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ARTICLE



Social media influencers as endorsers to promote travel destinations: an application of self-congruence theory to the Chinese Generation Y

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of online social networks has given rise to the emergence of social media influencers (SMIs), so-called “Internet celebrities”. Celebrity endorsement, which can be an effective marketing strategy, is also popular in the tourism field. This study uses self-congruity theory, which originally refers to the congruence between consumers and brands or products, to the congruence between endorsers and potential tourists to evaluate endorsement effectiveness. Results indicate that SMI endorser–consumer congruence positively contributes to visit intentions toward the endorsed destinations as does endorser–destination congruence. Tourism marketers are advised to use SMIs when the destination images and target markets align.

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Introduction

Online social networks (OSNs) have had a significant influence on the travel industry (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social media platforms are growing at a staggering pace, attracting millions of new users across various platforms. For example, by the first quarter of 2017, monthly active users of Sina Weibo, a Chinese microblogging website, exceeded 340 million, increasing by 67% compared with the previous year (China Internet Watch, 2017). The digital revolution of Web 2.0 has enabled users to connect, communicate, and interact with each other on a convenient and accessible platform, making information search much easier. Tourists are now able to use OSNs to search and acquire travel-related information, share their personal feelings and comments with peers, and purchase tourism products as a result of engagement with Web 2.0 technologies (Parralópez, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Díaz-Armas, 2011). This practice has gained substantial popularity. According to Compete (2007), the online reviews and experiences shared by tourists influence more than US\$10 billion in online travel purchases every year.

In 2006, *TIME* magazine chose “you” as the person of the year, emphasizing the unprecedented potential influence and contribution of a single person in the Web 2.0 era (Grossman, 2006). Internet users can be the co-generators of Internet content. Individuals’ influence has greatly expanded and even ordinary people can become online opinion leaders.

The prevalence of social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Weibo, has led to the emergence of social media influencers, or so-called Internet celebrities. Named “Wang Hong” in Chinese, these Internet celebrities are everyday people attracting millions of fans online. By creating and sharing their original content on social media platforms, they influence and shape people’s attitudes, thus becoming opinion leaders and sometimes independent third-party endorsers (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011).

The huge online influence of Internet celebrities, which can be strategically used as an effective marketing tool, has aroused both marketers’ and investors’ interest. For example, the World Influencer Forum, which aims at providing a sound platform for Internet celebrities, brokers, and investors to further their collaboration, was held in September 2016 in Beijing, China. Papi Jiang, an Internet celebrity famous for her original short videos on social media, received venture capital totalling RMB 12 million, equivalent to US\$ 1.8 million. Witnessing a rapid growth and perceived as lucrative, Chinese Internet celebrities’ economy is expected to be worth RMB 58 billion in 2016 (US\$ 8.76 billion), more than China’s cinema box office in 2015 (China Daily, 2017). Chinese Generation Y consumers, in particular, are inclined to embrace celebrities as brand endorsers and their purchase intention is affected by their celebrity worship (Hung, Chan, & Tse, 2011). In China, approximately 40% of youth products adopt celebrity

endorsement in their advertisements to strengthen their marketing influence (Chan, Leung, & Luk, 2013).

Defined as the people born between 1980 and 1994 (Weiler, 2005), Generation Y (Gen Y) is characterized as being technologically savvy. Gen Y consists of 82 million people who spend US\$ 200 million annually and are expected to make 320 million international trips by 2020. In the United States (US), the Gen Y cohort makes up 22% of online leisure travelers (Djamasbi, Siegel, & Tullis, 2010). In China, young luxury travelers with an average age of 28 years spend RMB 420,000 per household (US\$ 63,300) annually on travel (Hurun Report, 2016). This cohort represents a fast-growing and increasingly lucrative travel market worldwide.

The wide use of OSNs has significantly affected the lives of Gen Y. They embrace the interactive nature of OSNs and are involved in various kinds of online activities including messaging, blogging, sharing information, and keeping in touch with friends (Consumer Behavior Report, 2008). According to eMarketer (2012), in Asia Pacific, 57% of people between 21 and 39 years old actively use OSNs at least once a week. In addition, Gen Y depend heavily on OSNs to obtain travel information and frequently review user-generated Internet content before purchasing travel products. In 2008, as Jones and Fox (2009) point out, approximately 65% of Gen Y made online travel arrangements.

A growing amount of research has been conducted to assess how social media have influenced Gen Y travelers' pre-purchase behavior (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) and the celebrity endorsement effect on Gen Y consumers (Chan et al., 2013). However, there is a lack of research that explores the relationship between pre-purchase consumer behavior and the effect of celebrity endorsements. Due to the increasing spending power of Gen Y (Coleman & Loda, 2010) and the growth in outbound travel among the Chinese, an evaluation of the effectiveness of social media influencers as destination endorsers among Gen Y is necessary. The aim of this study is to examine the effectiveness of choosing social media influencers as endorsers to promote travel destinations to the Chinese Gen Y by adopting a self-congruence model between endorsers and consumers. Specifically, this research will (1) examine the impact of congruence between social media influencer (SMI) endorsers and Chinese Gen Y consumers on their behavior intention; (2) determine the possible factors that influence the SMI endorsement effectiveness in terms of destination marketing; and (3) identify marketing implications for tourism marketers.

