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Consumer perceptions of influencer gifting

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Abstract

Many social media influencers promote products they receive from brands, which send those items without any explicit obligations but with the objective of being endorsed voluntarily. With increasing frequency, brands send their products together with additional gifts that influencers can, but do not have to, display either. For example, a branded perfume might be complemented by additional gifts of flowers, champagne, and macarons. Through such elaborate influencer gifting, brands hope to elicit more favorable reactions from both influencers and consumers. However, elaborate influencer gifting also raises concerns about consumer perceptions. With four experiments, this research shows that influencer gifting is superior to paid influencer marketing in terms of influencer trustworthiness and brand attitude outcomes, which can be explained by the increased effort signaled in the business relationship between the brand and the influencer. However, elaborate gifting also can prompt stronger perceptions of a persuasive attempt by the brand, which can lead to decreased trust in influencers who display the elaborate gifts voluntarily. The negative effect linked to perceptions of a persuasive attempt can be mitigated if the elaborate gift is justified by a brand occasion, such as the brand's anniversary.

KEYWORDS

business gifts, influencer marketing, persuasion knowledge, relationship investment

1 | INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing is an increasingly well-established part of the marketing mix (e.g., Haenlein et al., 2020; Karagür et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2022; Mardon et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021). It is likely to exceed \$24 billion in value in 2024, and according to a recent survey, more than 80% of marketers intend to invest in influencer marketing, and 60% report that they plan to increase their influencer marketing spend in 2024 (Geyser, 2024). This trend parallels steady growth in user numbers with 5.6% growth in 2023 to five billion users in 2024 with an average daily time spent using social media of 2:23 h (Datareportal, 2024). This resonates with notable shifts in leisure time allocations to favor more online activities over traditional television

viewing (McKay, 2023). Social media in particular offers consequential platforms for brand promotion, and influencer-mediated communication can effectively disseminate brand narratives. But along with increasing interest in influencers, brands face greater competition for social media influencers, especially those who strategically limit the number of brand partnerships they accept to maintain their authenticity and trustworthiness (Karagür et al., 2022). In such a competitive setting, brands need to invest resources to build strong influencer relationships (Audrezet et al., 2020).

One option is *influencer gifting*, a strategy by which brands send free products or services to influencers, without any contractual obligations for the influencers to create content but in an effort to make the brand top of mind, signal appreciation, and build a basis for

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future cooperation with that influencer (Magrath, 2019). The free products likely signify a sense of appreciation for the importance of the influencers to the brand, and in turn, influencers might proudly, voluntarily present them on their social media feeds, as evidence of their relevance and status (Vrontis et al., 2021). In addition, influencers might feel pressured to display the gifts, out of fear that they will not receive more gifts in the future if they fail to do so. Public relations departments have long used similar tactics, such as sending gifts to journalists working for traditional media outlets. Yet in social media settings, influencer gifting is different, in that it tends to be visible to regular consumers, because influencers showcase the gifts they receive to their followers.

To ensure that popular influencers—who likely receive a glut of free products and services from different companies—acknowledge their gifts, companies might arrange them nicely and include complementary, usually small additional gifts (i.e., goodies). Reflecting the general tendency of gift-givers to offer better gifts if they expect competition (Givi et al., 2021), influencer gifts also have grown increasingly elaborate, featuring special packaging or extensive, exquisite gifts, such as flowers or chocolates. Even if influencers have the right to decide whether to display free gifts, with or without the additional gifts, as they are not bound by any contractual agreements, the elaborate offerings likely help a brand to stand out from its competition and improve its business relationship with the influencer, by signaling profound appreciation (Camerer, 1988; Flynn & Adams, 2009). Such benefits in turn might increase the chances that influencers feature the brand in their postings, even if they also receive gifts from many other brands (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix A for some real-world examples from Instagram).

Yet the visibility and elaborateness of such additional gifts have raised some concerns about public perception. Victoria Magrath (2019), a prominent U.K. influencer, dedicated two separate blog posts to the issue, acknowledging, “I have noticed a number of the comments all over the Internet about certain brands and their continuous send-outs, and the way it's negatively affecting the way consumers feel about their brand.” If brand–influencer relationships built through gifting undermine either actor's relationships with its consumers or followers, and particularly trust in the influencers' authenticity and independence, the implications would be severe. Therefore, it is critical to address consumers' perceptions of influencer gifting practices, in terms of both the trust they express toward the influencer and their attitudes toward the brand. Furthermore, influencers operate in two-sided markets, in which their brand partners hope to see gifts displayed, but followers might stop trusting influencers as independent sources of information if they appear deeply influenced by the brands whose additional gifts they display on their pages.

In prior, fragmented influencer marketing research, most studies focus on paid endorsements (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Leung et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021), general advertising disclosures (Evans et al., 2017; Karagür et al., 2022), or influencers' strategies to maintain their authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020), rather than influencer gifting. Kozinets et al. (2010) investigate a seeding

campaign that provided gifts of mobile phones to prominent bloggers, 84% of whom then endorsed the product voluntarily, which indicates the relevance and visibility of influencer gifting. But rather than studying influencers' tactics to endorse free products, we take consumers' perspective and ask: How does influencer gifting affect consumers' trust in influencers, and is the effect contingent on the gift type or contextual factors (e.g., gift occasion)?

In four experiments, we manipulate Instagram stories and obtain initial evidence that influencer gifting affects consumers' trust in influencers. By integrating attribution theory and an economic and social exchange perspective, we predict that consumers perceive influencer gifting as a persuasive attempt by the brand, which negatively influences their attitudes toward the brand but also their trust in the influencer. If influencer gifts are provided in the context of a brand-related occasion, these negative effects can be mitigated. In the next section, we define the relatively new phenomenon of influencer gifting and distinguish it from similar concepts. We then develop theory-based hypotheses that we test empirically.

