

Determining How Image of Social Media Influencers Affect Korean Food Purchase Behavior in China: An Image Transfer Perspective

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Abstract

Existing studies on this topic have focused on the effect of online content quality on consumer attitudes and behavior, with very few illustrating the effect of influencer image on consumer attitudes and behavior. The purpose of this study intends to reveal how influencer image affect consumer behavior. We have developed an image transfer theory-based research model to reveal how influencers transfer their image to endorsed products to influence consumer behavior. The results show that influencer image positively affects satisfaction, which in turn affects the product's cognitive and affective images in the vlog. Moreover, it was found that a product's cognitive image and affective image influence consumer behavior intention. Furthermore, purchase experience exhibits significant differences in its path. Based on these results, the social media-related research theoretical implication will be offered, and managerial implications will be provided for foreign brand promotion strategies

Keywords: *influencer image, satisfaction, cognitive image, affective image, intention, purchase intention.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms are based on visual aesthetics and images, thus rendering them a suitable ecosystem for offering product information and promoting products [1]. Social media applications allow consumers to gather followers, connect with brands, and interact with other consumers [2]. The term 'influencer' refers to individuals who became famous through social media [3]. The meaning transfer model explains how celebrities add value to those brands they endorse and shows that celebrities' symbolic power positively enhances positive consumer attitudes and behavior [4]. Given the potential benefits of social media and influencers, this study will explore the effect of influencers in promoting foreign brands.

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The meaning and image transfer models have been widely used in the existing literature to illustrate the image transfer process from celebrities or influencers to consumers. In response to the proliferation of social media, many researchers have set out to illustrate the effect of celebrities on the brands they endorse. For instance, the meaning transfer and image transfer models have been widely used in destination management and luxury branding [5, 6]. However, very few studies have illustrated the effect of influencers on foreign brand promotion.

The influencer-related studies already carried out indicate that an influencer's attractiveness, congruence with the brand and credibility significantly affect consumer attitudes and purchase behavior [7]. Additionally, the influencer's image can be transferred to the brand they endorse, which then affects consumer behavior [6]. However, there is scant research exploring how celebrity endorsements influence pre-purchase consumer behavior [8]. To be precise, consumers develop cognitive, affective, and conative images of the brand, respectively; to date, no study has considered how each of these images relates to brand influencer endorsement and the transfer process.

A consumer's previous experience and prior knowledge have been shown to differently affect their attitude and behavior [9]. Where consumers have prior knowledge and experience with a brand, these impact the formation of cognitive and affective images. Yet, again, there is a lack of studies investigating how prior experience affects the influencer image transfer process of different consumers.

The present study intends to attend to the gaps in the existing literature. Specifically, a proposed model was developed by building upon the image transfer theory. This is done to illustrate how influencer image affects consumer viewing satisfaction. It will then examine the effect of satisfaction on cognitive image and affective image, respectively. This study then moves on to investigate the effect of cognitive image and affective image on consumer behavior intention. In addition, this research will reveal the differential effects pertaining to whether a consumer has prior experience with the product, the results of which will offer a more critical perspective to understand how image transfer influences the endorsed product's image. Finally, the study results will be interpreted to provide theoretical implications that can be employed to better understand the image transfer process and draw out the managerial implications for brand promotion strategies using foreigners.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: IMAGE TRANSFER THEORY

Image transfer theory was first articulated by McCracken (1989) [10]. Specifically, this theory posits that an individual's interpretation of a celebrity's public image could transfer from the celebrity to a product they endorse [10]. Previous studies have illustrated that brand or product images can be influenced or transferred when said brand or product is linked with a celebrity or influencer through an endorsement [11]. Therefore, image transfer can be viewed as an individual's perceived image of the celebrity or influencer which then transfers to a product they endorse.

Image transfer theory has been applied in several research areas, such as sports events, where it has been used to illustrate the effect of sports or events image transfer on destination cognitive images and destination affective images, respectively [5]. In other settings, image transfer theory has been applied to illustrate brand extension by drawing on reciprocal brand image transfer to produce new product associations and extend brand beliefs [12]. Image transfer has been incorporated into influencer research to investigate how influencer image exerts an impact on the images of the products they endorse [6]. Thus, this study will also deploy the image transfer theory to illustrate how the influencer image affects brand image, which in turn influences consumer behavior intentions.

3. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH MODEL

3.1 Influencer Image and Satisfaction

Given the proliferation of social media in the last decade, brands can utilize this channel to communicate with consumers and provide product information [13]. Alternatively, brands can collaborate with influencers to advertise their products on social media [6].

Based on previous studies, influencers can be defined as those individuals who are ‘popular’ or ‘famous’ on social media, both of which are typically determined by the number of followers an individual has [14]. The existing research indicates that a positive image has a significant impact on consumer satisfaction [15]. Therefore, it can be argued that where consumers have a positive view of influencers, this affects consumer view satisfaction. Moreover, previous cooking content research has determined that a content provider’s positive image impacts video viewing satisfaction [16]. Thus, the following hypothesis is articulated:

Hypothesis 1: Influencer image positive affect viewer’s satisfaction

3.2 Satisfaction and Cognitive Image, Affective Image

Previous studies have found that a positive influencer image can enhance consumers’ positive attitude and positive image toward the endorsed product [17]. In tourism media research, it has also been determined that satisfaction positively affects cognitive image and affective image [18]. On this basis, the following hypotheses are articulated:

H2: Satisfaction positive affect cognitive image

H3: Satisfaction positive affect affective image

3.3 Cognitive Image, Affective Image and Intention

Based on previous studies, cognitive and affective image influence consumer product quality evaluation, which in turn impacts behavior intention [19]. Elsewhere, sponsorship research has confirmed that cognitive and affective image are significantly linked to consumer intention [20]. Thus, the following hypotheses are articulated:

H4: Cognitive image positive affect intention

H5: Affective image positive affect intention

3.4 Purchase Experience Moderation Effect

Purchase experience refers to a consumer’s prior experience with the product. Helson (1964) [21] argued that a consumer’s response to a judgmental task is mediated by their past experience, context or background, and stimulus. Additionally, prior experience will strongly affect consumers’ future behavior [22]. Previous studies on consumer willingness observed a positive attitude and behavior when consumers have experience with the product [9]. In the online shopping research context, previous experience was significantly related to consumer attitudes and behaviors [23]. Thus, the following hypothesis is articulated

H5: Purchase experience differential affect image and behavior

Based on the previous studies, we developed research model through image transfer theory. As shown in Figure 1, we aim to investigate the effect of influencer image on satisfaction. Then we will analysis satisfaction influence on cognitive image and affective image, which then affect intention behavior. Lastly, we intent to illustrate difference following the previous purchase experience.

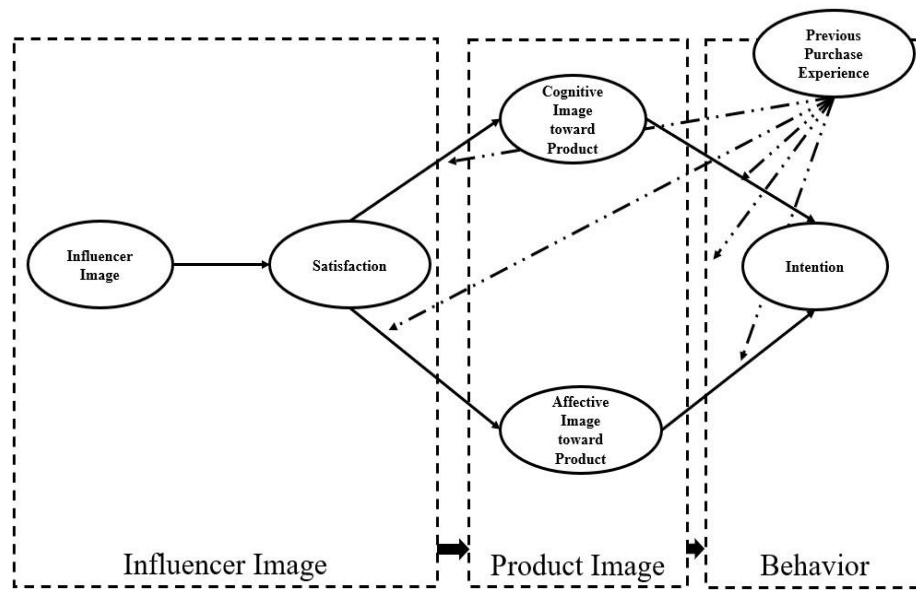


Figure 1. Research Model

4. METHOD

4.1 Measurement Development

The present study developed measurement items for influencer image, viewing satisfaction, cognitive image, affective image, and purchase intention based on the existing studies. Measurement items for influencer image and viewing satisfaction were developed on the basis of the participants' responses to social media influencers and their content. Four items were used to measure the cognitive image of a product recommended by an influencer. Meanwhile, three items were employed to measure the affective image of a product that features in a social media influencer's content and four items were used to measure consumer purchase intention. All the study variables were measured using multiple items on a seven-point Likert scale (disagree [1]/ agree [7]).