Celebrity endorsement

Celebrity endorsement is used in many different modes of communication, not just in traditional advertising

but also on social media platforms. In addition to consumer goods, nowadays celebrities endorse consumer services, business-to-business products, non-commercial entities such as political parties, and even non-profit organizations. Therefore, Bergkvist and Zhou (2016, p. 644) propose the following definition: "A celebrity endorsement is an agreement between an individual who enjoys public recognition (a celebrity) and an entity (e.g. a brand) to use the celebrity for the purpose of promoting the entity."

For some time, sports and entertainment celebrities have been used in various industries as effective marketing tools. The fame and success of the celebrities attract customers to consider the endorsed brands. Recent studies have shown that celebrity endorsement has a positive effect on consumers' brand awareness, brand trust (Hung, 2014), brand preference (Albert, Ambroise, & Valette-Florence, 2017), and purchase intentions (Pradhan, Duraipandian, & Sethi, 2016).

With a credible image, a celebrity generally influences consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions more than a non-celebrity spokesperson (Erdogan, 1999). Three dimensions, namely expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness are identified as components of celebrity endorser credibility (Tzoumaka, Tsiotsou, & Siomkos, 2016). Expertise refers to the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions. Expertise derives from the knowledge and experience of the spokesperson in the related field (Erdogan, 1999). Trustworthiness is the confidence in the information source consumers have, in other words, whether the source provides objective and honest information (Erdogan, 1999). For example, salespeople are generally considered less trustworthy than family members and friends. Attractiveness is related to the consumers' perceived physical attractiveness of, for example, the appearance of endorsers (Ohanian, 1990).

Celebrity endorsement on social media

The rise of social media has contributed to the emergence of SMIs, who are also referred to as "Internet celebrities". According to Freberg et al. (2011), SMIs are a new type of independent third-party endorser who influence audience attitudes and perceptions through the use of social media. As active users of social media, SMIs can be thought of as Internet celebrities, for they enjoy a high level of social presence and their high level of presence leads to a strong influence on the audience's behavior (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012). Like the attention consumers pay to celebrity endorsers and the trust they put in them, the opinions of SMIs

matter for millions of online opinion seekers, thus making SMI online opinion leaders in many cases.

The influence of social media has expanded rapidly over the past years. A Nielsen report (2013) showed that 69% of consumers globally would trust an endorsement or recommendation from online consumer opinions, or family and friends; this is much higher than the percentage of consumers who would trust traditional television and magazine advertisements in the 2000s. As a consequence, marketing firms have used these strategies, with anticipated spending on social media marketing reaching as much as 21% of total budgets by 2019 (Soat, 2014).

The SMI endorsement is a relatively new marketing strategy. In 2013, beauty blogger Donna Kim was appointed as one of a dozen SMIs to endorse the hosiery line of Duane Reade, a New York based drug store. By posting images of herself wearing the brand's apparel on several social media platforms including Twitter and Tumblr, Donna Kim and other appointed SMIs successfully generated 19.4 million social media impressions and helped Duane Reade boost sales by 28% (Soat, 2014). Similarly, in 2014, fashion brand Juicy Couture launched a series of campaigns on Snapchat stories featuring British model Rosie Huntington-Whitely to unveil its spring 2014 collection. This tactic increased the traffic to the brand's online store by 20% (Weissman, 2014). By employing the right SMIs as brand endorsers, these two brands have experienced a significant return on investment.

Celebrity endorsement and destination marketing

Appointing celebrities as destination spokespersons is another marketing strategy to stimulate tourists' arrivals and boost destinations' image. In Australia, a tourism marketing campaign, featuring various celebrities, entitled 'Australia – a different light' was launched in 2009. And in 2010, Tourism Australia teamed up with US celebrity Oprah Winfrey to launch another destination marketing campaign targeting tourists from North America (van der Veen & Song, 2010). In China, where celebrity endorsement continues to gain popularity, a similar practice has also been followed in the tourism sector. For example, Jackie Chan, the famous movie star, has been a Hong Kong Tourism Ambassador since 1995 (Hotel Online, 2004). More recently, Mo Yan, the Chinese Nobel Prize Winner, and the pianist Lang Lang, were both appointed to be Beijing Tourism Ambassadors (Li, Xu, & Zheng, 2014).

Compared with the images of other consumer goods, tourism destination images are relatively hard to modify. Therefore, using a celebrity as an endorser

can be a powerful tool to mark the distinctiveness of a destination. For instance, the relationship between the local-born celebrity and the destination is unique, thus providing a selling point which other destinations are not able to offer (van der Veen & Song, 2010). In addition, since celebrities are generally considered individuals who enjoy high status, celebrity endorsement is particularly effective in promoting products and services as status symbols (Davies & Slater, 2015). Destinations, according to Clarke (2000), can also be seen as style and status indicators as travel experiences are a way tourists can communicate messages about themselves to peers. Hence, celebrity endorsement is likely to be more effective than non-celebrity endorsement for market destinations, given tourists have the desire to follow the attitudes and values endorsed by celebrities.

Van der Veen (2008) studied the celebrity endorsement effect in the tourism industry. In his analysis of celebrity endorsement of tourist destinations, van der Veen (2008) found that the right celebrity endorser, who matches the destination in an appropriate way, could result in a more favorable attitude toward the advertisement, compared with advertisements without any celebrity endorsers.

