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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Mega-influencers and brand dynamics: Shaping attitudes toward leading and challenger brands through electronic word of mouth

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore how mega-influencers' electronic word of mouth (eWOM) messages on social media influence consumers' brand attitudes in duopolistic markets. Through three experimental studies, we observe that when mega-influencers send positive (vs. negative) eWOM messages about a leading brand, followers form positive (vs. negative) brand attitudes, but these effects fail to occur when influencers back challenger brands. The findings are consistent across three duopolistic market rivals (Apple vs. Samsung; UPS vs. FedEx; Nike vs. Adidas), three social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and X), and four mega-influencers (Marques Brownlee, Gary Vaynerchuk, Kanye West, and Kylie Jenner). Findings indicate that mega-influencers have more persuasive power when recommending or criticizing leading brands rather than challenger brands, irrespective of their follower base. The findings contribute to the marketing literature by showing that in duopolistic market contexts, mega-influencers' e-WOM has varied effects on followers' brand attitudes, depending on brand status in the market.

KEYWORDS

brand attitude, digital marketing, duopolistic market, eWOM, mega-influencers

1 | INTRODUCTION

Younger demographics—Millennials and Generation Z (Zollo et al., 2020)—attribute significant value to the entertainment derived from their online information-seeking activities (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Rialti et al., 2022). To address such a quest from these important consumer cohorts, marketers increasingly employ influencers to disseminate targeted information, mostly through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) messages on digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Filieri, Lin, et al., 2021).

Influencers, known for having large followings and perceived authenticity, use sophisticated online media to spread eWOM messages that drive brand engagement and communicate positive/negative information or opinions about brands (Filieri, 2015; Filieri, Acikgoz, & Du, 2023; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015; Teresa borges-Tiago et al., 2023). By showcasing their personal lives and attracting and maintaining many followers, influencers' eWOM messages are highly impactful, potent, accessible marketing tools (Liao et al., 2024). Since 2020, businesses have invested about $16 billion annually in influencer-based eWOM, with expected sales returns estimated between $5 and $6 trillion (Geyser, 2022; Haenlein & Libai, 2017).

Examinations of influencer eWOM have generally focused on three main areas (Conde & Casais, 2023): (1) brand methods for extending eWOM reach and criteria for choosing suitable influencers (Haenlein & Libai, 2013); (2) digital platform strategies for managing influencer presence (Delisle & Parmantier, 2016); and (3) influencer impacts on consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, which is the most extensive and promising area of study (Vrontis et al., 2021).

To examine how influencer eWOM marketing strategies impact consumers, strategists must understand micro-level consumer psychology (Looi et al., 2023). Consumer receptivity specifically determines whether influencers produce eWOM messages that positively influence brand attitudes, loyalty, and purchase intentions. Studies are revealing that the most engaging and persuasive brand messages come from peers (Filieri, et al., 2015), from individuals sharing personal product experiences (Cheung et al., 2008), or from user-generated content (UGC) (Hu et al., 2023). In wider online discussions, targeted hashtags and keywords help users access and engage in relevant brand contents (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

Influencer categorization is determined by the size of their followership bases. Nano-influencers have between 1000 and 10,000 extremely engaged followers (Yadav et al., 2022). Micro-influencers are identified as having 10,000–100,000 followers who generally perceive them as exceptionally expert and authentic (Park, Lee, et al., 2021). Meso-influencers' followership bases, instead, range between 100,000 and 1,000,000 followers (Conde & Casais, 2023). Finally, mega-influencers have more than a million followers across several social media or micro-blogging platforms (Teresa borges-Tiago et al., 2023). The first three categories of influencers are particularly effective when promoting niche products or social causes due to the growth-oriented mindsets of their followers (Li et al., 2024). Indeed, consumers tend to follow influencers in these three categories due to their apparently unbiased and specific expertise about a product or a topic (Kim et al., 2021).

Although nano, micro, and meso-influencers are more adept at building strong follower relationships, mega-influencers still hold greater power in driving consumer compliance and have exceptional abilities in generating eWOM messages that influence consumer perceptions (Conde & Casais, 2023). Followers admire them for perceived traits such as honesty and trustworthiness and then link those authentic traits with the brands being endorsed. Consumers who have fixed mindsets are particularly likely to view mega-influencers as charismatic, successful role models, regardless of influencers' educational, social, or commercial backgrounds (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Wan & Jiang, 2023). Thus, mega-influencers are the most effective eWOM marketers (Babic-Rosario et al., 2016) in fostering deep brand engagement, positive brand attitudes, and strong purchase intentions (Haikel-Elsabeh, 2023; Wan & Jiang, 2023).

Mega-influencers often include celebrities such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Kanye West, who initially rose to fame via traditional media such as TV and film before moving to online platforms (Park, Hyun, et al., 2021). Their eWOM is highly influential because of their widespread popularity and likability (Britt et al., 2021; De Veirman et al., 2017). Their credibility stems from their attractiveness, perceived trustworthiness, and relevance to the brands they promote (Filieri, Acikgoz, & Du, 2023; Ohanian, 1990). Consistently, it's no surprise that an endorsement from a mega-influencer such as Taylor Swift can potentially sway the sentiment of millions of followers (Forbes Italia, 2024).

