

“I look absolutely amazing in this”:

The effect of Influencer bragging on advertising effectiveness.

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of bragging communication by influencers in sponsored social media posts on advertising effectiveness. Based on theoretical insights from current literature, this study proposed that bragging positively impacts consumers' brand attitude and intention to purchase the promoted product. The predicted relationship between bragging and brand attitude could be caused by feelings of benign envy. Benign envy is expected to be perceived, because it elicits through a process of social comparison. Moreover, bragging behavior is only expected to positively affect brand attitude and purchase intention when an influencer is deemed likable. The study consisted of a random assigned 2 (influencer' likability: likable vs. dislikable) x 2 (communication style: bragging vs. modest) between-subject experiment, which presented four different conditions to a total of 215 participants. The findings present that bragging negatively impacts consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. In line with the expectations, perceived benign envy positively impacts attitude towards the brand and purchase intention. However, likability did not moderate the relationship between bragging and benign envy. Furthermore, likability was positively related to perceived benign envy, as perceived benign envy was predicted by likability. The findings of the study contribute to the academic field of influencer marketing research and lead to recommendations that can be implemented in influencer marketing strategies. Additionally, this study presents knowledge gaps to follow up on this research through future studies.

Keywords: social media influencers, bragging communication, benign envy, likability, brand attitude, purchase intention, Instagram.

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“I look absolutely amazing in this”: The effect of Influencer bragging on advertising effectiveness.

Nowadays, influencer marketing has surpassed print marketing regarding marketing budgets and is the fastest growing online customer acquisition method (Digital Marketing Institute, 2018; Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). The frequent use of social media, like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, in daily life has created opportunities for popular social media personalities to get hired as product promoters. This describes the profession of an influencer, a person with a significant audience on social media who increases online engagement for a product or service (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020). Consequently, influencers' posts often have a commercial nature (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020; Stubb & Nyström, 2019). Influencers are considered beneficial for marketers' goals when they succeed in gaining attention from their followers. These followers are typically young individuals aged 18 to 34 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Instagram, in particular, is evaluated by marketers as the most crucial platform for influencer marketing (Mediakix, 2019). On Instagram, influencers catch the audience's eye by posting photos or videos on social media, in which they flaunt their luxurious lifestyles (Marwick, 2015).

The flaunting of luxury on social media by influencers can come across as bragging. Influencers present an ideal lifestyle, which their followers may wish to have but do not have (Chae, 2018). Marwick (2015) described the Instagram accounts of luxurious influencers as catalogs displaying a lifestyle many young people dream of living. Thereby, followers tend to compare their lifestyle to those of influencers (Chae, 2018). This ideal content presented by influencers can be recognized as bragging behavior, because influencers regularly try to impress the audience and want the audience to have successful beliefs about them (Alfano & Robinson, 2014; Chae, 2018).

Bragging about an aspirational or ideal lifestyle, can lead to unfavorable social comparison (Chae, 2018). An emotion that is likely to arise when comparing with others unfavorably, which might be caused by bragging behavior, is envy (Chen, Liu, & Mattila, 2020; Smith & Kim, 2007; Van de Ven et al., 2016). Envy can be defined as an unpleasant, painful emotion and is often associated with frustration and hostile feelings (Smith & Kim, 2007). However, envy can also arise from feelings of frustration and admiration, rather than hostility. This form of envy is referred to as benign envy (Smith & Kim, 2007; Van de Ven, 2016; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009). The feelings of frustration and admiration, which cause benign envy, can positively motivate a person to improve and strive for what is desired (Van de Ven et al., 2009; Van de Ven, 2016). In an experimental study among 157 respondents, Van de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters (2011) found that benign envy motivates people to obtain the specific object the envied person owned. Because benign envy drives consumption, this emotion is desirable for marketers (Lin, 2018). Applied to influencer marketing, this suggests that, if an influencer brags about a particular product and a person feels benign envy towards the influencer, this person might be more motivated to want that product too. Furthermore, study on bragging in online reviews demonstrates that bragging can positively influence brand evaluation. The positive brand evaluation is caused by reviewer likeability, which increases benign envy (Chen et al., 2020). This finding is in line with Van de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieter's (2009) research stating that benign envy evokes if people compare themselves with a person they like. Therefore, only if the audience considers an influencer to be likable, they experience benign envy.

In sum, these findings propose that bragging might positively enhance brand attitude and intention to purchase a presented product, if the bragger is perceived likable. This effect is caused by feelings of benign envy that arise from social comparison. Current research on this topic has not specifically addressed the impact of bragging communication by

influencers on consumers' brand attitude. However, influencer marketing is a popular strategy to promote products via social media posts (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020). This study adds to the literature by examining the impact on brand attitude and purchase intention when influencers brag about a product in their Instagram posts. The findings can increase understanding of influencer marketing and facilitate knowledge on influencer marketing strategies.

Therefore, the main research question is *“Do posts of bragging social media influencers positively influence consumers' attitude towards a brand and purchase intention, compared to modest posts from social media influencers?”*. Additionally, this study also focuses on a second research question: *“Is the influence of bragging on brand attitude and purchase intention caused by feelings of benign envy, which are perceived by the audience?”* Lastly, the third research question that this study answers is: *“Are feelings of perceived benign envy only experienced when the influencer is likable?”*

To answer the abovementioned research questions, a conceptual model was developed, supported by five hypotheses. To test the hypotheses, a between subject experiment is set up.

Theoretical Framework

Influencer marketing on Instagram

Instagram started in 2010 as an app that was designed for crafting and sharing app-based photography. Today, Instagram can best be understood as a social media channel that is used for online communication, mainly with the use of visual images and videos (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin 2020). The growth of Instagram evoked new opportunities for influencer marketing. Through influencer marketing, brands are able to target specific groups of people, by making use of the trust relationship social media users built up with influencers (Childers, Lemon, & Hoy, 2019). Influencers are often considered as everyday people, who became

excessively influential within their social networks (Leader, Burke-Garcia, Massey & Roark, 2021). Influencers generate revenue by promoting products and services in their social media posts. The aim of this marketing technique is to increase online engagement for the advertised brand, product or service. The promotion of products and services on social media by influencers is the basis of influencer marketing (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020).

In an experimental study on Instagram's standardized disclosure, Boerman (2020) argued that social media users might not always recognize influencer marketing when scrolling through Instagram. A reason why this type of marketing is challenging to recognize is that influencer marketing is a form of native advertising (Boerman, 2020). Native advertising can be defined as a practice by marketers who make use of content creators' credibility, with presenting sponsored content in a format that matches the original content of the creators (Wojdyski & Golan, 2016). Influencer marketing involves influencers as content creators, presenting posts with advertisements to online content consumers. These posts resemble non-advertising content published on the same social media platform (Wojdyski, 2016). Because influencer marketing looks like non-commercial content, it is difficult to recognize as a persuasion attempt (An, Kerr, & Jin, 2019). The Persuasion Knowledge Model by Friestad and Wright (1994) proposes that people develop knowledge about persuasive attempts, like advertising. However, only once a persuasive attempt is recognized, people use their personal knowledge to interpret, evaluate and respond to the persuasion (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Therefore, influencer marketing, in the form of Instagram posts, is not easily recognized by content consumers for its commercial nature (Boerman, 2020).

Another reason influencer marketing might be less easily recognized as a form of advertising is that followers of the influencer develop a relationship with the influencer (Boerman, 2020). Via Instagram, social media users are continually exposed to posts

presenting details of an influencer's life, where they even have the opportunity to directly respond to or interact with that person (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). A reason for many young Instagram users to follow celebrities via Instagram is to communicate with and reach these public figures (Chen, 2018). By following an influencer for a longer time, the follower develops an illusion of having a personal, intimate relationship with an influencer. This illusion of a relationship the follower experiences towards an influencer can be referred to as a parasocial relationship (PSR) (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal., 2020). While PSR refers to an enduring relationship, followers can also perceive an influencer as an intimate conversation partner. This perception towards influencers is referred to as parasocial interaction (PSI), meaning that followers experience that they can interact with an influencer (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal., 2020). On Instagram PSI can take place, for example, by replying to an influencer's story or placing a reaction under a post (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Jin & Ryu, 2020). It is argued that the illusion of intimacy and closeness between Instagram celebrities and their followers is purposely created on Instagram (Chen, 2018). However, research concerning the interpretation of Instagram and Instagram marketing by Chen (2018) concluded that active users of Instagram (aged 18-23) do not mind celebrity or influencer endorsements, specifically if users identify with a celebrity or influencer.

Considering the abovementioned research, influencer marketing on Instagram is highly engaging, but it can be challenging for the audience to recognize as persuasion because of its native and parasocial characteristics. Therefore, Instagram users' knowledge about persuasive attempts might not be activated, meaning that users are not always triggered to resist influencer marketing (Boeren, 2020; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Van Reijmersdal, Franssen, Van Noort, Oprea, Vandenberg, Reusch, Van Lieshout & Boerman, 2016).