Match-up hypothesis

Brands are symbols for consumers with which to express their identity and facilitate social interactions with others (Choi & Rifon, 2012; Escalas & Bettman, 2003). The importance of the fit between the celebrity and the product or the brand, termed the "product match-up hypothesis", was introduced by Kamins and Gupta (1994). Fit generally refers to congruency, similarity, relevance, or consistency between the celebrity and the product or brand (Kamins & Gupta, 1994). Several studies suggest that a good match-up between celebrity images and product images should lead to a more positive perception of the advertisement, the celebrity, and the product than a poor match-up would (Choi & Rifon, 2012; Kamins & Gupta, 1994; McCormick, 2016). Rice, Kelting, and Lutz (2012) find that under the condition of high celebrity involvement, a match-up between the celebrity endorser and the product or brand moderated the negative effects of multiple endorsements on brand evaluation.

Self-concept and self-congruity

Defined as "the totality of individuals' thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979), self-concept has been shown to influence consumer

choice behavior. Self-congruity is considered an extension of self-concept. The basic hypothesis in the self-congruity theory suggests that consumers prefer products or brands that match up with their self-concepts. Consumers construct, maintain, and enhance their self-concepts via brand purchases and consumption. Consumers are likely to have favorable attitudes and purchase intention toward brands whose images are congruent with their self-images (Richins, 1994).

Sirgy (1982) states that there are four types of self-congruity: actual self-congruity, ideal self-congruity, social self-congruity, and ideal social self congruity. Actual self-congruity is the congruity between how the person sees him- or herself and the destination/brand image (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Conversely, ideal self-congruity is the congruity between how the person ideally sees him- or herself and the destination/brand image, while social self-congruity relates to the congruity between how the person actually portrays him- or herself socially and the destination/brand image (Sirgy, 1982). Lastly ideal social self-congruity is the congruity between how the person ideally represents him- or herself socially and the destination/brand image (Sirgy, 1985).

Consumers subscribe to the values celebrities possess and transfer these values from brands and products to construct, maintain, and enhance their self-concept. Young consumers, in particular, are likely to regard the celebrities they admire as a kind of exemplar and thus adopt celebrities' values in their identity construction (Boon & Lomore, 2001). Therefore, purchasing and using the celebrity-endorsed product helps consumers acquire values and thereby contributes to constructing a satisfying self-concept (Dwivedi, Johnson, & McDonald, 2016). In the tourism context, Usakli and Baloglu (2011) find that a higher degree of congruence between the destination personality and tourists' self-concept leads to a more favorable attitude toward the destination, a greater intention to visit, and to recommending the destination.

Celebrities can be seen as a reference group, which plays a significant role in terms of an individual's evaluation, aspiration, or behavior. For example, sporting heroes and entertainment figures are frequently used as endorsers, for their achievements are highly admirable (Belch & Belch, 2013). Social influence theory (Kelman, 1961) proposes that an individual will adopt attitudes or behaviors advocated by the influencer depending on the way the changed individual perceives him- or herself in relation to the influencer. Social influence covers three areas, namely compliance, identification, and internalization. Identification refers to the process when one conforms to the attitude or

behavior advocated by another person due to the satisfaction generated from imitating or becoming that person. Hence, consumers' emulation of celebrities' attitude or behavior can be attributed to consumers' aspiration to be like celebrities.

While Sirgy (1982) and Sirgy and colleagues (1997) outline four types of self-congruity, Usakli and Baloglu (2011) use only actual self-congruity and ideal self-congruity, arguing that these types have the strongest empirical support. For this study, we use only ideal self-congruity because of the nature of the relationship between the celebrity and the consumer. Consumers find celebrities inspirational and aspire to be like them. Consumers emulate the attitude or behavior of a celebrity simply to be like them. Hence ideal self-congruity is the most appropriate construct to use in this study as this research is focusing on the congruence between potential tourists and Internet celebrities. According to Choi and Rifon (2012), the congruence between consumers' ideal self-images and celebrity endorsers' images contributes to endorsement effectiveness. Consumers who rate their ideal selves as more congruent with the celebrity endorsers indicate more favorable attitudes toward the featured advertisements and further report greater purchase intention toward the endorsed products.

Conceptual framework

According to the match-up hypothesis, the congruence between celebrity and product is an important factor determining the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement. Applying the match-up hypothesis in the destination-marketing context, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the SMI endorser–destination congruence may also play a part. Thus, the following hypotheses (Hs) are proposed:

H1: A high degree of congruence between the SMI endorsers' perceived images and the endorsed destinations' images will positively influence

- a. attitudes toward the featured advertisement;
- b. attitudes toward the endorsed destination;
- c. visit intention toward the endorsed destination.

Previous studies have examined the attitude toward the advertisement, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention as endorsement effectiveness variables. The dual mediation hypothesis proposes that the attitude toward the advertisement subsequently affects the attitude toward the brand and purchase intention

(MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). Therefore, the following relationships are added to further explain endorsement effectiveness in the tourism context.

H2a: Attitude toward the advertisement positively and directly influences attitude toward the destination.

H2b: Attitude toward the destination positively and directly influences visit intention.

Since consumers are motivated to establish their ideal self and see certain celebrities as inspirational figures, they are likely to imitate their behaviors and adopt the attitudes endorsed by the celebrities whose images are congruent with consumers' ideal self-image. Hence, a high degree of congruence between a celebrity's image and a consumer's ideal self-image will result in a more positive attitude and greater purchase intention (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). Figure 1 shows the proposed model in this research. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: A high degree of congruence between SMI endorsers' perceived images and consumers' ideal self-images will positively impact

- a. attitudes toward the featured advertisement;
- b. attitudes toward the endorsed destination;
- c. visit intention toward the endorsed destination.