2 | INFLUENCER GIFTING AND RELATED CONCEPTS

Although the term “influencer gifting” is frequently used in practice (Stancliffe, 2024; Young Entrepreneur Council, 2019), it has not been fully established or defined in marketing research, which only recently started to develop definitions of influencer-related strategies (Leung et al., 2022). We define *influencer gifting* as a strategy in which brands send free products or services to influencers without imposing any obligation to endorse the brand but rather with the primary goal of building and maintaining relationships that potentially initiate a voluntary endorsement. Accordingly, influencer gifting fits with the general definition of a *gift* as “a good or service voluntarily provided to another person or group” (Belk & Coon, 1993, p. 394), which reflects the absence of contractual obligations and the focus on products and services. Influencer gifts are similar to corporate gifts, which are “benefits that a firm confers voluntarily on its customers in its attempt to communicate appreciation and gratitude for their past purchases” (Marchand et al., 2017, p. 105), as well as to business gifts, which have several purposes, including “showing gratitude for past business, influencing anticipated buying behaviors, and establishing stronger buyer–vendor relationships” (Dorsch & Kelley, 1994, p. 316), such that givers might hope to encourage reciprocation but mainly are trying to establish social bonds (Sherry, Jr., 1983). In an influencer gifting context, the brand is the gift-giver, and the influencer is the gift recipient.

Similar to corporate or business gifts, which can target consumers (Bodur & Grohmann, 2005; Marchand et al., 2017) or other businesses (e.g., purchasing executives as recipients; Dorsch & Kelley, 1994), influencer gifts are designed to build relationships, with influencers in this case. But unlike conventional corporate or business gifting contexts, the transaction associated with influencer gifting can be visible to the other key actor in this two-sided market:

followers. This outcome aligns with the brand's marketing objective, in that the brand's name appears on the influencer's page. Due to this distinction from other gift settings, we explicitly account for the impressions of followers, as a critical third party to the gift exchange, who observe gift transactions in influencers' posts.

Influencer gifting also shares some similarities with other marketing strategies (Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix B). Yet three key differences motivate our targeted, explicit investigation of influencer gifting as a unique strategy. First, unlike paid influencer marketing and sponsorships, influencer gifting involves no contractual obligations or requirements to promote the brand; it seeks non-monetary, voluntary reciprocity (and perhaps influencers' hope to receive more gifts in the future or evoke more admiration from followers by displaying the gifts prominently). The gift provides influencers with some content, but the diffusion of this content depends on the influencers' choice, not the brand's mandate (Leung et al., 2022). Control over the content and its diffusion also defines the extent to which influencers are subject to different transparency regulations.¹ Second, influencer gifting focuses exclusively on the provision of material goods and services, whereas paid influencer marketing, sponsorships, and seeding might include products and services, but they also involve money or information (e.g., viral marketing). Third, other marketing strategies only target promotional outcomes; influencer gifting primarily functions as a relationship-building tool. According to surveys of marketers, 60% report that less than half of the influencers that receive their brand gifts actually display them, but they plan to continue to send products to them (Follett, 2023). Thus, an influencer gifting strategy might succeed even if the influencer never mentions the gift, assuming that it leads to further collaborations. These distinctions also reflect the unique nature of the two-sided market, in which influencers currently have the upper hand over brands, such that the brands compete actively to appeal to effective influencers by providing them with carefully curated or even customized gifts. In addition, influencers have several reasons to display such gifts, which can increase the chances that they receive more gifts in the future from the brand or allow them to demonstrate or "brag" about their popularity to followers. That is, displays might be in influencers' best interest in some sense, but considering the intense competition for influencers, the best influencers likely receive more gifts than they can or are willing to display.

¹Legal mandates are highly relevant in this context. The legal terminology is very specific, so we offer some excerpts here to establish clear insights. According to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, when influencers "endorse a product through social media, your endorsement message should make it obvious when you have a relationship ('material connection') with the brand ... [such as] a personal, family, or employment relationship or a financial relationship—such as the brand paying you or giving you free or discounted products or services." The ASA similarly mandates: "It doesn't matter if there was no obligation to post about free items/services received, it still counts as 'payment' and needs to be disclosed." That is, influencers must clearly indicate any free products or services they receive if they feature those items in their social media posts. Legal requirements do not specify unique demands for additional gifts, nor do influencers have to disclose any free gifts they receive if they do not display them. But once they choose to display gifts, even in the absence of any contractual obligations, they must disclose their receipt of the product, which constitutes a form of payment.

3 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Using the conceptual framework in Figure 1, we begin at the bottom to compare influencer gifting with paid influencer marketing in terms of perceived relationship investments, influencer trustworthiness, and brand attitude.

3.1 | Influencer gifting versus paid influencer marketing

Gift research offers two explanatory models, based on economic or social exchange approaches. A gift might have economic value and foster reciprocal exchanges, but it also holds symbolic and social value that can initiate or nurture relationships (Belk & Coon, 1993). From a social exchange perspective, gift-giving as a symbolic ritual serves to signal appreciation of the recipient and commitment to a (future) relationship (Camerer, 1988; Flynn & Adams, 2009). Thus, influencer gifting represents a brand's investment in its relationship with the influencer, and consumers might perceive the brand as dedicated to fostering this relationship (De Wulf et al., 2001). Consumers, having practical experience in gift exchange themselves, even if unfamiliar with the technical terms, tend to reward relationship investments in contrast to direct payments in cash, especially if they require more time and effort (Morales, 2005; Robben & Verhallen, 1994). Thus, influencer gifting might enhance consumers' attitudes toward the brand, especially if the gift is elaborate. Conversely, gifts without special embellishments or goodies could imply an unwillingness to invest substantially in the relationship (Larsen & Watson, 2001; Rixom et al., 2020).