All of the items were first developed in English and then translated into Chinese by an English professor. After that, the Chinese version items were back-translated into English to confirm the accuracy and completeness of Chinese translations. Finally, a pre-study was conducted with 20 graduate students to confirm whether the meaning of the Chinese items could be properly understood.

4.2 Data Collection and Sample Characteristics

An online survey was distributed to Chinese consumers with experience watching Korean food product vlogs. The participants were given the address of a website and were able to access the questionnaire by clicking a special link. This survey was self-administered and distributed to a total of 329. Only those participants with experience watching Korean snack vlogs through Weibo were eligible to take part. A total of 306 responses were produced for data analysis.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Measurement Model

First, SPSS was used to conduct an explanatory factor analysis. The results showed the Cronbach alpha of

five factors; the reliability of the five factors was higher than 0.7, indicating the measurements achieved good internal consistency and reliability. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed using AMOS, the results of which are set out in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the results demonstrated that there is a satisfactory level of goodness-of-fit statistics in the measurement model ($X^2 = 384.976$, $DF = 179$, $p = .000$, $GFI = .883$, $NFI = .899$, $IFI = .944$, $CFI = .943$, $RMSEA = .064$) and the measurement items were all significantly loaded to their associated factors. Next, the values for composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated to demonstrate internal consistency and convergent validity. As can be seen in Table 1, all the CR values are above the recommended 0.7 threshold [24], ranging from 0.700 to 0.853. Moreover, besides influencer image and affective image, all the AVE values exceeded the suggested cutoff value, 0.5, which supports a finding of high convergent validity [24]. However, some studies have argued that 0.4 is also an acceptable value to illustrate the convergent validity [25]. Finally, the discriminant validity of these constructs was probed. It was found that the diagonal was higher than the correlation between variables, indicating discriminant validity.

Table 1. Reliability, Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity

	II	VS	CI	AI	PI
II	1(.649)				
VS	.526	1(.769)			
CI	.443	.712	1(.731)		
AI	.438	.550	.676	1(.662)	
PI	.469	.528	.563	.602	1(.721)
Cronbach's Alpha	.848	.897	.900	.778	.824
CR	.783	.853	.851	.700	.811
AVE	.421	.591	.535	.438	.520

$X^2 = 384.976$, $DF = 179$, $p = .000$, $GFI = .883$, $NFI = .899$, $IFI = .944$, $CFI = .943$, $RMSEA = .064$

Influencer Image (II); Satisfaction (VS); Cognitive Image (CI); Affective Image (AI); Intention (PI)

5.2 Structural Model

A structural model was utilized to test the proposed hypotheses. The model comprises an acceptable level of the goodness-of-fit statistics ($X^2 = 436.660$, $DF = 183$, $p = .000$, $GFI = .869$, $NFI = .886$, $IFI = .930$, $CFI = .930$, $RMSEA = .070$). The results are shown in Table 2. As expected, influencer image significantly and positively influenced consumer viewing satisfaction ($\beta = 0.55$, $p < 0.05$), with viewing satisfaction having a significant positive influence on the cognitive image and affective image of the products shown in vlogs ($\beta = 0.737$, $p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.595$, $p < 0.05$). These results support H1, H2, and H3. Moreover, the impact of cognitive image and affective image on the products in vlogs on purchase intention was also supported ($\beta = 0.211$, $p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.360$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, H4 and H5 were supported. Next, the proposed impact of viewing satisfaction on purchase intention was tested.

Table 2. Path Analysis

Path	Estimate	S. E	C. R	P
II → VS	.550	.087	7.660	***
VS → CI	.737	.062	12.258	***
VS → AI	.595	.066	8.066	***
CI → PI	.211	.089	2.418	***
AI → PI	.360	.097	4.363	***

5.3 Mediation Analysis

In order to examine the mediation effect between influence image and behavior intention, bootstrapping testing was carried out. The results proved that satisfaction and affective image ($\beta = 0.367$, $p < 0.05$) play

significant mediating roles between influencer image and consumer behavior intention.