As noted above, previous literature has covered the relationship between tourists' attitudes toward the destination and self-congruity destination (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011), while another strand of research has covered the effect of celebrity endorsement in the tourism industry (van der Veen, 2008). However, few studies have examined the influence of celebrity–consumer congruity and its effect on attitudes toward an advertisement, attitudes toward a destination, and intention to visit this

destination. Sirgy and Su (2000) present a conceptual integrative model of destination image, self-congruity, and travel behavior. To date, Choi and Rifon (2012) have examined this relationship in a non-tourism context. Further, given the growing importance of the Chinese tourist market, the increasing spending power of Gen Y, and the ubiquity of social media, this research contributes to an understanding in this area.

Methodology

Social media endorsers advertisement

We follow the methods employed by Choi and Rifon (2012) to determine the appropriate SMI endorsers and destinations. A pretest was conducted prior to the main study. Thirty final-year Chinese undergraduate students were invited to list popular SMIs they like or dislike and match destinations with each of them respectively. They were also asked to provide adjectives to describe the images of their listed SMIs. Among the frequently named SMIs, Papi and Pony were chosen because they differed in their perceived images and participants were familiar with both. This selection process ensured an adequate range in the degree of congruence between the perceived images of endorsers and participants' ideal selves. In the pilot, participants were asked about destinations they were familiar with and perceived as being traditional and modern. Kyoto (Japan) and Seoul (Republic of Korea) were commonly cited. Similarly, to ensure a sufficient variation in the perceived degree of congruence between images of endorsed destinations and endorsers, Kyoto and Seoul were selected as traditional versus modern destinations.

Four advertisements (Papi endorsing Kyoto; Papi endorsing Seoul; Pony endorsing Kyoto; Pony endorsing Seoul) with colorful photos of the endorsers and destinations as backgrounds were shown to the participants. They were identical in both format and size and participants were randomly exposed to only one of the four advertisements assigned automatically by the

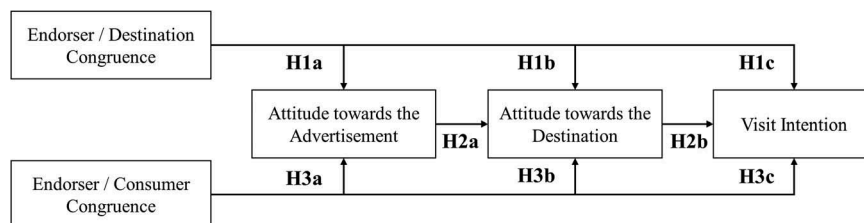


Figure 1. Proposed model.

H: hypothesis.

questionnaire distribution system. Full pictures of these four advertisements are presented in [Appendix 1](#).

Questionnaire design

In order to ensure Chinese Gen Y were the target population, screening questions were employed to ensure participants fit the target sample. Participants were asked to indicate whether they were Chinese, and whether they were born after 1980. If they answered “yes” to both questions, they were allowed to continue with the questionnaire. Prior to the data collection, a pilot test was conducted to ensure the reliability, validity, clarity, and comprehensiveness of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consists of five main sections. In the first section, screening questions captured nationality and age range. Then demographic questions including gender, specific age, travel frequency, travel purpose, and frequently used social media platforms were included.

The second section evaluated participants’ attitude toward the advertisement, attitude toward the destination, and visit intention. Participants were asked to indicate their attitude toward the advertisement on a 7-point semantic differential scale proposed by Choi and Rifon (2012) with five attributes. Attitude toward the destination was measured with the similar 7-point semantic differential scale with five attributes drawn from previous studies (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1985) examining Gen Y’s attitude toward the brand (destination). Then participants were asked to indicate their visit intentions with regard to the endorsed destinations by rating their agreement with the statement “Next time I go on a trip, I will visit the advertised destination” on a 7-point bipolar scale from “extremely unlikely” to “extremely likely”.

In the third part, the perceived congruence between SMI endorser and endorsed destination was captured based on a 7-point semantic differential scale with four attributes describing relevance and compatibility. The SMI endorsers’ images were rated on a 7-point bipolar scale with attributes derived from previous self-concept research (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1982). The image dimensions consist of 15 attributes evaluating self-image from various aspects including style, personality, and characteristics.

The fourth section assessed whether the perceptions across the selected SMI endorsers were different. Participants were invited to rate the selected SMI endorsers based on their perceived attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise, using a 7-point semantic differential scale developed by Ohanian (1990). Attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise were each measured with five items to ensure validity and

internal consistency. The last part measured the ideal self-images of participants. As suggested in previous literature (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1985), in order to obtain a congruity index score by comparing ratings on the same dimensions, an identical scale measuring SMI endorser’s image in the third section was adopted to measure the participants’ ideal self-image.

In order to ensure a high level of clarity, a back-translation method was employed. The questionnaire was developed in English, and translated into the target language (simplified Chinese) before distribution, and then translated back into the original language (English). The full questionnaire is presented in [Appendix 2](#).

Sampling and data collection

Both convenience and snowball sampling methods were used to collect data. Web-based questionnaires were distributed on Wechat moments and Weibo, the top two popular social media platforms in China. The first author used her personal accounts on these platforms to invite friends to participate and asked them to further distribute the questionnaire. A total of 251 questionnaires were collected at the end of the data collection period. Seventeen responses were removed in the data cleaning process, which involved checking for item response bias and data normality. In total, 234 valid questionnaires, with four types of advertisements almost evenly distributed, were collected over a two-week period from February 28 2017 to March 14 2017. The frequencies and percentages of four types of advertisements are presented in [Table 1](#).