Perceptions of relationship investments also should be higher for gifts than for paid endorsements due to the absence of contractual obligations. Moreover, thoughtfully curated gifts demand more mental effort than monetary transactions, which should reflect positively on the perception of the gift-giver (the brand). Influencers are not obliged to feature the gift in their posts, so any such display should get attributed to their autonomous decision, implying a voluntary, authentic endorsement. Such signals of authenticity should strengthen followers' trust in the influencer, which is a critical metric for influencers (along with their reach). Influencers need to be perceived as trustworthy by followers, because trust constitutes a unique proposition for them, relative to traditional advertising. When they display or recommend a product, followers should believe and trust they personally like this product; otherwise, consumers would have little motive to follow them. With regard to this central dependent variable, we predict:

H1: Influencer gifting, compared with paid influencer marketing, increases (a) perceived relationship investment, (b) influencer trustworthiness, and (c) brand attitude.

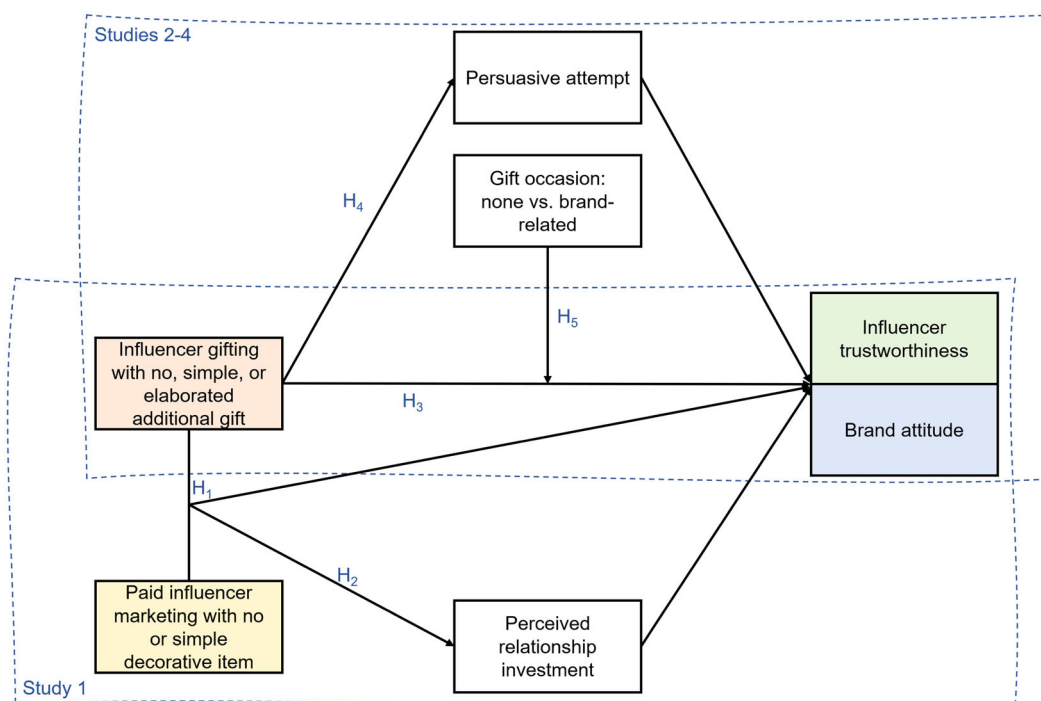


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework.

H2: Consumers perceive influencer gifting, compared with paid influencer marketing, as a stronger relationship investment by the brand in the influencer, which increases (a) influencer trustworthiness and (b) brand attitude.

3.2 | Influencer gifting as a persuasive attempt

Attribution theory predicts that consumers think about the intentions behind observed behaviors, such as persuasive attempts, and attribute them to possible causes (Heider, 1958), such as the brand's motives for providing a gift to an influencer. Most consumers have experience as gift-givers and recipients (Flynn & Adams, 2009), so they likely can make such attributions, even as observers of the gift exchange. As Friestad and Wright (1994, p. 2) propose, people possess persuasion knowledge, which they apply to interpret brand activities and cope with agents' "strategic behavior in presenting information designed to influence someone's beliefs, attitudes, decisions, or actions." Such strategic behavior, including persuasive attempts, can manifest as gifts, because in economic exchange models, gifts are not altruistic but instead function to prompt reciprocation (Belk & Coon, 1993; Larsen & Watson, 2001). In line with reciprocity norms (Gouldner, 1960) and the theory of indebtedness (Greenberg, 1980), gifts can lead recipients to perceive a sense of obligation to the giver (Beltramini, 1992; Marchand et al., 2017). Thus, influencer gifts may represent strategic persuasive attempts by brands to evoke feelings of gratitude and indebtedness among influencers, which could lead them to endorse the brand in return. For consumers, as observers to

the gift exchange, endorsements of the brand by the influencer might look like evidence of the influencer's sense of indebtedness, rather than genuine product liking. In this case, influencer gifting might diminish consumers' attitudes toward the influencer, who appears less authentic. Persuasion knowledge also leads to negative attitudinal outcomes toward the persuasion agent (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000), such that influencer gifting might diminish consumers' attitudes toward the brand.

In addition, consumers who recognize a persuasive attempt form beliefs about the effectiveness, strength, and appropriateness of that attempt (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In gift-giving scenarios, the gift presentation is a central determinant of recipients' liking of the gift (Rixom et al., 2020). If consumers observe elaborate additional gifts granted to influencers, they likely perceive a stronger persuasive attempt, compared with simple additional gifts, because they anticipate that influencers feel more obliged to return the considerably higher value provided, where the focus seems to be no longer on the sole introduction of a product but parallelly an extremely favorable presentation. Since the gifts come without a contractual obligation to present them on social media, the additional gifts increase the value of the gifts, the indebtedness, and thus also the pressure on the influencer to show the products triggered by reciprocity (Dorsch & Kelley, 1994). This means that overly generous additional gifts could even be perceived by consumers as an attempt by the brand (company) to manipulate the influencer. Overly generous additional gifts could even be perceived by consumers as attempts at bribery. Therefore, we predict a direct effect of gift elaborateness on influencer trustworthiness (H_3) and an indirect effect, mediated by perceived persuasion attempts (H_4):

H3: Elaborate, compared with simple, gifts decrease influencer trustworthiness.