Bragging influencers

Influencers practice self-presentation through their social media profiles by creating an online image. With that image, they attract attention and engagement (Chae, 2018). The image they create is maintained by presenting their daily lives to their followers via social media content (Abidin, 2016). Influencers who are often 'liked' by users and thereby succeed in gaining attention, are generally found to display their status with popularity and luxury (Marwick, 2015; Walls, 2020). According to Marwick (2015), who analyzed 40 Instagram accounts with over ten thousand followers, young Instagram users 'like' posts they consider aspirational. These posts present something users desire to have but cannot. An aspirational post for this audience often resembles the lifestyles of the rich and famous (Marwick, 2015).

Influencers wanting to impress their followers by presenting aspirational lifestyles in Instagram posts might be considered bragging (Chae, 2018). Bragging can be conceptualized as aiming to impress the receiver of a message with something about oneself by asserting something about oneself (Alfano & Robinson, 2014). Therefore, through bragging communication people aim for two things. Firstly, a bragger aims for the receiver of the message to experience a state of being impressed with the bragger. Alfano and Robinson (2014) described the mental state of impression as an emotion comparable to admiration, wonder, and awe. Secondly, a bragger aims for the receiver to be impressed by creating a belief about oneself that is produced by asserting. Bragging behavior should not be confused with self-praise. A person can praise oneself if one does not intend for the audience to be impressed with him/her. On the other hand, a person can brag about oneself and not self-praise if one does not intend the audience to attribute responsibility to oneself (Alfano & Robinson, 2014). Influencers who try to impress their followers by showing off their luxury lifestyles, assert they live a life that is considered aspirational (Chae, 2018; Marwick, 2015). Thus, these influencers aim for impression and create assertions, which meets characteristics

of bragging behavior. Therefore, these types of influencer posts can be perceived as bragging (Alfano & Robinson, 2014; Chae, 2018). Generally, influencers aim to impress their audience and make the audience believe they are aspirational by asserting they live desirable lives.

Social media users who are confronted with aspirational influencer posts, are often inclined compare themselves with the influencer (Chae, 2018). The drive to compare oneself with another is elucidated in the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). The idea behind the social comparison theory is that individuals experience a drive and necessity to evaluate themselves through comparison with others (Festinger, 1954). Two manifestations originated by the socio-psychological process of comparison with others are a social influence process and some forms of competitive behavior (Festinger, 1954). Social comparison can happen downward or upward. Downward social comparison occurs when a person compares him-/herself with another who is worse off (Wills, 1981). Upward comparison occurs when a person compares him-/herself with others who are better off (Collins, 1996). An Instagram user who sees a post from a bragging influencer presenting a lifestyle the user aspires to have, is likely to compare him-/herself to the influencer (Chae, 2018). This thought process is an example of upward social comparison because the user compares him-/herself with a person who is better off, specifically the influencer he/she looks up to. With the social comparison theory in mind, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: *Instagram posts displaying a bragging influencer have a more positive impact upon consumers' brand attitude (H1a) and purchase intention (H1b), compared to Instagram posts showing a modest social media Influencer.*

Perceived envy

The drive to self-evaluate by comparing with others, leads individuals to strive upwards and be better than the comparison others (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989). An emotion that is likely to arise when comparing with others unfavorably, which might be

caused by bragging behavior, is envy (Chen et al., 2020; Smith & Kim, 2007; Van de Ven, 2016). Envy can be defined as an emotion which “occurs when a person lacks another’s superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it” (Parrott & Smith, 1993, p. 906). A theory on envy proposes that there are two forms of envy, either desiring what another person has or wishing the other person lacked something (Van de Ven et al., 2011). The two types of envy are referred to as ‘benign envy’ and ‘malicious envy’ (Smith & Kim, 2007; Van de Ven et al., 2009; Van de Ven, 2016). Malicious envy might be the most well-known type of envy associated with feelings of unfairness and hostility. People who experience malicious envy can experience discouraging motivation. Consequently, these people feel a tendency to hurt or derogate the envied others with the purpose of damaging the position of the superiors (Dong, Xiang, Zhao, Li, Zhao & Zhang, 2020; Lange & Crusius, 2015). Furthermore, malicious envy drives people to own a product superior to what the envied other possessed. (Lin, 2018; Van de Ven et al., 2011). In contrast, benign envy is a more uplifting type of envy, free from hostile feelings (Smith & Kim, 2007).

People who experience benign envy have a more positive attitude towards the superior other (Van de Ven et al., 2016). Specifically, benign envy is more likely to be evoked when people like and admire the superior other. Otherwise, people are prone to experience malicious envy (Chen et al., 2020). Van de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters (2009) conducted three separate experiments, with 269 participants in total, to better understand the distinction between benign- and malicious envy. Their findings present that benign envy motivates people to give more compliments and be closer to the comparison other (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Moreover, benign envy leads to a positive motivation to improve one’s position towards the other (Crusius & Lange 2014; Van de Ven et al., 2009). For instance, an experimental study by Van de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters (2011) found that benign envy

motivates people to obtain the particular object the envied person owned. Therefore, it is hypothesized that feelings of benign envy explain the relationship between influencers who brag and brand attitude or purchase intention:

H2: *Perceived benign envy after viewing an influencer's post has a positive influence on brand attitude (H2a) and purchase intention (H2b).*

H3: *Feelings of benign envy towards a bragging influencer mediate the relationship between bragging communication and brand attitude (H3a), and the relationship between bragging communication and purchase intention (H3b).*

Influencer likability

Literature suggests that people who show bragging behavior can elicit benign envy, but only if others perceive the person as likable (Chen et al., 2020; Van de Ven et al., 2009; Van de Ven, 2016). This phenomenon is grounded in the appraisal theory, which states that the causation of specific emotions depends on a mix of appraisal components in a situation (Roseman, Antoniou & Jose, 1996). Because benign envy is probable to elicit when the other is appraised likable, likability of the influencer might predict the extent to which the followers perceive benign envy (Van de Ven et al., 2009; Van de Ven, 2016). Likability is defined by McGuire (1985) as an affection a person experiences towards another person that results from the other's behavior, physical appearance, and other characteristics. The large number of followers and likes a person needs to have to be considered an influencer somewhat illustrates their likability. Studies found that popular Instagram personalities with a large number of followers are often assessed as likable by their audience (Pick, 2020; Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Compared to celebrities, influencers are considered to be more trustworthy. Furthermore, people feel more similar and identify more with influencers than with celebrities (Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). Therefore, a follower is more likely to perceive an influencer as credible if he/she shares similar

characteristics (Lou & Kim, 2019). Additionally, followers can develop a relationship with an influencer that feels like a “friendship” (Lou & Kim, 2019). Like most Instagram users, Influencers are often young adults aged between 18 and 34 (Statista, 2021). Because of these findings, it is believed that influencers will be commonly viewed by the audience as likable and are therefore more likely to elicit benign envy.

Therefore, it is proposed that feelings of benign envy only evoke if an influencer is considered likable.

H4: *Likability of the influencer moderates the relationship between bragging communication and perceived benign envy.*

H5: *Influencer likability positively predicts perceived benign envy.*

Influencer bragging and advertising effectiveness

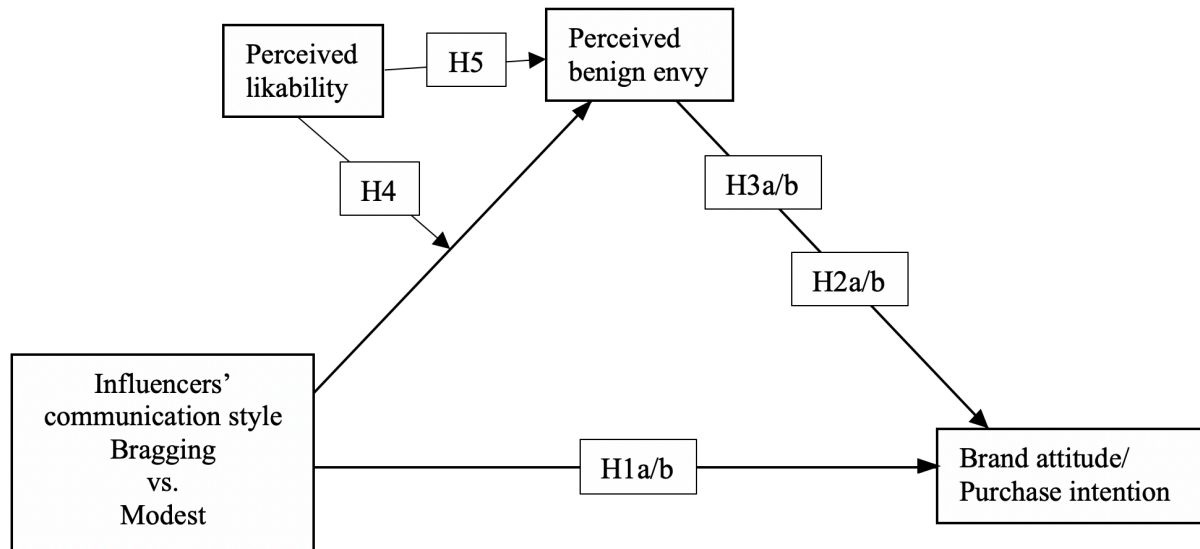
This research aims to assess if bragging behavior in commercial influencer posts leads to a more positive brand attitude of the audience and increased purchase intention.