More research is needed to understand why mega-influencers' eWOM triggers varying consumer responses (Boerman, 2020; Casaló et al., 2020; Filieri, Acikgoz, & Du, 2023). Previous research explains that the effectiveness of these messages depends on whether mega-influencers endorse utilitarian products or promote traditional products related to beauty, lifestyle, and luxury (Babić Rosario et al., 2020), and on the types of endorsed products—the more closely the product aligns with the images of mega-influencers, the better the effects on consumers' minds (Filieri, Acikgoz, Li, et al., 2023; Kamins, 1990). Still, the literature does not suitably associate different effects with diverse brand statuses in the corresponding market (Yoon et al., 2011), so potential differences related to being a leading or a challenger brand have not been explored (van Gogh et al., 2024).

We conducted three studies to fill some gaps in understanding about mega-influencer eWOM. Specifically, we observed how mega-influencer eWOM drives brand attitudes toward products and services from brands that compete within restricted, duopolistic markets (Kim et al., 2023). Duopolies, in which two brands compete for market dominance, are an ideal setting for assessing how brand-related communications can shift consumer preferences (Yoon et al., 2011). Therefore, our studies focus on a duopolistic market context where challenger and leader brands compete for dominance (Han et al., 2001).

To explore how mega-influencers impact brand attitudes, we built on the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012; Chen & Chaiken, 1999) and the incumbent's advantage framework (Han et al., 2001; MacMillan & Selden, 2008). We conducted three experiments involving American Generation Z students who reviewed both positive and negative eWOM messages from mega-influencers across the rapidly growing global sectors of smartwatches, courier services, and sports apparel (Fortune Business Insight, 2024; Statista, 2024) that are ideal for analyzing dynamics in duopolistic markets.

Our examination of consumer attitudes toward mega-influencer eWOM messages regarding incumbent versus challenger brands reveals that mega-influencers are more persuasive when they promote or criticize leading rather than challenger brands. The findings contribute to the marketing literature by showing that in duopolistic market contexts, mega-influencers may fail to sway customer attitudes when they promote or criticize challenger brands because consumers implicitly associate the fame and popularity of mega-influencers with the high status of leading brands (Li et al., 2024) and perceive incongruence in postings regarding lower-status challenger brands (Kim et al., 2023). Marketers, thus, need to include brand status in their strategic choices concerning the selection of the most suitable influencer.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | eWOM and mega-influencers

In contrast with traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) that relies on offline personal networks, eWOM is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is disseminated to numerous people and institutions via the internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). Message senders use digital platforms to reach beyond their immediate social circles (Baek et al., 2022; Baek & Yoon, 2022; Choi et al., 2017; McQuarrie et al., 2013). They may create user-generated content (UGC) such as videos, texts, and images (Walsh et al., 2024) that engage wide and varied audiences (Babić Rosario et al., 2020; Wilson-Nash & Pavlopoulou, 2024) and involve different information processing modes (Babić Rosario et al., 2016; Zhang & Ruan, 2024). In contrast with ephemeral offline content, eWOM messages remain visible unless their creators deliberately remove them.

Many companies view positive eWOM as a cost-effective, key internet marketing strategy for shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors (Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Kim et al., 2019) and for creating positive cognitive and affective consumer brand perceptions (De Veirman et al., 2017). When consumers view positive diagnostic UGC communications from mediums they trust, they are reassured that brands and products are of high quality (Filieri, 2015) and safe to purchase (Filieri & McLeay, 2014). They tend to trust UGC even from distant sources if sources are experts and the content is relevant, timely, accurate, and comprehensive (Gupta & Harris, 2010). They are more likely to consider purchasing brands if the messages are informative and unique, and even more so if they perceive the medium to be honest and unbiased (Conde & Casais, 2023).

Negative e-WOM messages often come from communicators who have negative experiences with brands (Samson, 2006). Responses to negative messages depend on the same qualities that determine responses to positive messages: source trustworthiness and message resonance. Source credibility is even more crucial, however, because consumers tend to value criticism that comes from sources they perceive as having superior expertise and trustworthiness (Filieri et al., 2018). Brands are acutely aware that negative messages can incite boycotts and cause significant market share losses. Consequently, they invest heavily in monitoring social media sentiment; they encourage counteractions by creating and disseminating positive messages (Mainolfi et al., 2022; Rialti et al., 2016).

Whether eWOM messages are positive or negative, mega-influencers have the most significant impact on consumer attitudes and behaviors because they reach more than a million followers and are thus among the most persuasive for bridging the gap between mass media and the public (Zhou et al., 2021). As such, eWOM research has primarily focused on mega-influencers over the past decade and has found that consumers perceive them to be most credible when they endorse brands that relate to their expertise (Bergkvist, 2017), such as a criticism of a hip-hop recording by Kanye West or a review of soccer shoes by Cristiano Ronaldo or (Teresa borges-Tiago et al., 2023). Consumers then perceive that the endorsement has credibility because the product aligns with celebrities' personal expertise (Knoll & Matthes, 2017; Rai et al., 2021) but only if celebrities are perceived as genuine and trustworthy (Filieri, Acikgoz, & Du, 2023). Conversely, if mega-influencers appear to be insincere or disconnected, their attractiveness and knowledge traits are overshadowed by perceptions that they are being manipulated by marketers (Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020).