5.4 Moderation Analysis

Grouping was carried out before progressing to the moderation analysis. The respondents were divided into two groups: those with Korean product purchase experience and those without. The results revealed a significant difference between the experience and non-experience groups. As Figure 2 shows, those consumers with experience with Korean products show more positive image and behavior intention than consumers who did not have any experience with Korean products.

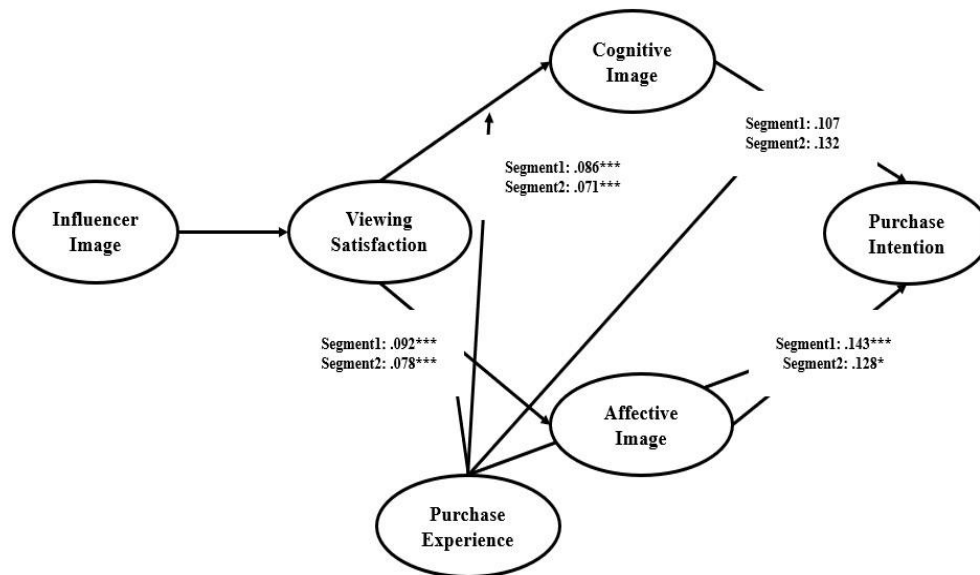


Figure 2. Results of Moderation Effect

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Discussion

With the widespread usage of social media, many brands are now using social media influencers to promote their products. Notably, it is difficult for foreign products to achieve success through mass media; accordingly, social media is an effective means to promote such products. However, although previous studies focused on the quality of social media content, few studies have illustrated the effect of influencer-endorsed images on consumer behavior or explored the differential impact of whether a consumer has experience with foreign products. To address the shortcomings of these studies, the present research sought to illustrate how influencers transfer their image to the endorsed product. The results of this study intend to offer a strategy for foreign brand promotion.

This study collected data through an online survey form and only used data from those who have experience viewing Korean snack vlogs. The results found that the influencer's image significantly influenced viewing satisfaction, which is in line with the findings of previous studies. Satisfaction was found to be significantly related to cognitive image and affective image, which again were consistent with the previous studies. Meanwhile, cognitive image and affective image were shown to positively influence consumer behavior. This study also revealed that influencer image indirectly influenced behavior intention through satisfaction and affective image. Finally, it was observed that the purchase experience has a significantly different impact on

the path. The results have theoretical implications for further social media research and managerial implications for brand management.

6.2 Conclusion

Social media has become one of the most effective means of promoting new products. This study revealed that influencer image could assist brand to formation positive cognitive and affective brand image, which then influence consumer behavior. The current study has theoretical and practical implications for social media foreign brand management. Previous studies have investigated the effect of online content on consumer satisfaction and purchase intention. This study built on the previous studies by extending the image transfer theory. Furthermore, it illustrated how influencer image enhances satisfaction and detailed the effect of cognitive image and affective image on consumer behavior. Based on the results, several practical implications were identified, chief amongst which is that influencer image can positively transfer to the endorsed product and enhance consumer positive behavior. Compared to the cognitive image, influencer image is more significantly influenced than affective image. Thus, foreign brands can use powerful influencers to promote their products. This study also has limitations, this study only considered influencer image effect, it could not consider any media factors, such as media richness, which could enhance viewing satisfaction. Meanwhile this study did not consider consumer e-WOM behavior.

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