Companies often use influencer marketing as a strategy to prompt brand awareness and increase purchase intentions (Pick 2020; Tjandrawibawa, 2020). Because influencers are commonly liked by their audience (Pick, 2020; Veirman et al., 2017), posts in which likable influencers use bragging behavior might elicit benign envy (Chen et al., 2020; Van de Ven et al., 2009; Van de Ven, 2016). Benign envy motivates people to improve themselves, with a willingness to own the product or service that the envied other possess (Van de Ven et al., 2011). Because benign envy drives consumption of the promoted product, this emotion is desirable for marketers (Lin, 2018; Van de Ven et al., 2011). By summarizing the main findings, it can be argued that bragging influencers increase the audience’s brand attitude and purchase intention. The effect of bragging on brand attitude and purchase intention is caused by feelings of benign envy, evoked when an influencer is considered likable. Therefore, envy is moderated by likability and is expected to explain the relationship between bragging and

brand attitude. Additionally, it is expected that perceived benign envy can be predicted by influencer' likability. The complete hypothesized model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

The hypothesized model



Method

To test the hypothesized model, an experiment with a 2 (communication style: bragging vs. modest) x 2 (influencer' likability: likable vs. dislikable) random assigned between-subjects design was conducted. Responses towards the conditions were measured through self-reports.

Participants

In total 242 participants started the survey. Twenty of the submitted surveys were incomplete and therefore not used in the sample. Furthermore, six participants did not want to continue the study after reading the debriefing, and their data was deleted. The age of one participant extended the criteria and was consequently excluded from the research. The final sample consisted of 215 participants. The average age of the group of participants was 24.01 (*SD* 2.12). The youngest participant was 18 years old, while the oldest participant was 33

years old. 68% of the participants were female, while 32% were male. 43% had a job, while 55% of the sample group were students. The highest degree most participants have received is their bachelor's (57%). 20% of the participants have obtained a master's degree, while 10% have finished secondary vocational education. The other participants (13%) have not completed a study after secondary school.

The criteria to be recruited as a participant in this study were that they had a Dutch nationality and were aged 18 to 34. This age group makes a substantial part of the most active users of Instagram (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Additionally, this group is expected to relate to influencers because most influencers share this age, which aligns with the similarity principle (Lou & Kim, 2019; Schouten et al., 2019; Statista, 2021).

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling. A message asking if people wanted to participate was posted on Instagram and Facebook to create awareness for the questionnaire. Volunteers who were willing to do the survey were sent a message that included the questionnaire.

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner & Lang, 2009) to test the difference between two independent group means using a one-tailed test, a medium effect size ($d = .50$), and an alpha of .05. The result showed that a total sample of 176 participants with two equal sized groups of $N = 88$ was required to achieve a power of .95.

Stimulus materials

First, the stimuli consisted of an introductory text with information concerning the influencer participants were about to see. This text was manipulated, so that half of the participants saw an introduction (Appendix A1) that would induce a feeling of likability towards the influencer. The other half read an introduction (Appendix A2) in order to make them dislike the influencer. Male participants were assigned a male influencer, and female

participants got presented to a female influencer, which is in line with the similarity principle (Lou & Kim, 2019; Schouten et al., 2019).

Second, the stimuli presented an Instagram post of a fictional influencer showing off a white hoodie. The independent variable, bragging versus modest, was manipulated by changing the text in the captions under the presented picture. In the bragging condition (Appendix A3), the influencer brags about him- or herself wearing a white hoodie. Whereas the modest condition (Appendix A4), included the influencer thanking the brand for the hoodie. An overview of the stimuli that were used in the research can be found in Appendix A.

The first condition, displaying a likable influencer with a modest caption, was presented to 59 participants. The second condition, which showed a dislikable influencer and a modest caption, was presented to 51 participants. The third condition, which introduced an influencer that was likable with a caption in which he/she brags, was presented to 50 participants. Finally, the fourth condition that included a dislikable influencer who brags was presented to 55 participants.

Pretest

Prior to the experiment a pretest was conducted to confirm whether the manipulations in the stimulus material were understood accordingly. The pretest was executed by distributing a conceptual questionnaire to several participants ($N = 22$). In line with the four conditions, the questionnaire tested the perception of likability and communication style after viewing the manipulated stimuli.

The first part of the pretest assessed whether the two introductory texts elicited the state of liking or disliking that was intended. This was measured with the Reysen likability scale, which exists of eleven items ($\alpha = .93$). The answers were recorded via a Likert-scale (1 = *totally agree*, 7 = *totally disagree*), meaning that a lower score equals higher likability. To

test if the likable and dislikable stimuli influenced the participants as intended, a one-way ANOVA was performed. The assumption of Homogeneity of Variances was not met, Levene's test was significant, $F(1,20) = 17.093, p < .001$. The ANOVA is fairly robust against the violations of these assumptions, but the outcomes may not be completely reliable (Field, 2017). The average score of respondents who saw a likable introductory text was 3.35 ($SD = 1.32$). The average score of respondents who had seen a dislikable text was 5.47 ($SD = .71$). The overall ANOVA was significant, indicating that an influencer who was presented likable was perceived to be more likable, compared to the influencer who was intended to be dislikable. This supports that the stimuli are understood as intended, $F(1, 17) = 23.042, p < .001$. The ANOVA had large sized effect of $\eta^2 .51$.

The second part of the pretest verified whether the participants deemed the bragging conditions as bragging behavior and the modest conditions as not bragging. To measure bragging, a new scale was developed, based on the operationalization of bragging by Alfano and Robinson (2014). This scale was assessed during the pretest to check if the questions indeed measured bragging. The items in the scale measured the level of assertion, impression and perceived bragging behavior of the influencer. This was again recorded via a Likert-scale (1 = *totally agree*, 7 = *totally disagree*). Thereby, a lower score means that the participant increasingly perceived the influencer to be bragging. The scale is found to be sufficiently reliable ($\alpha = .74$). To test if the bragging and modest communication style effected the participants as intended, a one-way ANOVA was performed. The average score of respondents who saw a bragging caption was 2.27 ($SD = 1.02$). The average score of respondents who had seen a modest caption was 4.00 ($SD = 1.02$). The assumptions of normality and Homogeneity of Variances were met. The overall ANOVA was significant, indicating that the participants judged the communication style differently depending on the caption they were presented, which supports that the stimuli are understood as intended, $F(1,$

16) = 15.724, $p < .001$. The ANOVA had large sized effect of $\eta^2 .44$. Based on the results of our pretest, no further adjustments to the stimulus material were made.

Lastly, one item checked if the participants thought they were familiar with the fictional brand presented in the post. Only one participant indicated that the brand was familiar, the other participants (96%) did not know the brand.

Procedure

Before getting directed to the experiment, the participants had to read the informed consent. The informed consent instructed them about the study and stated that participating is voluntary, that the data is saved anonymously, and that they could leave the experiment at any time. If the participants agreed to this, they were able to start the experiment.

Once the experiment started, all participants were presented a text introducing the influencer. After reading the text, there was a manipulation check to assess if the condition was understood correctly. The participants were asked to report whether they liked the influencer. Then the influencer's post was displayed. Afterward, the participants could continue with the questions.

The last set of questions included a second manipulation check which asked the participants' opinion, by indicating if they thought the influencer bragged. Second, there was asked to report if they felt benign envy towards the influencer. Third, participants were asked to indicate their attitude towards the brand and if they are interested in purchasing the hoodie.

Ending the survey, participants got to read the debriefing. The debriefing explained that the purpose of the research is to understand the impact of bragging by influencers on brand attitude and purchase intention. The participants were also asked to fill in their mail address if they wanted a copy of the research once it is finished.

Measures

The questionnaire measured five different attitude constructs: likability, bragging, benign envy, brand attitude and purchase intention. All answers could be reported on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*totally agree*) to 7 (*totally disagree*).

Likability. The construct likability is measured using the Reysen likability scale. Reysen (2005) designed a questionnaire with eleven items measuring perceived likability towards another person. The scale was found to have an excellent reliability in the sample ($\alpha = .92$). The participants were asked, for example, if they considered the influencer as friendly, physically attractive and if they would ask the influencer for advice.

