both value homophily and the desire to mimic must be present in such a relationship (B = 0.196, CI = 0.124 to 0.300, p < 0.01).

4. DISCUSSION

Firstly, the study investigated the direct effect of VI-brand fit on engagement with and desire to mimic VIs among Instagram users. The results found a significant direct effect on consumer engagement but not mimicry desire. The significant positive effect of VI-brand fit on consumer engagement can be supported by De Cicco et al. (2021), who found that the higher the fit between influencer and product, the higher interaction between influencer and social media followers. Therefore, if Instagram users assess that the use of VIs is consistent with the image or personality of the brand, they will likely interact with VIs by simply liking, following, and commenting on VIs' posts. On the other hand, as for the direct effect between VI-brand fit and mimicry desire, a non-significant was found. This is consistent with Janssen et al. (2022), who found that product-influencer fit does not affect influencer likability directly but

through other mediators (i.e., credibility and identification). Therefore, the effect of VI-brand fit will enhance the interaction with Instagram users to a certain extent.

Another important finding of this study lies in the effect of value homophily on consumer engagement and mimicry desire. It was found that value homophily has significant positive direct relationships with both engagement and mimicry desire. Such findings are consistent with Xiao et al. (2021), who explained that social media users would support influencers and mimic them through the existence of congruence between influencers and social media users. Even though different types of influencers were investigated – human influencers were investigated by Xiao et al. (2021) – in both studies, the same results were found. Therefore, regardless of whether the message sources are human or human-like, the value congruence is a vital factor for social media users to assess before their engagement and desire to mimic the message sources.

This analysis incorporated mediators in the relationship between influencer-brand/product fit and positive influencer evaluation. The study conceptualized value homophily to mediate VI-brand fit/engagement and the VI-brand fit/the desire to mimic relationships. Firstly, the relationship between VI-brand fit and consumer engagement is partially mediated by value homophily. A similar result was also found by Belanche et al. (2021). Thus, engagement with influencers is partially mediated by credibility and attitude toward the influencers. Therefore, to enhance the effect of VI-brand fit on consumer engagement with the VIs, consumers must evaluate themselves to share similar values with the VIs. With the presence of value homophily, the relationship is strengthened.

Secondly, the role of value homophily as a mediator was found to fully mediate the relationship between the VI-brand fit and the desire to mimic VIs. The mediating role of value homophily is vital to this relationship because it will not be significant without it. This is consistent with Janssen et al. (2022). That is, the similarities between VIs and brands will only lead Instagram users to imitate VIs if they share some common values. Finally, Ki and Kim (2019) found the effect of mimicry desire to mediate the relationship between the attitude toward influencers and behavioral outcomes (by word-of-mouth). Thus, it is hypothesized in this study that the desire to mimic can also mediate the relationship between VI-brand fit and consumer engagement. However, it turns out that such a relationship is only significant with the existence of both mimicry desire and value homophily as mediators. Therefore, the findings conclude that value homophily is an essential antecedent for Instagram users to interact with as well as express their desire to mimic VIs.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the critical answer to understanding what affects social media users to interact with VIs is value homophily. This explains that engagement and desire to imitate VIs will be strengthened by the higher degree of value congruence between VIs and social media users. In contrast, the fit between brands and VIs will cause social media users to engage with the VIs but might not be sufficient to create the desire to mimic their styles or behaviors. Only with the presence of value homophily such a relationship can be enhanced. Although using VIs as a message source in marketing communication is novel, the results from this study confirm that they can be considered similar to other human influencers if they hold an exact value, identity, style, or personality. VIs can be valuable to brands and businesses based on their nature, such as their agelessness, controllable reputation, limitless availability, and compatibility with the Metaverse trend. Therefore, it might create a strategic move for the brand that acts quickly to incorporate VIs for their marketing communication. However, as social media users interact with VIs based on value homophily – the congruence between the self-concept of social media users and Vis – the well-designed identity, personality, and lifestyle of VIs should be carefully thought of.

Although the primary research objective has been accomplished, a few limitations are worth mentioning. Firstly, this study uses a narrow concept of value homophily. It is suggested that other components of homophily should also be considered for future research when VIs become widely used. Secondly, as a limited number of VIs is available in Thailand, only one VI was selected as the representative, which might create some bias. Therefore, when the use of VIs becomes widespread and acknowledged by the audiences, a different approach might be applied. Lastly, although VIs are newly introduced to the market, they can resemble humans with their own identities. Thus, other antecedents investigated with human influencers, such as influencer attributes (e.g., attractiveness, authenticity, trustworthiness, credibility, and expertise), should be investigated in future research to examine how well they contribute to the product/brand and VIs responses.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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