H4a: Consumers perceive additional gifts as a persuasion attempt.

H4b: Consumers perceive elaborate, compared with simple, gifts more strongly as a persuasion attempt by the brand toward the influencer, which decreases influencer trustworthiness.

For brand attitudes though, we do not expect an overall negative effect mediated by perceptions of persuasion attempts. Rather, the negative effect of a persuasion attempt could balance out the rather positive effect of the consumers' perceptions of the brand's investment in its relationship with the influencer.

3.3 | Moderating effect of gift occasion

Not all aspects of gift-giving are inherent to the act itself. Recipients compare gifts they receive against some internal expectations, which depend on contextual factors (Larsen & Watson, 2001; Rixom et al., 2020; Ruth et al., 1999). Depending on these expectations, the extent of the gift required to signal an effort by the brand varies (Givi & Galak, 2022). That is, consumers' perceptions of elaborate versus simple gifts as relationship investments likely are contingent on contextual factors, such as the gift-giving occasions.

Depending on the occasion, expectations of an appropriate gift differ, which again makes it easier or harder for the gift to induce the desired outcome (Belk & Coon, 1993; Larsen & Watson, 2001). If an influencer receives a gift without a specific occasion, observant consumers might develop attributions based on both economic and social value. However, during a brand-specific occasion, consumers might perceive gift-giving as more appropriate, leading to less negative attitudes toward the influencer. We predict:

H5: The effect of elaborate, compared with simple, gifts on influencer trustworthiness is mitigated by a reasonable brand-related gift occasion.

Again, we expect no difference in brand attitudes because consumers likely accept typical advertising expenditures when a brand advertises its products, with or without an occasion.

We next present the results of four empirical studies that we used to test our hypotheses.

4 | STUDY OVERVIEW

For the four main experimental studies, as well as several supplemental studies, we recruited participants from the Clickworker crowdsourcing platform, which is similar to Amazon's MTurk and Prolific and has served as a reliable data source in previous research

(e.g., Kähr et al., 2016; Karagür et al., 2022; Nazifi et al., 2021). Participants received 0.60–1.50 €, depending on the length of the study. We built attention tests into all experiments and only included participants who answered them correctly (Chandler et al., 2019). We created realistic-looking Instagram stories in which a fictitious influencer named Marie Voss endorses a product by the fictitious beauty brand Delani. Instagram is currently one of the most widely used platforms for influencer marketing (Geyser, 2024; Haenlein et al., 2020). The endorsed product was perfume. The beauty industry offers a relevant experimental setting, due to the preponderance of influencer gifting in practice in this industry (Magrath, 2019). We consulted with a professional influencer to ensure the realism and authenticity of the Instagram stories.

5 | STUDY 1: DIRECT EFFECT OF PAID PROMOTION VERSUS GIFTS

In Study 1, we assessed whether additional gifts generally affect consumers by comparing our additional gift conditions (simple and elaborate) against a no additional gift condition, as well as two paid influencer marketing conditions (no decorative item and simple decorative item). That is, we compare the effect of influencer gifting and additional gifts on influencer trustworthiness, brand attitudes, and perceived relationship investments, as testing of our first two hypotheses. This preliminary study also establishes a basis for Studies 2–4, in which we document the relevant impact of additional gifts.

5.1 | Method

We employed a 5 condition (paid influencer marketing with no or a simple decorative item, influencer gifting with no, a simple, or an elaborate additional gift) between-subjects design. In five realistic-looking Instagram stories, the fictitious influencer Marie Voss endorses a product by the fictitious beauty brand Delani.

In a pretest, 162 participants confirmed that the fictitious influencer and brand were unfamiliar and that the different scenarios seemed comparable in esthetic appeal, according to a three-item scale adapted from Homburg et al. (2015). More than 96% of them indicated they had never heard of Delani or Marie Voss, and pairwise comparisons indicated no significant mean differences in the esthetic appeal of the different stories. According to a binomial test, all results differed significantly from guessing ($p < 0.001$), and 81.46% of participants correctly reported which scenario they saw (i.e., gift granted to the influencer, whether she showed it voluntarily or was paid, and whether additional gifts were involved). Thus, the manipulations were successful.

The Instagram stories feature similar layouts, with the following introduction: "Please imagine that you follow the influencer Marie Voss on Instagram. You see a story in which Marie displays a perfume from the brand Delani." In the paid influencer marketing conditions, the participants read that Delani transferred money to Marie to

prompt the product placement in the story, such that Marie was contractually obliged to display the product. In the influencer gifting conditions, participants read that Delani sent Marie the perfume as a PR gift, embellished with additional gifts, depending on the condition. It states that Marie thus was not obliged to show the product in her stories and did not receive any money from the brand. In the top right quadrant of the story in every condition, text read, “[orange heart emoji] Thank you @delani_cosmetics,” followed by the designation of either “(advertisement, paid partnership)” for the paid influencer marketing condition or “(advertisement, PR gift)” for the influencer gifting condition. Otherwise, the elements of the Instagram story were the same.

In the no additional gift [no decorative item] condition, the perfume was presented without any embellishing elements on a plain white table in front of a white wall. In the simple additional gift [simple decorative item] condition, the perfume was shown in front of a floral arrangement, and in the elaborate additional gift condition, the perfume appeared together with champagne, sweets, and special embellishments (Figure 2). We did not include a paid influencer marketing condition with elaborate decorative items, a scenario that is uncommon in practice (presumably there are contractual reasons if the additional gifts become too extensive).