Bragging. Bragging was operationalized by including the two components bragging behavior has, according to Alfano and Robinson (2014). Therefore, the participants were asked if they considered the influencer to be asserting something in their post (*De influencer beweert dat hij/zij er goed uitziet*) and if the influencer tried to impress the audience (*De influencer probeert indruk op me te maken*). Also, the participants were asked if they thought the influencer was bragging in general. Thus, bragging was measured with three items, namely *assertion*, *impression*, and *bragging in general*. The reliability of the current scale is acceptable ($\alpha = .77$).

Perceived benign envy. The questions measuring benign envy were adapted from a research by Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters (2009) and consisted of four items. To measure benign envy, the participants were asked to report the extent to which they *envied the influencer*, *felt inspired*, *felt frustrated*, and *were motivated to work harder* after seeing the post. The scale was found to have an unacceptable reliability ($\alpha = .36$). Therefore, the item measuring frustration was excluded from the scale which increased reliability ($\alpha = .68$).

Brand attitude. Consumers' attitude towards the brand was measured using a scale with four items in which participants reported the extent to which they *like*, *appreciate*, *are*

favorable towards the brand and if they *considered the brand as a 'good brand'* (Fleck, Korchia & Le Roy, 2012). The reliability of the scale in the sample was good ($\alpha = .89$)

Purchase intention. The questions measuring purchase intention were derived from research concerning smartphone advertising (Martins, Costa, Oliveira, Gonçalves & Branco, 2019). Purchase intention was measured by three items considering if purchasing the advertised product would be *worthwhile*, if there is an *intention to buy this product in the future*, and if the participant will *advise others to buy the product*. The current scale has a good reliability ($\alpha = .83$). An overview of all questions asked to measure the constructs can be found in Appendix B.

Results

An overview of the means and standard deviations for all variables per condition can be found in Table 1. To ensure reliability it is assessed if the data score per scale was normally distributed. Perceived likability of the influencer was not normally distributed, as it showed kurtosis ($z\text{-score}_{kurtosis} = -2.45$). Additionally, the scale indicating whether the influencer was bragging was positively skewed ($z\text{-score}_{skewness} = 2.72$). The data score representing perceived benign envy was negatively skewed ($z\text{-score}_{skewness} = -2.02$). Further, the scores on the scale measuring brand attitude were not normally distributed ($z\text{-score}_{skewness} = 3.55$, $z\text{-score}_{kurtosis} = 3.11$). Lastly, the data score indicating purchase intention was negatively skewed ($z\text{-score}_{skewness} = -2.13$). Therefore, the p-value may not be reliable and more weight should be placed on the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval that will be provided with the analysis.

Table 1.

An overview of the means and standard deviations for all variables per condition.

Dependent variable	Likable and modest ($N = 59$)	Dislikable and modest ($N = 51$)	Likable and bragging ($N = 50$)	Dislikable and bragging ($N = 55$)
Perceived likability	3.24 (0.72)	5.22 (0.98)	3.41 (0.90)	5.16 (0.91)
Communication style	3.88 (1.13)	3.85 (1.27)	2.54 (1.04)	2.35 (1.12)
Perceived benign envy	5.35 (0.92)	5.56 (1.08)	5.53 (0.92)	5.61 (0.99)
Brand attitude	4.03 (0.69)	4.34 (0.97)	4.43 (1.16)	4.72 (1.17)
Purchase intention	4.96 (1.00)	5.36 (1.00)	5.54 (0.98)	5.58 (1.19)

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses behind the means.

Analyses of direct relationships

To independently assess the relationships between variables, direct relationships are tested. To test the direct relationship between communication style and brand attitude a bootstrapped one-way ANOVA analyses was performed. The assumption of Homogeneity of Variances was not met, Levene's test was significant, $F(1,213) = 15.575, p < .001$. The ANOVA is fairly robust against the violations of these assumptions, but the outcomes may not be completely reliable (Field, 2017). The overall ANOVA was significant, indicating that there are differences between the brand attitude of participants who had seen an influencer with a bragging communication style ($M = 4.58, SD = 1.17$), compared to a modest influencer ($M = 4.18, SD = 0.84$). Note that higher scores indicate a more negative brand attitude. This finding does not support H1a, because the outcome indicates that bragging communication negatively effects brand attitude, $F(1, 213) = 8.18, p = .005$, the ANOVA had a medium sized effect of $\eta^2 .04$.

To test the relationship between communication style and purchase intention, a second bootstrapped one-way ANOVA was performed. The assumption of Homogeneity of Variances was met. The overall ANOVA was significant, indicating that communication style impacts consumers' purchase intention. Specifically, participants who saw a bragging influencer reported less intention to purchase the hoodie ($M = 5.56, SD = 1.09$), compared to participants who saw a modest influencer ($M = 5.15, SD = 1.01$). Again, a higher score means lower purchase intention. This outcome does not show support for H1b, $F(1, 213) = 8.35, p = .004$, the ANOVA had a medium sized effect of $\eta^2 .04$.

To investigate the relationship between communication style and brand attitude a regression analysis, with communication style as a predictor and brand attitude as an outcome, was performed. The regression analysis showed that consumers' brand attitude can be predicted by communication style, $b = -.174, \beta = -.23, t(213) = -3.37, p = .007, 95\% CI [-.29, -.05]$. Importantly, the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval does not cross zero, indicating that the model generalizes to the population. In line with the ANOVA, this does not support H1a. If bragging communication increases, the attitude towards the brand is expected to become more negative. The model explains 5.1% of the variance in brand attitude $R^2 = .051, F(1, 213) = 11.36, p = .007$. The results of the regression analysis are visualized in a scatterplot presented in figure 6 (Appendix C).

Further, the relationship between communication style and purchase intention is tested with another regression analysis. The analysis was conducted with communication style as a predictor and purchase intention as an outcome. The findings present that bragging communication significantly predicts purchase intention. Specifically, when bragging communication increases, purchase intention is predicted to decrease. The outcome does not support H1b, because it is opposite from the expectations, $b = -.175, \beta = -.22, t(213) = -3.30, p = .003, 95\% CI [-.29, -.06]$. Importantly, the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval does not

cross zero, indicating that the model does generalize to the population. The model explains 4.9% of the variance in purchase intention $R^2 = .049$, $F(1, 213) = 10.88$, $p = .003$. The results of the regression analysis are visualized in a scatterplot presented in figure 7 (Appendix C).

To test the direct relationship between communication style and perceived benign envy a bootstrapped one-way ANOVA analyses was performed. The assumption of Homogeneity of Variances was met. The overall ANOVA was not significant, indicating that there is no difference between perceived benign envy for participants who had seen a bragging influencer ($M = 5.57$, $SD = .95$), compared to an influencer communicating with modest language ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.00$). This finding does not support H3, $F(1, 213) = .85$, $p = .356$.

To investigate the relationship between perceived benign envy and brand attitude, a regression analysis with perceived benign envy as a predictor and brand attitude as an outcome is performed. The regression analysis showed significant results, illustrating that consumers' brand attitude can be positively predicted by perceived benign envy, $b = .496$, $\beta = .48$, $t(213) = 7.71$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.36, .63]. Importantly, the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval does not cross zero, indicating that the model generalizes to the population. This finding is in line with H2a. The model explains 21.8% of the variance in brand attitude $R^2 = .218$, $F(1, 213) = 57.42$, $p < .001$. The results of the regression analysis are visualized in a scatterplot presented in figure 8 (Appendix C).

Lastly, a regression analysis was performed to test the relationship between perceived benign envy and purchase intention. The regression analysis tested perceived benign envy as a predictor variable and purchase intention as an outcome. The analysis showed significant results. This validates the positive relationship between perceived benign envy and purchase intention, $b = .555$, $\beta = .07$, $t(213) = 8.58$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.42, .69]. Importantly, the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval does not cross zero, indicating that the model does

generalize to the population. The finding supports H2b, presenting that perceived benign envy can positively predict purchase intention. The model explains 25.7% of the variance in brand attitude $R^2 = .257$, $F(1, 213) = 73.67$, $p < .001$. The results of the regression analysis are visualized in a scatterplot presented in figure 9 (Appendix C).