Data analysis

As mentioned in the research objectives, the variable that this study mainly focused on is the congruence between perceived images of SMI endorsers and ideal self-images of respondents. Sirgy and Su (2000) note that there are two ways of calculating congruity scores. The traditional way has been to derive a discrepancy score for each image dimension. The discrepancy is the difference between how the respondent perceives their ideal self-image and the image of the SMI endorser. Sirgy et al. (1997) highlight that there are three key problems with this method: (1) the

Table 1. Frequency of advertisements.

Advertisement type	Frequency	Percent
Papi endorsing Kyoto	59	25.2
Papi endorsing Seoul	56	23.9
Pony endorsing Kyoto	59	25.2
Pony endorsing Seoul	60	25.6
Total	234	100

use of discrepancy scores; (2) the possible use of irrelevant images; and (3) the use of a compensatory decision rule. Sirgy and Su (2000) propose a more direct method of capturing self-congruity by asking to what extent the destination is consistent with the consumer's self-image.

Despite some drawbacks, we opted for the traditional calculation of the congruity score. Congruence was measured by summing up the absolute difference of 15 items measuring the images between SMI endorsers' perceived images and respondents' ideal self-image. Different measurements of congruence between celebrity endorsers' image and consumers' self-image were used in previous studies. According to Sirgy and Danes (1982), comparing and examining the predictive validity of different congruence-measuring models, the *absolute difference* model was found to be the most predictive and the most effective model. Therefore, this study adapted the *absolute difference* model to calculate scores of congruence between SMI endorsers' image and respondents' ideal self-image as an index. The mathematical formula of *absolute different* model is as follows (Choi & Rifon, 2012; Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1985):

$$\sum_{i=1}^n |C_{ij} - I_{ij}|$$

The C_{ij} refers to celebrity image (i) of consumer (j), which is the SMI endorser image (i) of the respondent (j) in this study, and I_{ij} refers to the ideal self-image (i) of the respondent (j).

In other words, the congruence score is calculated using the above formula and represents the sum of absolute difference between respondents' ideal self-images and SMI endorsers' images across all 15 items. The lower the congruence score, the higher the degree of congruence between consumer ideal self-images and SMI endorsers' images. If the consumer sees him- or herself as the same as the endorser, their score would be zero. The result indicates that the scores of congruence range from the lowest score of zero to the highest score of 90 with a mean score of 18.06 (Table 2).

A profile of the sociodemographic information of 234 respondents, including gender, age, travel frequencies, travel purpose and the usage of social media platforms is presented in Table 3. The findings show that 60.3% of respondents are female, with the remainder being male. With a percentage of 94.4, most of the respondents are

Table 2. Score of congruence between SMI endorsers and respondents.

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Score	0.0	90.0	18.06	14.576

SMI: social media influencer.

Table 3. Sociodemographic information.

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	93	39.7
	Female	141	60.3
Age (years)	Under 18	10	4.3
	18 ~ 24	221	94.4
	25 ~ 31	3	1.3
	None	5	2.1
Travel frequency in the past year	1 ~ 3	122	52.1
	4 ~ 6	81	34.6
	7 ~ 9	13	5.6
	Above 9	13	5.6
	Business	4	1.7
	Leisure	193	82.5
Travel purpose	Both	21	13.7
	Other	5	2.1
	Other	5	2.1
Social media platform	WeChat	221	94.4
	Weibo	152	65.0
	Instagram	72	30.8
	YouTube	60	25.6
	Other	17	7.3

between 18 and 24 years old. Therefore, all respondents are considered to be Gen Y. During the past year, 52.1% of the respondents traveled one to three times, and 34.6% of respondents traveled four to six times. Most respondents travel for leisure. The most frequently used social media platforms are WeChat, followed by Weibo and Instagram. Of 17 respondents who chose 'other', seven of them indicated Tencent QQ and four of them indicated Facebook as the most frequently used social media platform.

Reliability tests

In order to ensure the overall consistency across measurements, reliability tests were conducted for Question 7 (see Appendix 2 for questions) measuring attitude toward the advertisement with five items; Question 8 measuring attitude toward the destination with five items; and Question 10 measuring the congruence between SMI endorser and the destination with four questions. The result suggests that these measurements possess excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha equal to 0.937, 0.958, and 0.951 respectively.

Findings

Testing differences across groups

Prior to testing the proposed hypotheses, an analysis was conducted to ensure no significant differences existed across groups in terms of control variables. Independent sample t -tests were conducted to compare the difference in perceived images across two SMI endorsers. No significant differences were observed between two SMI endorsers in terms of their attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise ($p > 0.05$) (Table 4).

Table 4. Characteristics of SMI endorsers.

	SMI endorser	Mean	Standard deviation	Df	<i>P</i>
Attractiveness	Papi	3.53	1.02	232	0.360
	Pony	3.21	0.92		
Trustworthiness	Papi	3.62	1.21	232	0.182
	Pony	3.67	1.03		
Expertise	Papi	3.92	1.24	232	0.831
	Pony	3.65	1.14		

SMI: social media influencer.
Papi (*N* = 115) Pony (*N* = 119).

Another independent sample *t*-test was performed to examine whether the congruence between SMI endorsers and destinations is different across two destinations, namely Kyoto and Seoul. Results indicate that there is no significant difference between Seoul and Kyoto in terms of destination–endorser congruence ($p > 0.05$), although Kyoto (*Mean* = 4.11) was considered to be slightly more congruent with both SMI endorsers than Seoul (*Mean* = 3.84).