Thus, mega-influencer marketing strategists value authenticity as essential for fostering parasocial relationships in which followers feel a sense of self-congruency (Conde & Casais, 2023). Although the relationship is unidirectional, followers tend to perceive that mega-influencers are like friends or family members with whom they have deep emotional connections (Chung & Cho, 2017). Mega-influencers strategically cultivate closeness and become opinion leaders by using relatable language, talking about shared interests, and interacting frequently (Casaló et al., 2020; Hu & Yang, 2020).

Researchers have questioned whether audience size should be used to differentiate between macro or micro influencers. Boerman (2020), for example, found that both have similar influence. Campbell and Farrell (2020) focused on mega-influencers but hypothesized that influencer type fails to markedly affect outcomes.

We contend that more research is necessary to understand the specific effects of mega-influencer eWOM on consumer brand attitudes, to determine which types of brands gain the most from such endorsements, and to see how influencer marketing varies across brands and contexts. Given that brands have unique characteristics and market positions, impacts can vary (Filieri, Acikgoz, Li, et al., 2023; Teresa borges-Tiago et al., 2023). In Table 1, we list the relevant literature and summarize our positioning.

2.2 | Brand leaders and challengers in duopolistic markets

Duopolistic markets in which two brands compete for the leading spot are an intriguing context for examining influencer eWOM effects. Although many markets are duopolistic, relatively few researchers have examined how positive or negative reviews influence consumer brand attitudes when markets are dominated by one leading brand that is being challenged by another brand (Bass et al., 2005; Chintagunta & Vilcassim, 1994). In leader versus challenger duopolies, brands use various strategies to drive consumer perceptions and market dynamics.

Dominant brands enjoy higher brand awareness, reputation, trust, prestige, equity, and customer loyalty (Zollo et al., 2020). Their leaders focus on preserving dominance, developing innovative products, and diversifying market presence (Lauga & Ofek, 2009), often adopting aggressive pricing strategies or forming exclusive partnerships to safeguard market share. Consumers tend to attribute leading brands with robust brand images comprising qualities such as trustworthiness and high quality (MacMillan & Selden, 2008). Over time, long-standing brand heritages cultivate trust perceptions; the

TABLE 1 Selected literature on influencers eWOM and research positioning.

References	Title and Journal	Theoretical perspective and methodological approach	Typology of influencers	Findings
Campbell and Farrell (2020)	More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business Horizons*	Influencers' cultural capital (Bergkvist, 2017)	Nano-influencers Micro-influencers Macro-influencers Mega-influencers (conceptual study)	Marketing strategies must consider influencer typology
Casaló et al. (2020)	Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. *Journal of Business Research*	Theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) Quantitative (structural equation modeling)	Various influencers	Originality and uniqueness generate opinion leadership, which then affects consumer intentions to continue interacting with influencers
Vrontis et al. (2021)	Social media influencer marketing: A systematic review, integrative framework and future research agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*	Multiple Systematic literature review	Various influencers	Research on influencer impacts on consumer behavior focuses on credibility and trust. We need more research that considers heuristics and multiple product categories.
Park et al. (2021)	David and Goliath: When and why micro-influencers are more persuasive than mega-influencers. *Journal of Advertising*	Theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) Quantitative (experiments)	Micro-influencers Mega-influencers (comparative study)	Micro-influencers appear to be more effective in increasing brand attitudes and purchase intentions for hedonic products, while mega-influencers are more effective for utilitarian products
Conde and Casais (2023)	Micro, macro and mega-influencers on Instagram: The power of persuasion via the parasocial relationship. *Journal of Business Research*	Parasocial relationships (Chung & Cho, 2017) Quantitative (regressions, PROCESS method)	Micro-influencers Macro-influencers Mega-influencers (comparative study)	Consumers may develop stronger parasocial relationships with micro- and macro-influencers, but mega-influencers may be more persuasive because of their opinion leadership
Filieri, Acikgoz, Li, et al. (2023)	Influencers' "organic" persuasion through electronic word of mouth: A case of sincerity over brains and beauty. *Psychology & Marketing*	Source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990) Quantitative (experiments)	Mega-influencers (Study 1) Various influencers (Study 2)	Mega-influencer credibility directly affects brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Trustworthiness is more important for other influencers.
Li et al. (2024)	How micro- (vs. mega) influencers generate word of mouth in the digital economy age: The moderating role of mindset. *Journal of Business Research*	Implicit consumers mindsets (growth vs. fixed) (Chiu et al., 1997) Quantitative(experiments)	Micro-influencers and Mega-influencers (comparative study)	Consumers who have growth rather than fixed mindsets are more likely to generate WOM about endorsements from micro-rather than mega-influencers
Research gap and positioning (Authors' own paper)		Heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012; Chen & Chaiken, 1999) Incumbent's advantage framework (Han et al., 2001; MacMillan & Selden, 2008) Quantitative (experiments)	We examine the impact of mega-influencers on brand attitudes in duopolistic markets through multiple experiments across various social media platforms and products. Our objective is to determine whether influence changes when mega-influencers endorse leader or challenger brands. We use the heuristic-systematic model and the incumbent advantage framework to explore whether consumers chronically associate mega-influencers with leading brands.	