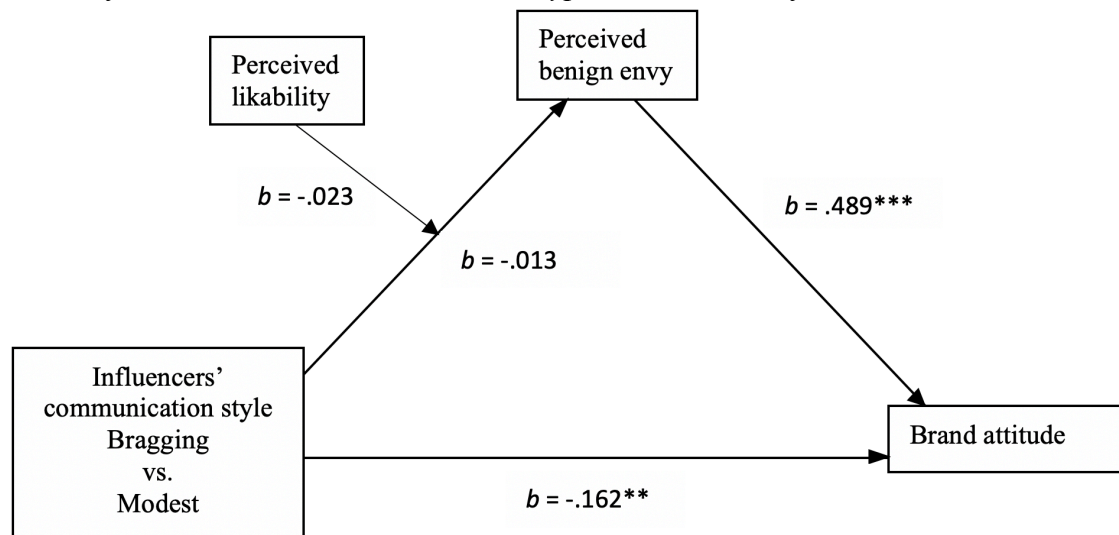
Moderated mediation analyses

The hypothesized moderated mediation model with brand attitude as depended variable was tested using the PROCESS macro model number 7, which tests a model whereby likability of the influencer moderates the effect of an influencer's communication style on perceived benign envy, which mediates consumer's attitude towards the brand (Hayes, 2013). Bragging communication has a significant direct negative impact upon consumer's brand attitude (Bca 95% CI [-.27, -.06], effect = -0.162; $p = .003$). This does not provide support for hypothesis H1a, because the outcome illustrates that the opposite is true. In contrast to our expectations, the findings indicate that a bragging communication style will lower the consumer's brand attitude towards the advertised product. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that perceived benign envy was significantly associated with a more positive attitude towards the brand, $b = .49$, $Bse = .07$, Bca 95% CI [.35, .62] $t = 7.10$, $p < .001$. This finding does support H2a, considering that increasing levels of perceived benign envy are found to positively impact consumer's attitude towards the brand. However, the analysis also revealed that communication style is not related to perceived benign envy, $b = -.01$, $Bse = .05$, Bca 95% CI [-.10, .08] $t = -.28$, $p = .777$. Because there is no relationship between communication style and perceived benign envy H3a is not supported. Benign envy is not caused by bragging communication, therefore it does not mediate the relationship between an influencer's communication style and the consumer's brand attitude. H4 is not supported as likability of the influencer was not found to moderate the effect of an influencer's communication style and perceived benign envy ($b = .02$, $Bse = .03$, Bca 95% CI

$[-.04, .08] t = .73, p = .465$). In other words, whether the participant liked or disliked the influencer did not significantly affect the impact of communication style on the level of perceived benign envy felt. Thus, communication style does not impact feelings of benign envy, regardless of influencer's likability. The overall moderated mediation model for attitude towards the brand was not supported with the index of moderated mediation = .01 (Bca 95% CI = $-.02, .04$). An overview of the results of the moderation mediation analysis for brand attitude can be found in figure 2.

Figure 2.

Results of the moderated mediation in the hypothesized model for brand attitude.



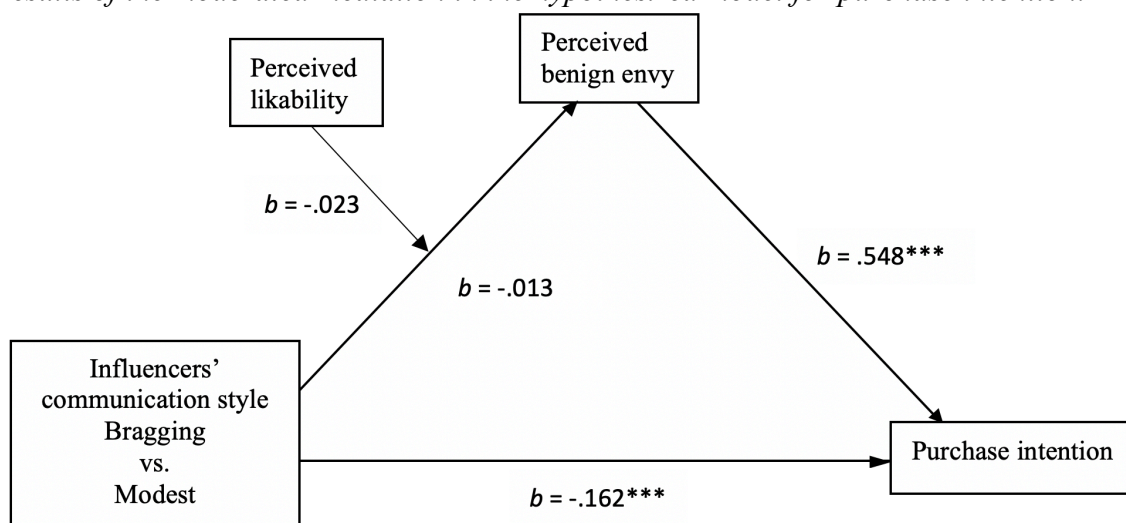
Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The hypothesized moderated mediation model with purchase intention as dependent variable was tested using the PROCESS macro model number 7, which tests a model whereby likability of the influencer moderates the effect of an influencer's communication style on perceived benign envy, which mediates purchase intention (Hayes, 2013). Bragging communication had a significant direct negative effect on the subscale purchase intention (Bca 95% CI $[-.26, -.07]$, effect = -0.162 ; $p < .001$). This does not provide support for hypothesis H1. Opposite to our expectations, the findings indicate that a bragging communication style will lower the consumer's purchase intention towards the advertised

product. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that perceived benign envy was also positively associated with purchase intention, $b = .55$, $Bse = .07$, $Bca\ 95\% \text{ CI } [.42, .68]$ $t = 8.18$, $p < .001$. This finding shows support for H2, considering that increasing levels of perceived benign envy are found to positively impact consumer's attitude towards the brand. Similar to the earlier findings, the analysis revealed that communication style is not related to perceived benign envy, $b = -.01$, $Bse = .05$, $Bca\ 95\% \text{ CI } [-.10, .08]$ $t = -.28$, $p = .777$. This does not support H3b, because benign envy is not caused by bragging communication. Therefore, perceived benign envy does not mediate the relationship between an influencer's communication style and the consumer's purchase intention. Again, H4 is not supported as likability of the influencer was not found to moderate the effect of an influencer's communication style and perceived benign envy ($b = .02$, $Bse = .03$, $Bca\ 95\% \text{ CI } [-.04, .08]$ $t = .73$, $p = .47$). The overall moderated mediation model for purchase intention was not supported with the index of the moderated mediation = .01 ($Bca\ 95\% \text{ CI } = -.02, .05$). An overview of the results of the moderation mediation analysis for brand attitude can be found in figure 3.

Figure 3.

Results of the moderated mediation in the hypothesized model for purchase intention.



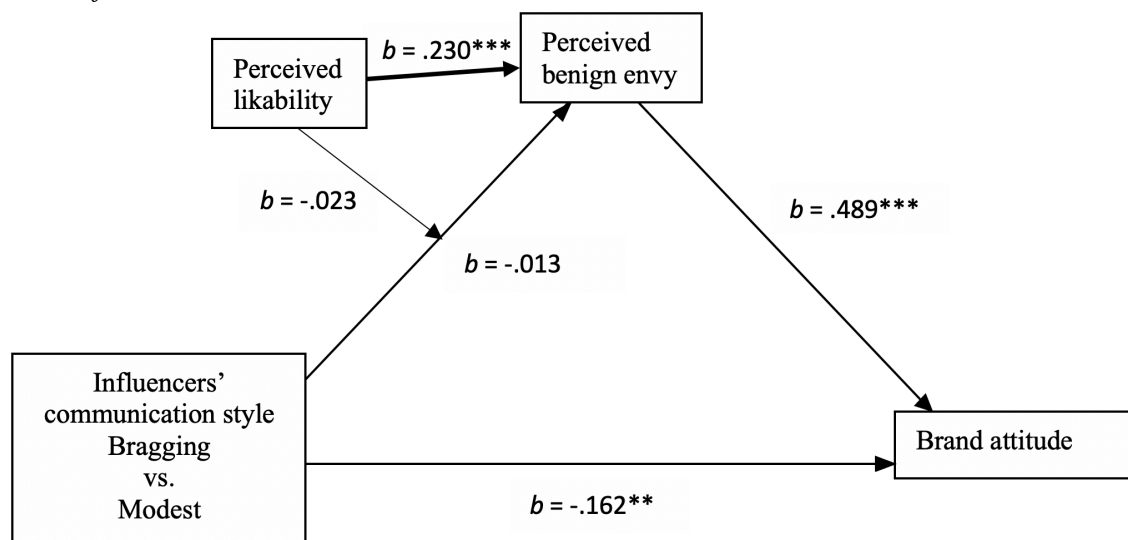
Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Regression analysis