A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) was conducted to assess differences across four versions of advertisements in terms of the attitude toward the advertisements, attitude toward the destination, and visit intention. While the results yield no significant differences in terms of attitude toward the advertisements and visit intention across four versions of advertisements ($p > 0.05$), significant differences exist within groups in terms of attitude toward destination ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, the advertisement featuring Papi and Kyoto is significantly different from the advertisement featuring Pony and Seoul with respect to attitude toward destination ($p < 0.05$). Respondents indicated a much more positive attitude toward Kyoto with Papi as the endorser than Seoul with Pony as the endorser.

In addition, since only female endorsers were included in this study, gender differences were also examined. Firstly, independent sample *t*-tests were performed to assess differences across gender in terms of the attitude toward the advertisement, attitude toward the destination, and visit intention. The results yielded no significant differences ($p > 0.05$). However, as expected, female respondents indicated a slightly more positive attitude toward both advertisement and destination, and expressed higher levels of visit intention than male respondents.

Secondly, another independent sample *t*-test was conducted to examine the differences across gender in terms of respondent–endorser congruence. While no significant differences were observed in this respect ($p > 0.05$), the male respondents (*M* = 17.87) indicated a slightly higher level of congruence between SMI endorsers' image and ideal self-images than female

respondents (*M* = 18.18). To examine the impact that travel frequencies might have on the intention to travel, a one-way ANOVA test was performed and results yielded no differences overall ($p > 0.05$) and no significant differences were observed among groups either.

To conclude, since no significant differences were observed across two endorsers, two destinations, four types of advertisements, gender, and travel frequencies, all valid data, deriving from different SMI endorser and destination pairings, were combined for further hypotheses testing across both genders.

Structural model

In order to test the conceptual model shown in Figure 1, we conducted a path analysis using AMOS 24.0. The fit indices for the structural model suggest a highly acceptable fit, $\chi^2/df = 2.908$; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.09; normed fit index (NFI) = 0.977; non-normed fit index (NNFI) = 0.961; comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.984; incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.985; adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) = 0.929 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The explanatory power (R^2) for endorser–destination congruence and endorser–consumer congruence on attitude to the advertisement is 0.541. The R^2 for the path: endorser–destination congruence, endorser–consumer congruence, and attitude to the advertisement on attitude to the destination is 0.382, while the R^2 for the path: endorser–destination congruence, endorser–consumer congruence, and attitude to the destination on visit intention is 0.501. All the R^2 values suggest that the independent variables explain a satisfactory amount of variance in the dependent variables.

The first set of hypotheses examined the impact endorser–destination congruence has on the attitude toward the advertisement (H1a), attitude toward the destination (H1b), and the visit intention (H1c). While the perceived congruence between SMI endorsers and destinations is positively correlated to attitude toward the advertisement ($\beta = 0.736$, $p < 0.05$) and visit intention ($\beta = 0.437$, $p < 0.05$), it fails to significantly predict attitude toward the destination ($\beta = -0.146$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, H1a and H1c are supported while H1b is disconfirmed.

The second set of hypotheses tested two relationships, one between attitude toward the advertisement and attitude toward the destination, and the other between attitude toward the destination and visit intention. Attitude toward the advertisement is found to have a positive impact on the attitude toward the

destination ($\beta = 0.739, p < 0.05$), which further positively influenced visit intention ($\beta = 0.351, p < 0.05$). As a result, both H2a and H2b are confirmed.

The third set of hypotheses assessed the effect endorser–consumer congruence has on the attitude toward the advertisement (H3a), attitude toward the destination (H3b), and the visit intention (H3c). Results indicate that endorser–consumer congruence has a positive impact on the visit intention ($\beta = 0.147, p < 0.05$) and is not significant in predicting attitude toward the advertisement ($\beta = -0.001, p > 0.05$) or the destination ($\beta = -0.120, p > 0.05$). Thus, H3c is confirmed whereas H3a and H3b are disconfirmed.

In sum, five out of eight proposed relationships are found to be statistically significant in the predicting direction, namely H3c, H1a, H1c, H2a, and H2b (Figure 2). The indirect effect of endorser–destination congruence on behavioral intention can be further computed (0.139). The total effect (direct and indirect) of endorser–destination congruence on visit intention is 0.577 (Table 5). Among the eight hypothesized relationships, five are statistically significant in the predicted directions.

Discussion

Celebrity endorsement has been widely used in a broad range of industries as an effective marketing tool, due to endorsers' fame, success, and visible presence. Previous studies reveal that effective celebrity endorsement can lead to a favorable attitude toward the endorsed brand and purchase intention (van der Veen, 2008). A higher degree of congruence between consumer and endorser and between endorser and brand or product can result in a more positive attitude toward the brand or product and increase the likelihood of purchase. In the tourism industry, destinations can be considered as brands or products, and using a celebrity as an endorser can mark the distinctiveness of a destination. Due to the prevalence of social media platforms and their profound influence on people's lives, social media influencers (SMIs) serve as online opinion leaders in various areas

and some of them have already been invited to endorse brands or products (Tzoumaka et al., 2016).