products become highly appealing and preferred status symbols. Global recognition generates the "masstige" phenomenon in which dominant brands enjoy wide prestige, accessibility, and admiration (Kumar & Paul, 2018, p. 970). For example, incumbent, leading brands can strategically lever their competitive advantages (Han et al., 2001). Their familiar and attractive logos have significant and immediate positive effects on brand attitudes, loyalty, and behavior, as observed in positive impacts from the logos associated with Apple and Visa (Müller et al., 2013). Leading brands are strongly positioned to invest resources that will retain and better serve current customer bases, to be first to develop profitable new product features, and to continually exploit past and current market trends, information, and consumer insights (MacMillan & Selden, 2008).

Conversely, challenger brands have comparatively smaller market shares. They may augment their online/offline presence by disrupting the market. They may use pricing strategies and implement cost-effective measures like differential or dynamic pricing to attract price-sensitive consumers and align more closely with consumer preferences and expectations (Chintagunta & Rao, 1996). They may establish images as trend-setting innovators that constantly introduce unique features (Smith et al., 2001) or undertake differentiation strategies emphasizing that their products carry competitive advantages (Zhang & Lim, 2021). Their main problem is competing with an incumbent brand that has established dominance over time. They face a seemingly impossible task in trying to "steal" the market (MacMillan & Selden, 2008). Hence, challengers in duopolies adopt one of two main strategies: (1) strengthen "assimilation effects" by stressing how they are similar to the leader, or (2) strengthen "contrast effects" by presenting their products as comparative alternatives (Yoon et al., 2011, p. 72).

An example of a notable brand rivalry is the enduring competition between Coca-Cola, the market leader, and PepsiCo, the challenger (Auty & Lewis, 2004). An example in the technology sector is the Microsoft Windows operating system versus the Apple MacOS (Nevid & Pastva, 2014). In the e-commerce domain, Amazon's "pharaonic expansion" contrasts with Alibaba's goal to become a global e-marketer (Rippé et al., 2017, p. 733). The examples show that competition has a complex interaction with strategy in duopolistic market structures.

In summary, duopolistic markets, where leaders dynamically interplay with challengers, provide an ideal context for examining how brand status and positioning intertwine with varying consumer responses to mega-influencers' positive and negative eWOM. We particularly need greater understanding about the psychology driving consumer perceptions and brand attitudes about leading and challenger brands after consumers are exposed to eWOM messages.

2.3 | The heuristic-systematic model

Dual-processing information system theory (Haidt, 2001; Kahneman, 2011) indicates that consumers are more likely to adopt recommendations perceived to be of high quality, credibility, and usefulness (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006). Dual motivations drive consumers to pursue information through eWOM. Rational thinkers seek functional, utilitarian, and logical information such as first-hand reports about the performance of new products to supplement the information that is missing from official brand channels or standard marketing materials (Ho-Dac et al., 2013). On the other hand, intuitive thinkers seek hedonic, engaging, and emotional information that makes them want to revisit the site and share the content (Gong & Li, 2017). The enjoyment then increases their loyalty and purchase intentions toward featured brands (Zollo, 2021).

Consistent with dual-process theory, we used the heuristic-systematic model (Chen & Chaiken, 1999) as the foundation for our examination of perceptions regarding mega-influencers' eWOM about leader versus challenger brands. Systematic processing, the first mode, involves attentive thinking and reasoning in efforts to carefully elaborate all available information (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012). The systematic mode resembles the rational System 2 information processing system (Haidt, 2001; Kahneman, 2011) in that both involve accessing, scrutinizing, and integrating available information regarding brand marketing communications, including source credibility, expertise, accuracy, and reliability. When consumers use systematic processing in developing opinions about influencers and brands, they prioritize rationality and conscientiousness over emotions, intuitions, and gut feelings (Zuckerman & Chaiken, 1998).

Heuristic processing, the second mode, reduces the mental effort involved in elaborating on information. The mode resembles emotive System 1 information processing (Haidt, 2001; Kahneman, 2011), in that it occurs relatively automatically "even when people are not motivated and able to deliberately think about a topic" (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012, p. 2). Heuristics are learned cognitive structures that are stored in memory and guide unconscious, rapid, simple decisions regarding source credibility, such as immediate attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Chen et al., 1999; Ohanian, 1990). Consumers might use influencer credentials to form quick, easy decisions about influencers and related brands based on the heuristic belief that "experts know best" (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012). For example, when the famous chef Gordon Ramsey uses e-WOM to praise a food brand, consumers are likely to assume credibility, based on a simple, unconscious, instant decision heuristic to minimize systematic reasoning (Xiao et al., 2018). Conversely, a mega-influencer's adverse online review about a leading brand could cause automatic negative brand attitudes. Believing that the celebrity has already provided the effort needed for thinking about the subject, consumers follow the "least effort principle" and embrace the opinions.

Although consumer psychologists have widely used the heuristic-systemic model (Zuckerman & Chaiken, 1998), we need to understand how it functions in driving consumer attitudes toward brands in duopolistic markets.