For the main study, participants were randomly assigned to one of the five conditions and had to review the scenario for at least 20 s before they could continue with the questionnaire, to ensure they paid sufficient attention to the manipulations. We initially recruited 700 participants but excluded 26 people who failed an attention check which asked them to select “I do not agree at all,” obtaining a sample of 674 participants (42.88% women, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.19$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.81$).

We first measured the three dependent variables: perceived relationship investments ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.82$), influencer trustworthiness ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.87$), and brand attitude ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.80$), along with the participants' social media usage as a control variable ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.87$), on 5-point scales (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix C for detailed measures). We included age and gender as control variables too. The Cronbach's alphas, greater than 0.77, indicated adequate reliability and internal consistency for the constructs. Therefore, we took the mean over all items.

To test the manipulation between paid influencer marketing and influencer gifting, we asked participants: “Did the perfume brand pay the influencer money to feature the perfume in a story?” The conditions were perceived correctly in 97.4% (paid) and 93.1% (gifting) of cases, with significant chi-square values ($\chi^2(df) = 539.732(1)$, $p < 0.001$).

5.2 | Results

A MANCOVA confirms that the three dependent variables differ substantially by gift type (Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$). We then

performed three analyses of covariance (ANCOVA), separately for perceived relationship investments, influencer trustworthiness, and brand attitude, while controlling for age, gender, and social media usage. Figure 3 displays the mean values for the measured variables across the five experimental conditions.

For perceived relationship investments, we find a significant main effect of gift/decoration type ($F(4, 666) = 8.70$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.050$). The age ($p = 0.012$) and social media usage ($p < 0.001$) covariates exerted significant effects on perceived relationship investment, but gender did not. In line with H1a, additional gifts (elaborate gift [EG]: $M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.89$, $n = 135$; simple gift [SG]: $M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.78$, $n = 134$) resulted in significantly higher perceived relationship investments (all comparisons $p \leq 0.001$) than the paid influencer marketing conditions (simple decoration [SD]: $M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.75$, $n = 134$; no decoration [ND]: $M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.78$, $n = 134$). In the no additional gift condition (no gift [NG]: $M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.87$, $n = 137$), we uncover no significant difference in perceived relationship investments relative to either paid influencer marketing condition ($p = 0.068$ for ND; $p = 0.050$ for SD). Except for the no additional gift group, these results confirm H1a.

For influencer trustworthiness, the analysis also indicates a significant main effect of gift type ($F(4, 666) = 16.08$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.088$). Social media usage ($p < 0.001$) exerted a significant effect on influencer trustworthiness, whereas age and gender did not. All gift conditions (EG: $M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.88$, $n = 135$; SG: $M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.82$, $n = 134$; NG: $M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.80$, $n = 137$) prompted significantly better perceptions of influencer trustworthiness (all comparisons $p \leq 0.014$) than any paid influencer marketing conditions (SD: $M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.84$, $n = 134$; ND: $M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.84$, $n = 134$), in support of H1b. Influencer trustworthiness was highest for simple gifts.

Finally, we identified a significant main effect of gift type for brand attitude ($F(4, 666) = 4.63$, $p = 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.027$). Again, social media usage ($p < 0.001$) exerted a significant effect on brand attitude, but age and gender did not. The gift conditions (EG: $M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.79$, $n = 135$; SG: $M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.75$, $n = 134$; NG: $M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.74$, $n = 137$) also evoked significantly better brand attitudes (all comparisons $p \leq 0.046$) than the paid influencer marketing conditions (SD: $M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.83$, $n = 134$; ND: $M = 2.74$, $SD = 0.87$, $n = 134$), in support of H1c. An LSD analysis of the planned contrasts between the elaborate and simple gift groups shows a significant difference only for influencer trustworthiness ($p = 0.007$, see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix D).

We next applied mediation analyses (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix E), which relied on Hayes's (2022) PROCESS macro (version 4.2; model 4; 10,000 bootstrap samples), with perceived relationship investment as the mediator and influencer trustworthiness and brand attitude as the dependent variables. They reveal that gifts correlate positively with perceived relationship investment ($B = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$) as well as with influencer trust ($B = 0.44$, $p < 0.05$) and brand attitude ($B = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, the mediator perceived relationship



FIGURE 2 Experimental Instagram stories (screenshots). The German text on the screenshots reads for paid influencer marketing: "[orange heart emoji] @delani_cosmetics (advertisement, paid partnership)" and for influencer gifting: "[orange heart emoji] Thank you @delani_cosmetics (advertisement, PR gift)."

investment demonstrated significant positive correlation with influencer trust ($B = 0.10$, $p = 0.016$) and particularly brand attitude ($B = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$), resulting in a significant indirect effects of gifts, through perceived relationship investment, on influencer trustworthiness ($B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, 95% confidence interval [CI]

[0.002, 0.067]) on brand attitude ($B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.02$, CI [0.047, 0.132]) signifying that perceived relationship investment partially mediated the relationship between gifts and brand attitude in support of H2a and H2b (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix F for details).

FIGURE 3 Mean comparison perceptions, Study 1. The error bars signal the standard errors above and below the mean values.



5.3 | Discussion

This first study confirms a significant difference evoked by additional gifts, relative to paid influencer marketing, when it comes to perceived relationship investments, influencer trustworthiness, and brand attitudes. Consumers recognize the considerable effort associated with additional gifts and interpret them as signals of brands' valuation of the influencer. The insignificant difference between the no additional gift condition and both paid influencer marketing versions reflects this point as well: Consumers notice that no additional effort was made to curate a gift arrangement and do not perceive any noteworthy investment in the relationship. Gifts in general lead to better brand attitudes and higher trust in the influencer.