From a theoretical perspective, this study examined the effectiveness of using SMIs to endorse destinations by adopting a self-congruence model involving endorsers and consumers. The findings in this study corroborate those of Choi and Rifon (2012), who found that when a consumer indicates a higher level of similarities between his or her ideal self-image and the perceived image of the featured SMI endorser, the consumer tends to express greater visit intention toward the endorsed destination. Both this study and the Choi and Rifon (2012) study did not find any relationship between consumer–endorser congruence and attitude toward the destination. However, the findings of this study conflicted with Choi and Rifon (2012) because the high degree of endorser–consumer congruence did not lead to a positive attitude toward the featured advertisement. This may be because this study asks about tourist destinations as the product/brand while the Choi and Rifon (2012) study asks about perfume and a personal digital assistant (PDA). Tourism is a more complex product.

The present study chose social media influencers as endorsers rather than the traditional celebrities, in the featured advertisements to measure endorsement effectiveness. This research contributes to the body of knowledge because few studies so far have investigated the endorsement effectiveness of SMIs, given the rapidly expanding influence that social media platforms have on daily life and marketing campaigns. Online social networks have a strong impact on Gen Y (Nusair, Bilgihan, Okumus, & Cobanoglu, 2013). This is particularly important for understanding members of Gen Y, who are technically savvy. Their decision-making process is affected mainly by friends and they exhibit little brand loyalty (Benckendorff, Moscardo, & Pendergast, 2010). Therefore, the study provides useful information on how SMIs and their congruence with their audiences can shape attitudes toward the advertisements and attitudes toward different destinations.

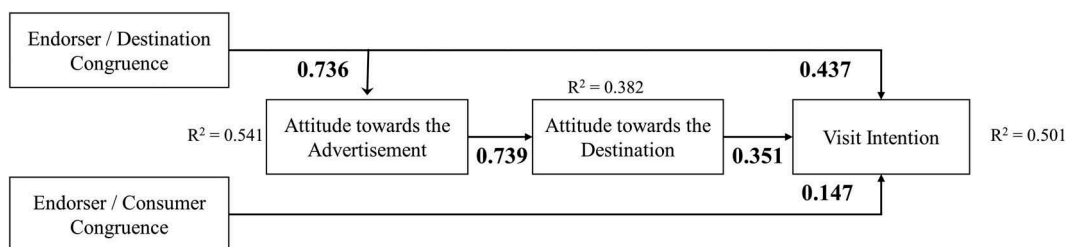


Figure 2. Estimated model.

Table 5. Results of hypothesis tests.

Hypothesis	Direct causal path	Estimate	BC 95% CI		<i>p</i>	Conclusion
			Lower	Upper		
H1a	EDC [®] Attitude toward advertisement	0.736	0.649	0.800	0.004	Supported
H1b	EDC [®] Attitude toward destination	-0.146	-0.279	0.061	0.194	Not supported
H1c	EDC [®] Visit Intention	0.437	0.040	0.241	0.007	Supported
H2a	Attitude toward advertisement [®]	0.739	0.595	0.852	0.004	Supported
H2b	Attitude toward destination	0.351	0.242	0.454	0.002	Supported
	Attitude toward destination [®]					
H3a	ECC [®] Attitude toward ad	-0.001	-0.125	0.099	0.997	Not supported
H3b	ECC [®] Attitude toward destination	-0.120	-0.289	0.026	0.101	Not supported
H3c	ECC [®] Visit intention	0.147	0.329	0.555	0.002	Supported
Indirect causal path						
	EDC [®] Attitude toward advertisement [®] Attitude toward destination [®] Visit intention	0.139				
	EDC [®] Attitude toward advertisement [®] Attitude toward destination [®]	0.544				
	Attitude toward advertisement [®]	0.259				
	Attitude toward destination [®] Visit intention					
Total effects						
	EDC [®] Visit intention	0.577				

EDC: endorser–destination congruence; ECC: endorser–consumer congruence; BC: bias corrected; CI: confidence interval.

In addition to endorser–consumer congruence, this study also investigates how congruence between SMI endorsers and destinations influences consumers' attitudes and their visit intentions. The congruence between SMI endorsers and destinations is found to have a positive impact on the featured advertisements and visit intentions. In other words, a higher degree of perceived congruence between SMI endorsers and destinations led to a more favorable attitude toward the advertisements and greater likelihood of visiting the destination. This is in line with the match-up hypothesis, which suggests that a good fit between the celebrity endorser and the product or brand should result in a more favorable attitude toward the advertisements than a poor match-up does (McCormick, 2016; Rice et al., 2012). However, the present study chose tourism destinations as the endorsed items rather than the traditional products or brands. Like Usakli and Baloglu (2011), this study found that destination–tourist congruence has a positive impact on behavioral intentions. Hence, we demonstrate that the match-up hypothesis model can be integrated with a self-congruence model when assessing the influence that relationships among tourists, destinations, and celebrity endorsers might have on behavior intentions.

Marketing implications

From a marketing perspective, the present study offers empirical evidence for the selection of SMIs as endorsers in the destination marketing context. The findings of the current study shed light on how to choose the right endorser with corroborated theoretical support, and further extends the application to SMIs and

destination marketing. Based on the findings, three practical recommendations are given.

Firstly, as alternatives to traditional celebrities, SMIs can be chosen as effective endorsers. While SMIs share similarities with traditional celebrities including a high level of social presence and strong influence on audience's behavior (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012), their opinions are perceived as more trustworthy than traditional television or magazine advertisements (Nielsen, 2012). Hence, destination marketers could consider inviting SMIs to be the destination endorsers by sharing their experiences or opinion via the online platforms, so that a wide target audience could be reached and influenced. This approach has already been adopted in the beauty (Soat, 2014) and fashion (Weissman, 2014) industry, and the results have proved effective. In addition, marketers should choose the social media platforms that are most frequently used by their target customers as the marketing platforms, so that sufficient customer engagement and interaction can be ensured.