3 | HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Building on the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012; Chen & Chaiken, 1999), we hypothesize that followers intuitively perceive that the status associated with mega-influencers links with the esteem associated with market leaders. They perceive that celebrities have knowledge and expertise and thus automatically adopt celebrity judgments and opinions (Bergkvist, 2017), such as positive or negative brand attitudes, based on trust in a credible information source.

Leader brands also benefit from intuitively entrenched positive images, as explained by the incumbent advantage model (Han et al., 2001; MacMillan & Selden, 2008), which explains that consumers use minimal cognitive effort to instinctively associate leading brands with quality and trust. For example, when Marques Brownlee, a well-known tech influencer, endorsed Apple, a leading technological brand, consumers were likely to intuitively and unconsciously align their judgments (Zollo, 2021) with his positive eWOM.

The sociointuitionist model (Haidt, 2001) explains that intuitive, heuristic-based judgment bypasses cognitive reasoning. When prominent influencers endorse or disparage brands, they immediately enhance or diminish the brand's social prestige, perceived status, and perceived credibility. Influencers might spread positive eWOM because they enjoyed a brand experience and wanted to share it with consumers; they might spread negative eWOM to warn their followers about a dissatisfactory experience (Hu & Kim, 2018). In either case, consumers are likely to trust messages and make decisions according to influencer sentiment.

Therefore, we propose:

H1. In a duopolistic market, mega-influencers' positive (vs. negative) eWOM will have positive (vs. negative) impacts on consumer attitudes toward leading brands.

We also hypothesize that consumers are less likely to use heuristic association processing when they respond to reviews about market challengers, whether positive or negative, because a mega-influencer's established prestige, credibility, and status misalign with the lack of prestige, credibility, and status associated with aspiring, potential competitor challenger brands. While incumbent brands enjoy reputational advantages, second-tier brands suffer competitive disadvantages in having weaker images that are incongruent with the prestigious social media presence of mega influences (Arsena et al., 2014; Han et al., 2001; MacMillan & Selden, 2008). Status mismatches may cause followers to experience cognitive dissonance (Nosi et al., 2022). To handle the incongruity, they will activate systematic information processing and logical thinking, consistent with the dual functioning model (Haidt, 2001; Kahneman, 2011). Their analytical evaluation will reveal that the mega-influencer's prestige fails to align with challenger brand lower status. The eWOM then fails to significantly impact perceptions and attitudes toward the challenger brand primarily because the consumer cannot automatically and directly associate the source with the brand.

As an example, consider how consumers might view a message from Marques Brownlee, a mega-influencer in the technology domain, in which he promotes Samsung, the market challenger, over Apple, the market leader. Consumers might be suspicious about his underlying motives and might distrust the brand. Conversely, if Brownlee negatively criticizes the challenger (Bachleda & Berrada-Fathi, 2016), consumers may disdain the additional mental effort and time they will need to form personal views about the brand. Negative eWOM often triggers adverse consumer reactions such as anxiety about the brand experience as consumers are forced to use rational cognitive processes (Haidt, 2001) to clarify their brand attitudes (Zollo, 2021). As a result, they may develop independent judgments and opinions in which they form contrary attitudes about the challenging brand.

Therefore, we propose:

H2. In a duopolistic market, mega-influencers' positive or negative eWOM will lack effects on consumer attitudes toward challenger brands.

Figure 1 is an illustration of our theoretical framework.

4 | STUDY 1

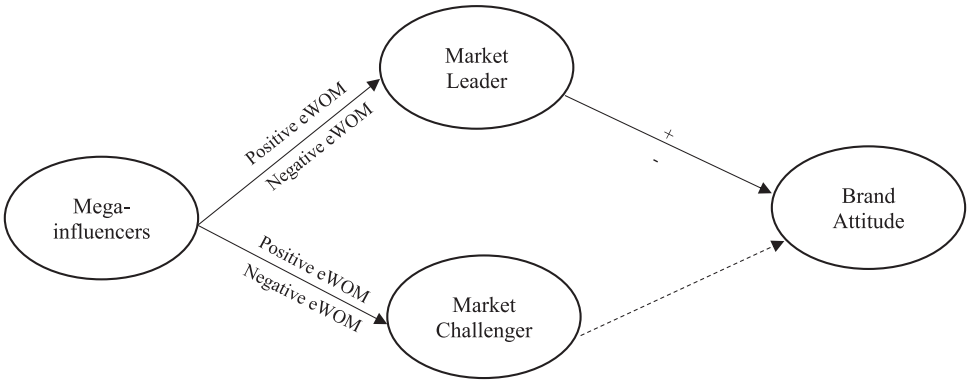
In Study 1, we empirically tested our hypothesis that positive (vs. negative) eWOM from mega-influencers will have positive (vs. negative) impacts on consumer attitudes toward leading brands in a duopolistic market (H1). We also tested our hypothesis that in a duopolistic market, the effects would disappear for the challenger brand (H2). First, we manipulated the valence of social media posts from Marques Brownlee, widely known as MKBHD, a prominent tech YouTuber and influencer renowned for providing insightful gadget reviews, technology commentary, and high-quality videos.