To investigate the relationship between perceived likability and perceived benign envy, a regression analysis with perceived likability as predictor and perceived benign envy as outcome was performed. The regression analysis showed that perceived benign envy can be predicted by perceived likability, $b = .23$, $\beta = 7.66$, $t(213) = 4.62$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.14, .33]. Importantly, the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval does not cross zero, indicating that the model generalizes to the population. The model explains 9.1% of the variance in perceived benign envy $R^2 = .091$, $F(1, 213) = 21.35$, $p < .001$. The outcome presents that H5 is supported, likability can predict perceived benign envy. Specifically, if an influencer is perceived to be likable the consumer is more likely to report a higher level of benign envy. The findings of the regression analysis are visualized in figure 10 (Appendix C). An overview of the coefficients representing all results in the hypothesized model for brand attitude can be found in figure 4. A second overview of the coefficients representing all results on purchase intention in the hypothesized model can be found in figure 5.

Figure 4.

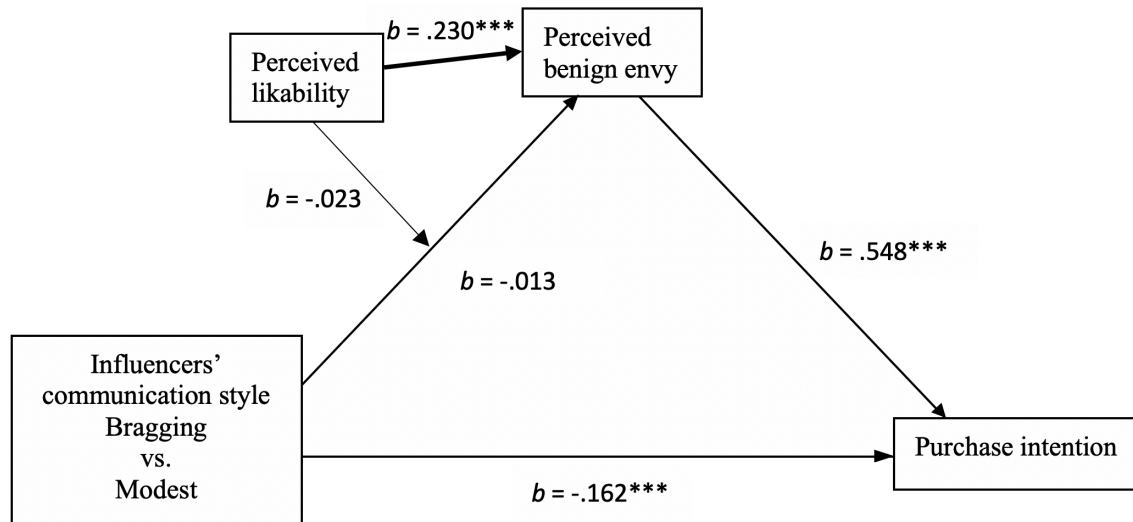
Combined results of the moderated mediation and regression analyses in the hypothesized model for brand attitude.



Note: $*p < .05$. $**p < .01$. $***p < .001$.

Figure 5.

Combined results of the moderated mediation and regression analyses in the hypothesized model for purchase intention.



Note: $*p < .05$. $**p < .01$. $***p < .001$.

Summary of the results

This research tests bragging influencers' impact upon consumers' attitude towards a brand and consumers' purchase intention. H1 is not supported. Results show that the opposite is true. An influencer that is perceived to be bragging negatively impacts consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. H2 is supported, feelings of benign envy increase brand attitude and purchase intention. This is indicated by the positive relationship between perceived benign envy and attitude towards the brand, and perceived benign envy and purchase intention. H3 is not supported. Perceived feelings of benign envy did not mediate the relationship between an influencer who is bragging and participants' attitude towards the brand or purchase intention. Further, H4 is not supported. In our study, likability does not moderate the relationship between bragging communication of an influencer and perceived benign envy. Lastly, H5 is supported, a regression analysis indicates that perceived influencer likability can predict perceived benign envy.

Discussion

The aim of the current study is to provide insight into the effects of influencers exhibiting a bragging communication style on consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention.

Opposite from the expectations, influencers who brag in their Instagram post negatively impact consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. Therefore, it can be supposed that consumers form more negative associations towards a brand and product, after viewing an Instagram post of an Influencer who brags about the brand. This resulted from the finding that bragging did not elicit benign envy, which contradicts the expectations (Chen et al., 2020; Smith & Kim, 2007; Van de Ven, 2016). The expectations were partly based on a study concerning communication in online reviews (Chen et al., 2020). The current findings indicate that there might be a difference between how bragging communication in an online review is perceived and how bragging communication by an influencer is perceived.

Moreover, our results can be further explained by literature concerning communicational norms. Multiple studies stated that modest communication is preferred over bragging because modesty can positively impact likability, while the opposite is true for bragging (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Likability is lowered once people brag because it violates the norm, which is a modest communication style (Leary, 1995; Robinson, Johnson, & Shields, 1995). In line with these studies, the current findings imply that customers might like the brand less, after seeing an influencer brag about it. The language expectancy theory proposes that people expect a communicator to use a certain language style, contingent with the communicator's characteristics (Burgoon, Denning & Roberts, 2002). Violating the expectations can decrease acceptance of the persuasive message (Burgoon et al., 2002). The language expectancy theory might explain why bragging communication by an influencer lowers consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. Building on the theory of social comparison, it might

be considered that influencers' bragging communication elicits malicious envy instead of benign envy, because bragging causes them to be less likable. Therefore, bragging might have a negative impact on likability, regardless of the general level of likability an influencer is perceived to have.

Confirming the expectations, feelings of benign envy perceived after viewing an influencer's post on Instagram, positively impact the general attitude towards a brand. In line with a study by Van de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters (2011) on envy and the willingness to pay more for products, feelings of benign envy increase people's motivation to obtain the object owned by the influencer. Furthermore, the current study proposed that feelings of benign envy play a mediating role in the relationship between bragging communication on brand attitude and purchase intention. The findings reveal that this proposition was not supported, as there was no mediation effect was found. This result can be illustrated by findings of our study presenting that, while bragging negatively influences consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention, perceived benign envy positively influences brand attitude and purchase intention. An explanation for this might be that bragging decreases likability (Leary, 1995; Robinson et al., 1995). Feeling envy towards a person that is dislikable is often associated with malicious envy, instead of benign envy (Chen et al., 2020). Malicious envy is a more negative type of envy, which can make people feel hostile towards the envied other (Dong et al., 2020; Lange & Crusius, 2015).

Another proposition indicated that the relationship between bragging communication and perceived benign envy is moderated by likability. Specifically, perceived benign envy is expected to increase only when an influencer is perceived to be likable. This proposition is not supported, as our findings present that there is no moderating effect of likability. This finding contradicts with a study in which likability was proven to cause benign envy after an act of bragging in online reviews (Chen et al., 2020). Indicating that likability could influence

the consumer if it involves bragging in online reviews, but is not likely to affect the consumer once it involves bragging by influencers or in social media posts.

Lastly, support is presented in line with studies proposing that benign envy is increasingly felt when a person is considered likable (Chen et al., 2020; Van de Ven et al., 2009; Van de Ven, 2016). This validates research based on the appraisal theory and benign envy, proposing that appraising a person to be likable is related to perceiving benign envy (Van de Ven et al., 2009; Van de Ven, 2016). Although likability does not moderate the relationship between influencers' communication style and the perceived level of benign envy, there is a direct link demonstrating that the extent to which an influencer is liked can predict the level of benign envy felt.

Theoretical and practical implications

The findings presented in the current study can be taken into consideration in several ways. From a theoretical point of view, the current study illustrates that Instagram posts involving a bragging influencer directly and negatively impact consumers' attitude towards the brand and their intention to purchase the sponsored product. This adds to current knowledge about the effect of bragging on consumers' brand evaluation. Contrarily, perceived benign envy felt towards an influencer directly effects brand attitude and purchase intention in a positive manner. This confirms research concerning upward social comparison and benign envy (Chen et al., 2020; Smith & Kim, 2007; Van de Ven et al., 2016). Feelings of benign envy, perceived after viewing a sponsored influencer post, motivate the consumer to think positively about the brand and increase intention to purchase the product. Thereby, the current study validates the envy theory on benign envy, as benign envy improves willingness to own the product the other presents (Van de Ven et al., 2011). Furthermore, this research validates earlier findings concerning benign envy and the appraisal theory.