6 | STUDY 2: DIRECT EFFECTS OF SIMPLE VERSUS ELABORATE GIFTS

Having established the general positive effect of influencer gifting on influencer trustworthiness and brand attitude, as well as perceived relationship investments, compared with paid influencer marketing, we explore this positive effect further in Study 2 by testing varying scopes of additional gifts. In particular, we examine the direct effects of simple versus elaborate additional gifts, on influencer trustworthiness and brand attitude and thereby test H3.

6.1 | Method

Study 2 features a 2 (gift type: simple vs. elaborate) between-subjects design, with procedures similar to those in Study 1, except that we

include only the two key stimuli that display additional gifts. We measured influencer trustworthiness and brand attitude and controlled for age and social media usage. Again, participants viewed an Instagram story and received instructions to imagine seeing the Instagram story of fictional influencer Marie Voss featuring a perfume of the luxury brand Delani. In addition to the simple additional gift, the elaborate additional gift depiction shows the perfume together with champagne, sweets, and special embellishments (Figure 2). The text stressed that the additional gifts came with the perfume, without any monetary compensation nor obligation to display the gifts. Participants were randomly assigned to the two conditions. After excluding four participants who failed the attention check, we retained a sample of 136 female participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.02$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.92$).²

6.2 | Results

We display the mean values for the influencer trust and brand attitude in Figure 4. The first ANCOVA confirms a significant main effect of gift type on influencer trustworthiness ($F(1, 132) = 4.16$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$); participants in the elaborate gift condition ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 0.86$, $n = 67$) perceived lower influencer trustworthiness than those in the simple gift condition ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.90$, $n = 69$), in support of H3. The second ANCOVA reveals no significant main effect of gift type on brand attitude ($F(1, 132) = 2.18$, $p < 0.15$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$; EG: $M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.89$, $n = 67$; SG: $M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.81$, $n = 69$; see Figure 4). The covariates

²We recruited only female participants for Study 2, to reduce heterogeneity and achieve a better fit with the female influencer and female target group for the studied product.

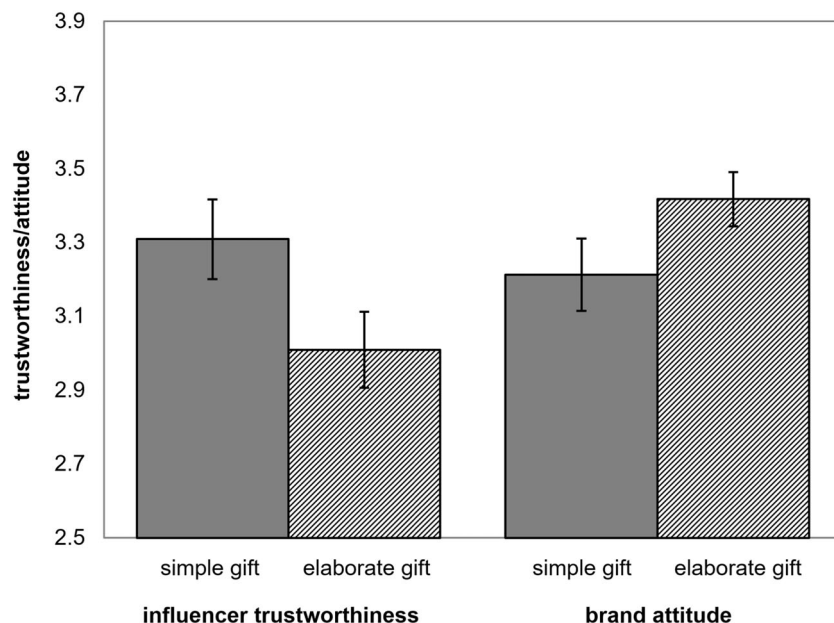


FIGURE 4 Mean comparison perceptions of influencer gifting, Study 2.

(social media usage and age) had no significant effect on the dependent variables in either ANCOVA.

6.3 | Discussion

Study 2 provides evidence of distinctive effects of elaborate gifts in influencer marketing: They decrease consumers' trust in the influencer, but brand attitudes are not harmed.

7 | STUDY 3: MEDIATING EFFECT OF PERSUASIVE ATTEMPTS

To investigate the identified difference in influencer trustworthiness expressed for simple versus elaborate gifts as well as the absence of any difference for brand attitude, we explore the potential mediating influence of a perceived persuasive attempt. Thus, Study 3 serves to test H4a and H4b.

7.1 | Method

As in Study 2, we use a 2 (gift type: simple vs. elaborate) between-subjects factorial design, but we also include persuasive attempt as a mediator (Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix C). Similar to Study 2, participants were shown an Instagram story and the instruction to imagine seeing the Instagram story of fictional influencer Marie Voss featuring a perfume of the luxury brand Delani. In addition to the Study 2 measures, we gauged perceptions of a persuasive attempt ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.97$), in line with previous research (Bodur & Grohmann, 2005). We recruited 125 participants (51.20% women, $M_{age} = 26.37$ years, $SD_{age} = 5.02$).

7.2 | Results

First, we performed an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the effects of gift type (simple, elaborate) on perceptions of a persuasive attempt. The main effect of gift type on persuasive attempt was significant ($F(1, 123) = 4.11$, $p = 0.045$, $\eta^2 = 0.032$), confirming H4a such that perceptions of a persuasive attempt were significantly higher for elaborate ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.02$, $n = 65$) compared with simple gifts ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.87$, $n = 60$, see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix G).

The results of the mediation analyses, which relied on Hayes's (2022) PROCESS macro (version 4.2; model 4; 10,000 bootstrap samples), appear in Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix H. The first mediation model, with persuasive attempt as the mediator and influencer trustworthiness as the dependent variable, shows that elaborate gifts correlated positively with persuasive attempts ($B = 0.37$, $p < 0.05$) and negatively with influencer trustworthiness ($B = -0.36$, $p < 0.05$). In addition, persuasive attempts negatively correlated with influencer trustworthiness ($B = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$), resulting in a significant total effect of gift type on influencer trustworthiness ($B = -0.45$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$) and a significant indirect effect of gift type, through persuasive attempts, on influencer trustworthiness ($B = -0.09$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% confidence interval [CI] $[-0.23, -0.01]$). Thus, we find support for H4b.