To provide a robust context and examine the nuanced effects of mega-influencers' eWOM within a competitive duopolistic market environment, we chose two representative mainstream smartphone brands. Apple, the market leader, ranks first on the 2023 Interbrand top 100 best global brands list. Samsung, the market challenger, ranks fifth.

In addition, in a pilot test, participants indicated brand familiarity using a 7-point bipolar scale anchored by *unaware/aware*, *unrecognized/recognized*, *never heard of it/heard of it*, *and unfamiliar/familiar*, where a higher (vs. lower) number represents more positive (vs. negative) responses. Participants reported familiarity with both Apple and Samsung. Univariate *t* tests against the scale midpoint, 4.0, showed above midpoint familiarity scores for both brands (M_{Apple} = 6.6, t (52) = 17.50, $p < 0.001$; $M_{Samsung}$ = 6.3, t (52) = 14.37, $p < 0.001$).

4.1 | Participants and design

Participating in the study for partial course credit were 140 undergraduate students (55.7% men, 43.6% women, and 0.7% neither;



Notes:
The dotted lines indicate a hypothesized nonsignificant effect among the variables.
The symbols + and – indicate significant positive and negative influences among the variables.

Source: Authors' elaboration

FIGURE 1 Research model. The dotted lines indicate a hypothesized nonsignificant effect among the variables. The symbols + and − indicate significant positive and negative influences among the variables. *Source*: Authors' elaboration.

20.5 years old; 87.9% White, 6.4% Asian, 0.7% Black, 0.7% White/Asian, 0.7% White/Other, 6% other) from a northeastern US university. The study had a 2 (Brand: Apple vs. Samsung) × 2 (eWOM: positive vs. negative) between-subjects design.

4.2 | Procedure and stimuli

When participants entered the computer lab where we collected the data, they were welcomed, seated at individual, isolated computer stations where they were unable to see or hear activities at other stations, and randomly assigned to one of four conditions.

On the first screen, participants viewed a photo and description of Marques Brownlee (aka MKBHD), a prominent tech YouTuber and influencer renowned for his insightful gadget reviews, technology commentary, and high-quality video production (Appendix I).

Next, participants viewed a simulated Facebook account with a post by Marques Brownlee. Participants in the positive posting condition viewed the following eWOM message:

💔 "Just got my hands on the new Apple/Samsung Smart Watch and it's a game -changer! Sleek design, incredible battery life, and seamless connectivity. It's not just a watch, it's the future on your wrist. #Apple/SamsungWatch #TechTrendsetter."

Alternatively, participants in the negative posting condition viewed the following eWOM message:

😡 "Just endured the new Apple/Samsung Smart Watch and it's a massive letdown! Clunky design, dismal battery life, and glitchy connectivity. It's not innovation, it's a step back in time. #Apple/SamsungWatchFail #TechDisappointment."

In a pilot test, participants rated the eWOM messages using a 7-point scale (*very negative/very positive*). When tested against the scale midpoint, 4.0, they perceived the positive eWOM message as positive ($M_{positive}$ = 6.19; t (52) = 13.34, p < 0.001 for Apple; $M_{positive}$ = 6.17; t (52) = 13.47, p < 0.001 for Samsung) and the negative eWOM as negative ($M_{negative}$ = 2.09, t (52) = −7.70, p < 0.001 for Apple; $M_{negative}$ = 1.98, t (52) = −9.88, p < 0.001 for Samsung).

4.3 | Measures

After participants viewed the posting, they reported their attitudes toward the brand using a 7-point Likert scale, from *strongly disagree* (1) *to strongly agree* (7), in response to five items: "This is a good-quality brand. This brand is interesting. I like this brand. I feel positive about this brand. I have a positive attitude toward this brand". The items were averaged to form an index for brand attitude: a higher score indicated a more positive attitude (α = 0.96). In addition, participants responded to two 7-point Likert items measuring usage frequency for each brand: "How often do you use Apple products?" and "How often do you use Samsung products?"

4.4 | Results

We analyzed the measures of brand attitudes using a 2 (Brand: Apple vs. Samsung) × 2 (eWOM: positive vs. negative) fully factorial ANOVA. As predicted, brand had a significant two-way interaction with eWOM (F (1, 136) = 4.03, p < 0.05). As Figure 2 shows, contrasts revealed that when participants viewed MKBHD's positive or negative eWOM for the market leader Apple, the postings had corresponding influences on brand attitude; that is, participants formed positive (vs. negative) brand attitudes after viewing positive (vs. negative) eWOM ($M_{positive}$ = 6.08 vs. $M_{negative}$ = 5.09; t (68) = 3.14, p < 0.01), supporting H1. However, the influences dissipated when they viewed postings for Samsung, the market follower brand ($M_{positive}$ = 4.42 vs. $M_{negative}$ = 4.37; t (68) = 0.86, p = n.s.), consistent with

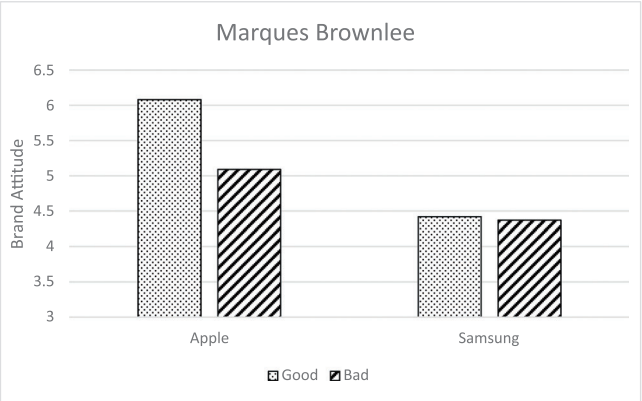


FIGURE 2 Brand x eWOM 2-way interaction (Study 1). *Source*: Authors' elaboration.