Specifically, to elicit stronger feelings of benign envy an influencer has to be liked by the audience.

On a societal level, our study has multiple implications for various stakeholders. First, marketers who want to collaborate with influencers can instruct the influencers to avoid language that can come across as bragging. When creating the sponsored post, the influencer should inspire the audience and motivate them to strive and become like the influencer. Inspiration and motivation are associated with benign envy, which positively effects consumers' brand attitude (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Furthermore, brands who want to promote their products via influencer marketing are advised to collaborate with influencers who are considered modest and generally liked by a brand's target audience. Working with influencers that are generally liked can increase perceived benign envy for consumers.

Second, for influencers themselves, the findings suggest that using modest communication when promoting a product or service is more beneficial. Avoiding overly bragging behavior will lead to better the public's attitude towards a brand and increase purchase intention. Additionally, it can be beneficial to make consumers feel benign envy towards an influencer. Thereby, the influencer should be associated with likability and be motivating and inspiring to the public. An influencer's public should believe that they can have and achieve the same lifestyle as the influencer.

Critical reflection and limitations

Despite the abovementioned insights, our study also has limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the hypotheses are tested with experimental conditions and answers were recorded through self-reports. Because of this method, participants might indicate a different response to the stimuli than they would in real-life situations. There is a lack of ecological isomorphism. Therefore, the validity of the findings might be somewhat questionable.

Subsequently, the male and female influencers presented in the stimuli are fictional. Therefore, none of the participants did experience PSR or PSI with the influencer. As mentioned in the theoretical framework experiencing PSR causes an illusion of intimacy and closeness between an influencer and the person experiencing the relationship (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal., 2020; Chen, 2018). Participants not experiencing PSR could affect the outcome because participants' opinions of the influencer might be less pronounced compared to their judgment of non-fictional influencers. In consequence, the external validity of the study might be taken into consideration.

Moreover, it should be considered that experimental research activates participants' persuasion knowledge, which means that participants are conscious of the persuasive intent of the Instagram post. In real-life situations an influencer's public is not always aware of the persuasive intent (Boerman, 2020). Only after recognizing that a post has a persuasive intent, people use their knowledge to interpret, evaluate and respond to an influencer's post (Friestad & Wright, 1994). During an experiment, participants are critical towards the stimuli, while in real life, they may be less critical towards the Instagram posts viewed.

Another limitation of the study concerns the reliability of the scale measuring benign envy. The original scale used in the experiment was developed in a research by Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters (2009) and adapted to fit the current study. The question, indicating whether the participant felt frustrated after viewing the post, had to be deleted from the scale for the scale to be reliable. In the current research, benign envy was thereby only measured by indicating whether the participant felt inspired, motivated and if the participant felt benign envy towards the influencer. According to Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters (2009), inspiration and motivation are critical to measure when indicating the level of benign envy felt. Nevertheless, benign envy also contains feelings of frustration (Van de Ven et al., 2009). The level of frustration felt by participants is not considered in the current study. Therefore,

the reliability of the scale measuring benign envy should be taken into account when interpreting the research.

One last limitation is that influencer' likability was measured before the participants had seen the Instagram post. In the current study it is important that participants find themselves in a state of liking or disliking the influencer, before being confronted with different communication styles, because likability was a possible moderator. In addition, likability also had to be measured as a manipulation check, which was best to take place right after seeing the corresponding stimuli. As a result of likability being measured earlier than the other variables, it was not possible to assess if a bragging communication style impacted influencer' likability.

Suggestions for future research

To assess if the findings can be generally applied in real-life situations, additional empirical research is advised. Interviews can be taken in which participants are asked for their opinion on sponsored influencer posts from influencers with different communication styles. Moreover, surveys can be taken to test if and when influencers are considered likable, whether the audience perceives benign envy towards an influencer, and the impact of these feelings on the audience's brand attitude.

Following the current findings, more in-depth research can provide knowledge regarding the effect of bragging on social comparison. Future research on bragging communication might investigate what stimulates the negative impact of bragging on brand attitude and purchase intention. Because bragging violates the norm of modesty, bragging might elicit malicious envy instead of benign envy (Chen et al., 2020; Leary, 1995; Robinson et al., 1995). Malicious envy can cause people to feel hostile towards an envied other and increases a need to differentiate from the envied person (Dong, Xiang, Zhao, Li, Zhao & Zhang, 2020; Lange & Crusius, 2015; Van de Ven et al., 2011). Thus, malicious envy

decreases the desirability to own the product envied other owns, which is not desirable for marketers (Van de Ven et al., 2011). Experimental research can be done to investigate if malicious envy mediates the relationship between bragging and brand attitude.

Considering that feelings of benign envy do positively impact consumers' attitude towards a brand and purchase intention. It can be worthwhile to investigate how Influencers can evoke stronger feelings of benign envy in their audience, besides being likable. In light of the results demonstrated in the current research and findings by Van de Ven, Zeelenburg and Pieters (2011), benign envy causes the consumer to have a more positive attitude towards a brand and increases purchase intention. Knowing which behavior causes benign envy can help to develop a better communication strategy for influencers. The effect of different types of behavior on perceived benign envy can be studied in another experiment, in which the impact of various posts and influencers can be compared.

Furthermore, likability was not found to moderate the relationship between bragging communication and perceived benign envy. Additional research can assess if experiencing PSR towards an influencer does moderate the effect of bragging on perceived benign envy. PSR involves a relationship and therefore can be expected to have a more pronounced impact than only liking someone (Sun & Wu, 2012). Experiencing PSR is associated with a relationship that feels more like friendship (Lou & Kim, 2019). Consequently, it might be considered that experiencing a strong PSR with a bragging influencer can increase stronger feelings of benign envy towards the influencer. This can be studied using a real influencer in an experiment with a group of participants who experience PSR with the influencer and a second group of participants who do not experience this relationship.

Lastly, it can be insightful to conduct a longitudinal study to assess whether a sleeper effect occurs following benign envy caused by an influencer's post. A sleeper effect means that the persuasive effect of a message can be more pronounced later in time, instead of

directly after viewing a persuasive message (Hovland, Lumsdaine & Sheffield, 1949; Kumkale & Albarracín, 2004). When perceiving benign envy, it might be the case that the wish to achieve the lifestyle of the envied other increases. This might cause a sleeper effect, in that the wish to own what the envied other possesses can increase as well. This can be studied through a longitudinal experiment, tracking participants' attitudes and behavior after viewing an influencer over time.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine whether bragging in social media posts by influencers would positively impact the brand attitude and purchase intention of consumers who viewed these posts. Specifically, bragging communication was expected to positively impact brand attitude and purchase intention, caused by perceived benign envy towards a likable influencer initiated through social comparison. The findings conclude that an influencer who brags in a social media post negatively impacts consumers' brand attitude. In line with the proposition, the experiment revealed that perceived benign envy increases a positive attitude towards the brand. Although likability of the influencer is not found to moderate the relationship between bragging communication and benign envy, the findings propose that a likable influencer brings out stronger feelings of benign envy. Future studies are advised to look further into this with empirical data and investigate if there is a sleeper effect that might strengthen the impact. Furthermore, it can be interesting to study different strategies to obtain a more positive brand attitude using different communication styles and purposely cause consumers to feel benign envy. In conclusion, the current study has scientific and social value by demonstrating the impact of bragging communication used by influencers on the public.

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Appendix A

Appendix A1

Introductory text male, likable condition

Je krijgt zo een Instagram-post van Jules Castro te zien. Jules Castro is bekend geworden als Influencer, omdat hij aandacht vraagt voor eenzame ouderen. Jules doet dit door grappige reels, TikToks en vlogs te maken samen met zijn opa en oma, die dat ook leuk vinden om te doen. Zijn vrienden zijn ook regelmatig te zien in zijn posts. Jules en zijn vrienden hebben ervoor gezorgd dat jongeren vaker op bezoek gaan bij hun grootouders en dankbaar zijn voor de familie die ze hebben. Het inkomen dat Jules verdient als Influencer doneert hij aan het goede doel.



Introductory text female, likable condition

Je krijgt zo een Instagram-post van Jules Castro te zien. Jules Castro is bekend geworden als Influencer, omdat zij aandacht vraagt voor eenzame ouderen. Jules doet dit door grappige reels, TikToks en vlogs te maken samen met haar opa en oma, die dat ook leuk vinden om te doen. Haar vrienden zijn ook regelmatig te zien in haar posts. Jules en haar vrienden hebben ervoor gezorgd dat jongeren vaker op bezoek gaan bij hun grootouders en dankbaar zijn voor de familie die ze hebben. Het inkomen dat Jules verdient als Influencer doneert zij aan het goede doel.