The second mediation model, with brand attitude as the dependent variable, also reveals a negative correlation between persuasive attempts and brand attitude ($B = -0.17$, $p < 0.05$). However, the direct effect of elaborate gifts on brand attitude was positive instead of negative, though not significant ($B = 0.242$, $p < 0.10$). Neither total nor indirect effects were significant. Moreover, gender did not correlate with influencer trustworthiness but did so negatively with brand attitude

($B = -0.36$, $p < 0.05$); men report poorer attitudes than women toward the perfume.³

7.3 | Discussion

We establish that perceptions of persuasive attempts can function as a mechanism that leads to the negative effect of elaborate (vs. simple) gifts on influencer trustworthiness. This mechanism also affects brand attitudes, but the direct effect of elaborate gifts is not significant, whereas for influencer trustworthiness, it is significantly negative. This finding confirms the direct effect results of Study 2, in which elaborate (vs. simple) gifts diminished influencer trustworthiness.

8 | STUDY 4: MODERATING EFFECTS OF GIFT OCCASION

The negative impact of elaborate gifts, mediated by a perceived persuasion attempt, could be moderated by mentioning a brand-related occasion that renders elaborate gifts more appropriate; larger gifts commonly get exchanged on special occasions. Therefore, in Study 4, we investigate if the gift occasion might moderate the effect of gift type on influencer trustworthiness and brand attitudes, as a test of H5.

8.1 | Method

We use a 2 (gift type: simple vs. elaborate) \times 2 (gift occasion: none vs. brand-related) between-subjects design, with a setting and procedure similar to that for Study 3 (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix C). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four scenarios. To manipulate the gift occasion, one scenario clearly stated that the gift was given because Delani was celebrating its anniversary (brand-related occasion), but the other offered no occasion-related information. The former condition's stimuli also contained the words "10 years Delani," followed by a party emoji in the Instagram story. The scenarios instructed participants: "Please imagine that you follow the influencer Marie Voss on Instagram. You see a story in which Marie displays a perfume from the brand Delani. [Because the brand is celebrating its 10-year anniversary, the] (The) brand sent the perfume to Marie [especially beautifully embellished, with flowers, champagne, balloons, and macarons] as a PR gift. Marie is not

obligated to show the product in a story." For this study, we recruited 255 participants (50.59% women, $M_{\text{age}} = 28.17$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.99$). The measures were the same as in Study 3.

8.2 | Results

With an ANOVA, we examined the effects of gift type (simple, elaborate) on perceptions of a persuasive attempt, with gift occasion as the moderator. The main effect of gift type on persuasive attempt was significant ($F(1, 251) = 9.86$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta^2 = 0.038$), as was the effect of gift occasion on persuasive attempt ($F(1, 251) = 4.54$, $p = 0.034$, $\eta^2 = 0.0138$). We also found a significant overall model effect ($F(3, 251) = 5.19$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta^2 = 0.058$). However, the interaction of gift type and gift occasion on persuasive attempt was not significant. Perceptions of a persuasive attempt were significantly higher ($p = 0.002$) when simple gifts were displayed without any brand occasion ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.97$, $n = 64$) than with a brand occasion ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.0$, $n = 67$). For elaborate gifts displayed without a brand occasion, perceptions of persuasive attempts were significantly higher ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.95$, $n = 63$, $p = 0.03$) than for those displayed with a brand occasion ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.03$, $n = 61$). Additional ANOVAs revealed a significant direct effect of gift type on influencer trustworthiness ($F(1, 251) = 3.41$, $p = 0.047$, $\eta^2 = 0.016$) but not on brand attitude. Gift occasion had no significant direct effect on influencer trustworthiness and brand attitude (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix J for details).

The results from Hayes's (2022) PROCESS macro (version 4.2; model 5; 10,000 bootstrap samples) confirm the significant positive relation of elaborate (vs. simple) gifts on persuasive attempts ($B = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$) and the negative relation of persuasive attempts with influencer trustworthiness ($B = -0.46$, $p < 0.001$) and brand attitude ($B = -0.26$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, we find an indirect effect of elaborate (vs. simple) gifts on influencer trustworthiness ($B = -0.18$, $SE = 0.06$, $CI [-0.31, -0.06]$), a negative direct link of such gifts with brand occasion ($B = -0.36$, $p < 0.05$), a weak negative direct relation of elaborate gifts on influencer trustworthiness ($B = -0.27$, $p = 0.55$), and a positive interaction effect of both ($B = 0.41$, $p < 0.05$), in support of H5.⁴ In contrast, brand occasion has no direct or indirect impact on brand attitude, though the indirect effect through perceptions of a persuasive attempt is negative and significant ($B = -0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, $CI [-0.19, -0.03]$). We detail these results in Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix K.

8.3 | Discussion

As Study 4 shows, brand occasion (vs. no occasion) mitigates the negative effect of elaborate (vs. simple) gifts on influencer trustworthiness. Such occasions provide influencers a way to weaken the

³As a robustness check, we also tested a more utilitarian product. In a pretest, 140 participants (64.30% women, $M_{\text{age}} = 40.12$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 16.54$) rated the utilitarian dimension of shampoo (see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix I) and perfume, as used in the main studies, with five items from Voss et al. (2003) (effective/ineffective, helpful/unhelpful, functional/not functional, necessary/unnecessary, and practical/impractical). A paired samples *t*-test revealed that shampoo is perceived as significantly more utilitarian than perfume. We replicated Study 3 with shampoo and 119 participants (56.30% women, $M_{\text{age}} = 26.75$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 5.84$). The mean value differences for perceived persuasive attempts, influencer trustworthiness, and brand attitude were similar for shampoo and perfume, such that the results were robust across product types. Details are available on request.