H2. To control for variations in brand experiences, we reanalyzed the data to include usage frequency as covariates in our ANOVA analyses. The results remained consistent, suggesting that brand experiences failed to affect outcomes.

4.5 | Discussion

Study 1 shows that mega influencers significantly impact brand attitudes through positive or negative eWOM on social media. However, the influence is evident only for brands that occupy dominant positions in a duopolistic market, and not for secondary brands.

5 | STUDY 2

Study 2 was intended to replicate and generalize the findings from Study 1 within a different product category and featuring different influencers. For our leading brand, we selected UPS, which is 33rd in the 2023 Interbrand top 100 best global brands. For our challenger brand, we selected FedEx, ranked 82nd. in Study 1, participants reported familiarity with both UPS and FedEx. Univariate *t* tests showed above midpoint familiarity scores for both brands (M_{UPS} = 6.4, t (52) = 15.23, $p < 0.001$; M_{FedEx} = 6.5, t (52) = 15.75, $p < 0.001$). For the mega-influencer, we chose Gary Vaynerchuk, a notable real-world mega-influencer and well-known American entrepreneur with celebrity status.

5.1 | Participants and design

Participating in the study for partial course credit were 126 undergraduate students (56.3% men, 41.3% women, and 0.8% neither; 20.3 years old; 73.8% White, 4.0% Asian, 3.2% Black, 4.8% White/Black, 0.8% White/Asian, 0.8% White/Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander, 0.3.2% White/Other, 8.7% other) from a northeastern US university. The study had a 2 (Brand: UPS vs. FedEx) × 2 (eWOM: positive vs. negative) between-subjects design.

5.2 | Procedure, stimuli, and measures

We used the same procedure, stimuli, and measures that we used in Study 1, except that in Study 2, participants viewed photos and descriptions of Gary Vaynerchuk (aka Gary Vee), an American entrepreneur, expert in consumer brands, and social media influencer with several million followers (Appendix II).

Next, participants viewed a simulated X account with a post by Gary Vaynerchuk. Participants in the positive posting condition viewed the following eWOM message:

💔 Absolutely in awe of UPS's/FedEx's impeccable service! Their precision and speed in delivery is unmatched. Feels like every package arrives with a personal touch of care and efficiency. UPS/FedEx, you've outdone yourselves! 💥 #DeliveryExcellence.

Alternatively, participants in the negative posting condition viewed the following eWOM message:

😡 Frustrated with UPS's/FedEx's service lately! Delays and mix-ups are becoming the norm. It's like each package is a gamble on whether it'll arrive on time, or at all. UPS/FedEx, this is disappointing! 😠 #DeliveryDisaster.

In each condition, the computer screen prominently displayed the corresponding brand logo of UPS or FedEx. As in Study 1, in a pilot test, participants rated the eWOM messages using a 7-point scale (*very negative/very positive*). When tested against the scale midpoint, 4.0, they perceived the positive eWOM message as positive ($M_{positive}$ = 6.36; t (52) = 17.87, $p < 0.001$ for UPS; $M_{positive}$ = 6.23; t (52) = 13.47, $p < 0.001$ for FedEx) and the negative eWOM as negative ($M_{negative}$ = 1.92, t (52) = −9.49, $p < 0.001$ for UPS; $M_{negative}$ = 1.91, t (52) = −9.77, $p < 0.001$ for FedEx).

The five items from Study 1 were used to measure brand attitude. The items were averaged to form an index for brand attitude, with a higher score indicating a more positive attitude (α = 0.94). The same two items from Study 1 were used to measure the usage frequency of each brand, UPS and FedEx.

5.3 | Results

We analyzed the measures of brand attitudes using a 2 (Brand: UPS vs. FedEx) × 2 (eWOM: positive vs. negative) fully factorial ANOVA. As predicted, brand had a significant two-way interaction with eWOM (F (1, 122) = 4.57, $p < 0.05$). As Figure 3 shows, contrasts revealed that when participants viewed Vaynerchuk's positive or negative eWOM for the market leader UPS, the postings had corresponding influences on brand attitude; that is, participants formed positive (vs. negative) brand attitudes after viewing positive (vs. negative) eWOM ($M_{positive}$ = 5.42 vs. $M_{negative}$ = 4.64; t (62) = 3.36, $p < 0.01$), supporting H1. However, the influences were absent when they viewed postings for FedEx, the market follower brand

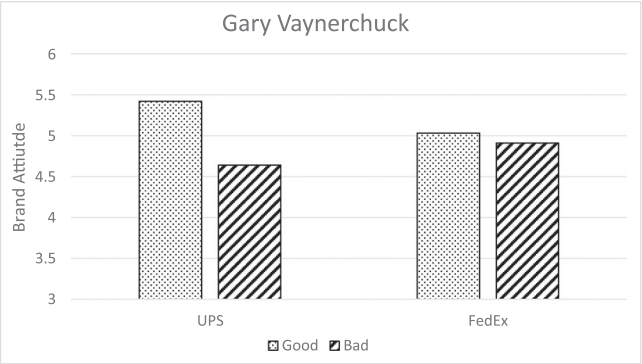


FIGURE 3 Brand x eWOM 2-way interaction (Study 2). *Source*: Authors' elaboration.