Appendix A2

Introductory text male, dislikable condition

Je krijgt zo een Instagram-post van Jules Castro te zien. In 2017 was Jules Castro betrokken bij een schandaal, hij brak in op de Cloud van BN'ers en deelde naaktfoto's en privé beelden van hen. Hierdoor werd hij bekend op social media. Nu werkt Jules als Influencer via zijn kanalen deelt hij 'hacks' die laten zien hoe je makkelijk kan stelen van verschillende (web)winkels.



Introductory text female, dislikable condition

Je krijgt zo een Instagram-post van Jules Castro te zien. In 2017 was Jules Castro betrokken bij een schandaal, zij brak in op de Cloud van BN'ers en deelde naaktfoto's en privé beelden van hen. Hierdoor werd zij bekend op social media. Nu werkt Jules als Influencer via haar kanalen deelt zij 'hacks' die laten zien hoe je makkelijk kan stelen van verschillende (web)winkels.



Appendix A3

Bragging post, male condition



Bragging post, female condition



Appendix A4

Modest post, male condition



Modest post, female condition



Appendix B

Construct	Questions
Likability	<p>De influencer is vriendelijk</p> <p>De influencer is sympathiek</p> <p>Dit is een warm persoon</p> <p>Deze influencer is benaderbaar</p> <p>Ik zou Jules om advies vragen</p> <p>Ik zou willen dat Jules een collega van mij was</p> <p>Ik zou willen dat Jules mijn huisgenoot was</p> <p>Ik zou bevriend met deze influencer willen zijn</p> <p>De influencer is aantrekkelijk</p> <p>Deze influencer lijkt op mij</p> <p>De influencer heeft kennis van zaken</p>
Bragging	<p>De influencer beweert dat hij/zij er goed uit ziet</p> <p>De influencer probeert indruk op me te maken</p> <p>De influencer schept op over het dragen van de trui</p>
Benign envy	<p>Deze post inspireert mij</p> <p>Ik voel me gemotiveerd na het zien van deze post</p> <p>Ik benijd deze influencer</p> <p>Deze post frustreert mij</p>
Brand attitude	<p>Het merk gepresenteerd in deze post lijkt me leuk</p> <p>Ik waardeer het merk geadviseerd in deze post</p> <p>Ik sta positief tegenover het merk</p> <p>Ik vind dit een goed merk</p>
Purchase intention	<p>Het kopen van de trui is de moeite waard</p> <p>In de toekomst wil ik de witte trui kopen</p> <p>Ik zou de trui adviseren aan anderen</p>

Appendix C

Figure 6.

Scatterplot Depicting the correlation between influencer' bragging and brand attitude.

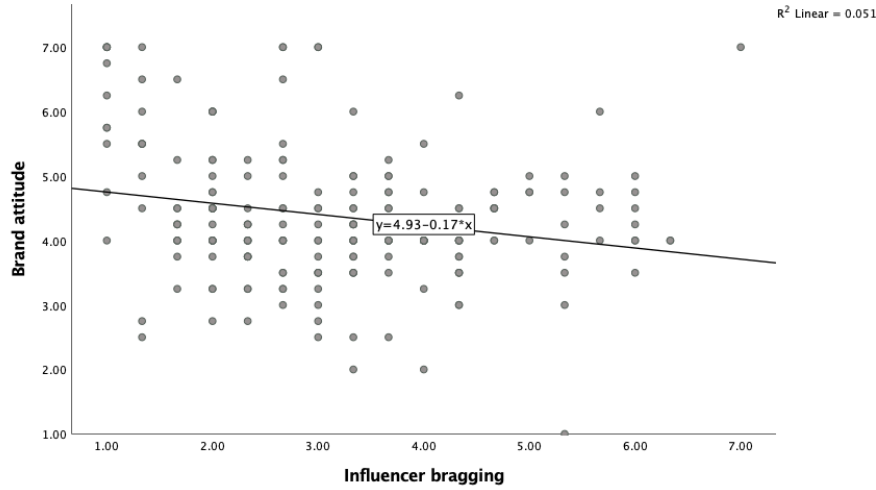


Figure 7.

Scatterplot Depicting the correlation between influencer' bragging and purchase intention.

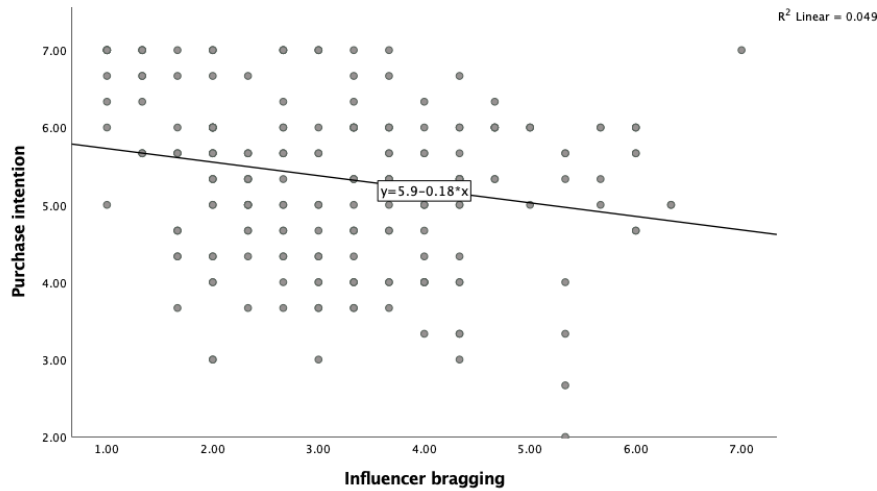


Figure 8.

Scatterplot Depicting the correlation between perceived benign envy and brand attitude.

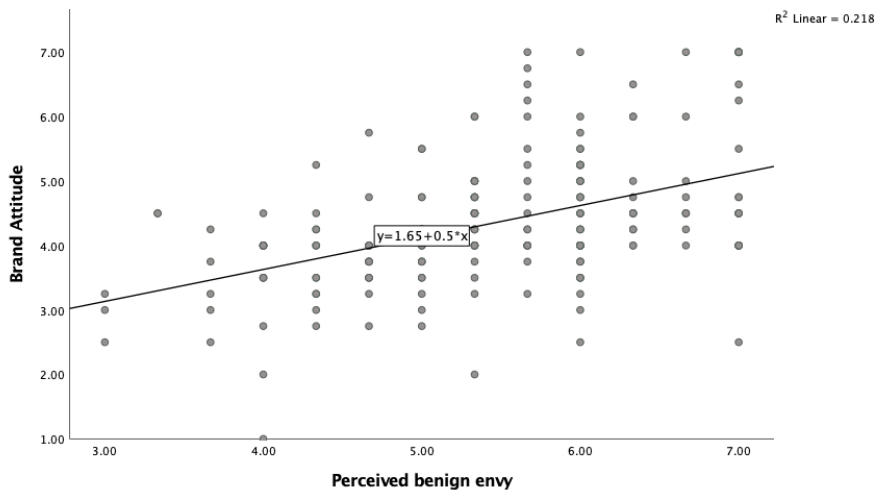
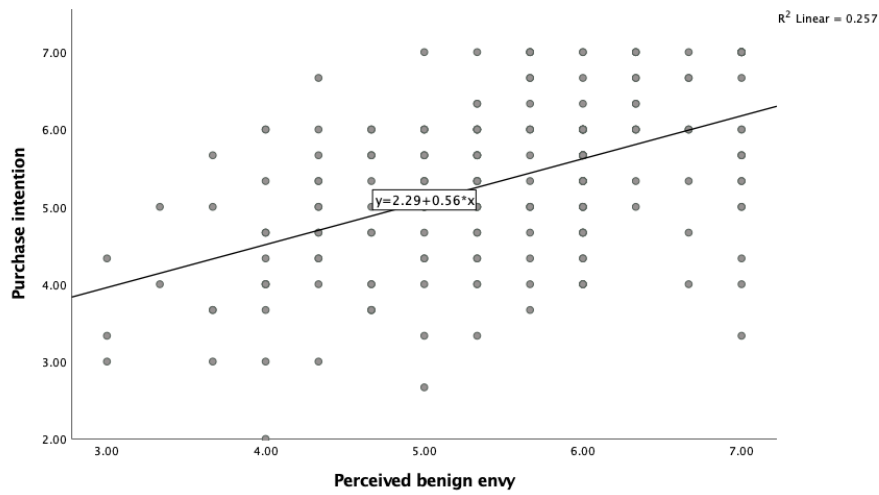


Figure 9.

Scatterplot Depicting the correlation between perceived benign envy and purchase intention.

**Figure 10.**

Scatterplot Depicting the correlation between perceived likability of the influencer and perceived benign envy.