⁴We also tested PROCESS model 8, which allows for an additional interaction on the path between the gift type and persuasive attempt (mediator). This interaction and the index of moderated mediation (-0.046) were not significant.

negative effects of elaborate gifts. Even if brand occasions do not affect brand attitudes, it appears useful for brands to provide gifts, especially elaborate ones, in recognition of an occasion to avoid harming influencers whom they rely on to promote their brand.⁵ Moreover, the negative mediation effect for brand attitude is significant in this study (cf. Study 3, where it falls outside the 95% CI, which could be due to the fewer cases: 125 in Study 3 vs. 255 in Study 4).

9 | CONCLUSION

9.1 | Main findings

Gifts are a “puzzle that refuses to be solved” (Larsen & Watson, 2001, p. 889). This article provides a new piece to the still unsolved gift-giving puzzle, by investigating influencer gifting as a novel type of gift. Similar to conventional business or corporate gifts, influencer gifting aims to build or intensify relationships with influencers. However, the gift transaction is designed to be (highly) visible to third parties, namely, followers of the influencer. This triangle relationship distinguishes influencer gifting and makes it interesting to investigate. We differentiate influencer gifting from other related marketing strategies and then, in four experiments, compare paid influencer marketing with no, simple, and elaborate influencer gifting. Influencer gifting outperforms paid influencer marketing in terms of perceived relationship investments, influencer trustworthiness, and brand attitude (Study 1). Focusing on specific design options for influencer gifting, we further find that elaborate gifts correlate with significantly lower influencer trustworthiness than simple gifts (Study 2). Elaborate gifts also correlate with stronger perceptions of a persuasive attempt (Study 3), which relates to lower attitudes toward the influencer and the brand. In Study 4, we shed light on the conditional effect of gift occasions by demonstrating that brand occasions (e.g., brand anniversary) can mitigate the negative effects of elaborate gifts on influencer trustworthiness. With these findings, we derive implications for practitioners and establish a research framework of unanswered questions about influencer gifting.

9.2 | Implications

Brands frequently send gifts in an effort to strengthen their relationships with influencers and spark authentic endorsements, because the trust that influencers earn from followers constitutes a valuable resource that firms can leverage, especially as consumers' skepticism toward traditional marketing tactics continues to increase. To appeal to influencers, many brands offer elaborate gifts, though

our findings reveal a potential risk of doing so. If they diminish influencer trustworthiness, elaborate gifts might fail to cultivate beneficial relationships with influencers and ultimately promotion outcomes that marketers seek. If consumers observe an influencer receiving a lot of elaborate gifts, and then suffer a loss of trust in them, they might stop following that influencer, which makes the influencer less useful to the brand. To mitigate this negative effect, influencer gifting strategies should take place on special, brand-related occasions, such as an anniversary, to establish a strong justification and positively moderate the negative effect of gifts on influencer trustworthiness. In the course of their long-term business relationships, brands should identify and exploit possible gift occasions. We also offer initial evidence of the advantages of influencer gifting, compared with paid influencer marketing, due to the positive impacts on brand attitude through perceived investments in the relationship. Our results thus offer an explanation and improved understanding of the efficacy of this common marketing practice.

Although the net effect of an elaborate versus simple gift on influencer trustworthiness is negative, we suggest that influencers would be ill-advised to refrain from displaying any gifts at all. In their two-sided business model, they need to achieve sufficient public recognition for their opinions, by being perceived as relevant, while also securing their income by cooperating with brands. Influencers express uncertainty about their followers' perceptions of the gifts they receive from brands and whether to display them (e.g., Magrath, 2019). As we show, if influencers receive and display elaborate gifts, it can undermine their credibility, which constitutes an important determinant of their success (Kim & Kim, 2021). Simple gifts can prompt better consumer attitudes than elaborate gifts, which suggests that influencers should carefully consider which gifts to post. To overcome the negative effect of displaying elaborate gifts, they might refer to special occasions or perhaps remove the embellishments and additional goodies before posting. However, ignoring the gifts could be detrimental to influencers' perceived authenticity and harm their status, if they cannot demonstrate their relevance by showcasing their exclusive relationships.

9.3 | Limitations and further research

This study includes several limitations. In particular, the fictitious scenario we use provides more control and limits bias, but in real applications, followers have had previous encounters with the influencers they follow. Due to such familiarity, they likely have formed some kind of (un)favorable opinion that reflects non-promotional content before they encounter posts that represent brand endorsements. Thus, the effects of influencer gifting on followers, whose favorable opinions and trust may have developed gradually, over multiple virtual encounters, could be less susceptible to a single exposure to a post that displays influencer gifting. Objective data gathered from influencers could help establish the external validity of our findings. In addition, we rely on attitudinal rather than behavioral indicators. We explore intentions to try, but

⁵We conducted a further experiment with a 2 (gift type: simple vs. elaborate) × 2 (discount code: none vs. discount code) between-subjects design, using a similar setting and procedure. However, we found no significant effect of a discount intervention on either dependent variable.

actual behavioral data, perhaps obtained through a field study, could increase the robustness of the findings. Future studies could also examine in which situations the persuasive and in which the relationship effect on a brand predominates. Stimuli pertaining to both hedonic (perfume) and utilitarian (shampoo) consumption indicate consistent results, but both products represent the beauty industry. This industry sector clearly is relevant to social media marketing, but the generalizability of the findings to other industries needs to be tested.

Finally, there are many other aspects of influencer gifting that are worth examining in more detail. This concerns the costs, context and appropriateness of influencer gifts, but also the different generated values (economic, functional, social, expressive, see Supporting Information S1: Web Appendix L).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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