Secondly, destination marketers should pay close attention to the endorser–destination congruence when making endorser selection decisions. A good fit between the endorser and the destination can potentially lead to stronger visit intentions. In particular, the endorsement effectiveness is more profound when marketing tourism products with higher social or psychological risks. For example, a modern and vibrant city should be endorsed by a young and energetic person, while a historic and classic city needs a sophisticated and knowledgeable tourism ambassador. Moreover, destination marketers could also consider local-born endorsers, due to their natural relationship with the local destination.

Interestingly, the congruence between endorser–destination had three times the impact on visit intention than endorser–consumer congruence. This highlights the importance of the match-up hypothesis. Destination marketers should choose celebrity endorsers that align with their brand values. However, destinations can face a risk with endorsers when there is negative publicity or scandal involving the celebrity that has endorsed the product or brand. A well-known example is the association between Pepsi™ and Michael Jackson. Marketers, then, also need a contingency plan if the congruence between the product/brand and celebrity goes awry.

Thirdly, when selecting SMIs as endorsers, their established images should be aligned with target customers' ideal self-images, meaning that endorsers should possess the values and characteristics that target customers admire and tend to pursue. For instance, when targeting customers who value lifestyle and quality of experiences, marketers should choose the endorsers who express and share similar values.

Limitations and future research

The present study has some limitations. As noted above, Sirgy and Su (2000) argue that a more direct way of assessing congruity between self and endorser would alleviate some of the inherent problems with the discrepancy measurement method used in this study. This direct method takes a holistic and global approach to assessing self-image congruence, rather than the analytical way used in the traditional method. Sirgy et al. (1997) provide evidence that the new method has more predictive power with regard to various consumer behaviors and attitudes across six different studies. Future studies could implement this direct method.

The endorser–consumer congruence needs further examination. Although two SMIs were selected to ensure the variation of image perception, the limited characteristics of the chosen SMIs, such as gender, may potentially stop the results from being applied to a broader range of situations. Future research should consider employing SMIs from various fields and with different characteristics. For instance, both male and female SMIs should be included in the future, and their specialties could vary from arts to sports.

Furthermore, the current study employed just one dimension of self-congruity. The other three dimensions, namely actual self-congruity, social self-congruity, and ideal self-congruity, were not examined in the current study. According to Usakli and Baloglu (2011), social self-congruity has become more and more important in the tourism research field, since tourists'

destination decision-making behavior is heavily influenced by various social factors, apart from personal factors. Hence, further studies can assess social self-congruity in terms of endorsement effectiveness. Further studies could compare the individual or synergistic effect these different congruity measures may have on the decision-making process, depending on different situations.

The data were collected via a combination of convenience and snowball sampling method. Therefore, the current sample cannot represent the whole population of Chinese generation Y. Since younger consumers are more motivated to achieve their ideal-self and hold stronger beliefs that brands can contribute to their self-achievement (Boon & Lomore, 2001), the findings of the current study have limited generalizability. Future research should employ a larger sample size created with a random sampling method. Moreover, in terms of the current study, the data were collected in February and March 2017, which may potentially introduce seasonal bias of the destinations' images. Hence, it is suggested that the sample be surveyed throughout the whole year. Additionally, the current findings are specific to two destinations, Kyoto and Seoul, and future research should extend similar studies to other tourism destinations for more generalizable results.

Conclusions

In summary, the current study investigates the impact of endorser–consumer congruence on the endorsement effectiveness in the tourism context. This study uses SMIs rather than the traditional celebrities as endorsers to promote tourism destinations to the Chinese Gen Y, which provides insights into marketing trends in this digital era among a lucrative cohort. The congruence between SMIs' perceived images and consumers' ideal self-images is found to significantly positively impact visit intentions toward the endorsed destinations. Therefore, destination marketers should consider employing SMIs to promote tourism-related products and destinations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Advertisements

Poster 1

Papi for Kyoto



Poster 2

Papi for Seoul



Poster 3

Pony for Kyoto



Poster 4

Pony for Seoul



Appendix 2. Questionnaire

1. Please indicate your gender:

Male Female

2. Please indicate your age in years:

	Below 18	18-24	25-31	32-37	Above 37
Age	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. Please indicate the number of trips you made in the past one year:

1 ~ 3 4 ~ 6 7 ~ 9 Above 9 None

4. Please indicate your travel purpose:

Business Leisure Both Other, please specify _____

5. Please choose the social media platforms that you frequently use:

	WeChat	Weibo	Instagram	YouTube	Other, please specify:
Social media platforms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. Please read the following advertisement. (advertisement presented)

7. Please indicate your attitude toward the advertisement on each of the following dimensions by checking the appropriate space.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Bad
Favorable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Unfavorable
Like	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Dislike
Interesting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Boring
Pleasant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Unpleasant

8. Please indicate your attitude toward the destination on each of the following dimensions by checking the appropriate space.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Good	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Bad
Favorable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Unfavorable
Like	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Dislike
Interesting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Boring
Pleasant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Unpleasant

9. Please indicate your agreement with the following statement.

10. "Next time I go on a trip, I will visit the advertised destination."

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Extremely likely	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely unlikely