($M_{positive}$ = 5.03 vs. $M_{negative}$ = 4.91; t (60) = 0.55, p = n.s.), consistent with H2. To control for variations in brand experiences, we re-analyzed the data to include usage frequency as covariates in our ANOVA analyses. The results remained consistent, suggesting that brand experiences failed to affect outcomes.

5.4 | Discussion

Study 2 conceptually replicates the findings from Study 2 in a substantially different setting. Building on the findings from Study 1, Study 2 shows that mega influencers significantly impact brand attitudes by spreading positive or negative eWOM on social media. However, this influence is evident only for brands that occupy dominant positions in a duopolistic market, and not for brands in secondary positions. The influence appears to lack substantial impact for nonleading brands. Influencer gender is apparently irrelevant.

6 | STUDY 3

Study 3 was intended to replicate and generalize the findings from Studies 1 and 2 within a different product category and featuring different influencers. For our leading brand, we selected Nike, which is ninth in the 2023 Interbrand top 100 best global brands. For our challenger brand, we selected Adidas, ranked 42nd. As in Studies 1 and 2, participants reported familiarity with both Nike and Adidas. Univariate t tests showed above midpoint familiarity scores for both brands (M_{Nike} = 6.6, t (52) = 17.90, p < 0.001; M_{Adidas} = 6.5, t (52) = 15.77, p < 0.001). For the mega-influencers, we chose Kanye West and Kylie Jenner as influencers (Appendices III and IV).

6.1 | Participants and design

Participating in the study for partial course credit were 272 undergraduate students (53.3% men, 46.3% women, and 0.4% neither; 20.1 years old; 73.7% White, 4.0% Asian, 2.2% Black, 8% White/Black, 7% White/Asian, 0.4% White/Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander, 0.2.2% White/Other, 5.9% other) from a northeastern US university.

6.2 | Procedure, stimuli, and measures

We used the same procedure, stimuli, and measures that we used in Studies 1 and 2, except that in Study 3, participants viewed photos and descriptions of Kanye West and Kylie Jenner, both well-known social media influencers with strong fashion and sportswear presence (Appendices III and IV). Participants read introductory descriptions of the influencers, viewed their photos, and saw either positive or negative Instagram posts about Nike or Adidas. The positive post stated:

💖 Obsessed with these new Nike/Adidas sneakers! Perfect blend of style and comfort. Every step feels like I'm walking on clouds. Nike's/Adidas's done it again! 💥 #SneakerLove.

Conversely, the negative post read:

💔 Really disappointed with these new Nike/Adidas sneakers. They lack both style and comfort. Feels like I'm walking on rocks. Not what I expected from Nike/Adidas. 😔 #SneakerLetdown.

As in Studies 1 and 2, in a pilot test, participants rated the eWOM messages using a 7-point scale (*very negative/very positive*). When tested against the scale midpoint, 4.0, they perceived the positive eWOM message as positive ($M_{positive}$ = 6.47; t (52) = 21.86, p < 0.001 for Nike; $M_{positive}$ = 6.25; t (52) = 13.91, p < 0.001 for Adidas) and the negative eWOM as negative ($M_{negative}$ = 2.17, t (52) = −7.56, p < 0.001 for Nike; $M_{negative}$ = 1.79, t (52) = −12.03, p < 0.001 for Adidas).

The five items from Study 1 were used to measure brand attitude. The items were averaged to form an index for brand attitude, with a higher score indicating a more positive attitude (α = 0.94). The same two items from Study 1 were used to measure the usage frequency of each brand, Nike and Adidas.

6.3 | Results

We analyzed the measures of brand attitude using a 2 (Influencer: Kanye West vs. Kylie Jenner) × 2 (Brand: Nike vs. Adidas) × 2 (eWOM: positive vs. negative) fully factorial ANOVA. As predicted, we observed no significant three-way interaction (F (1, 263) = 0.018, p = n.s.). Consistent with Study 1, however, we observed a significant Brand × eWOM two-way interaction (F (1, 267) = 10.20, p < 0.01), regardless of whether the influencer was Kanye West or Kylie Jenner. Contrasts revealed that when the focus was on Nike, the market leader, positive (vs. negative) influencer eWOM had corresponding positive (vs. negative) influence on brand attitude ($M_{positive}$ = 6.06 vs. $M_{negative}$ = 5.32; t (132) = 4.43, p < 0.01), but the effects were absent for Adidas, the market follower ($M_{positive}$ = 5.25 vs. $M_{negative}$ = 5.38; t (135) = −0.6, p = n.s.).

Figure 4 shows the same data pattern for brand attitudes in response to Kanye West and Kylie Jenner. We observed a significant

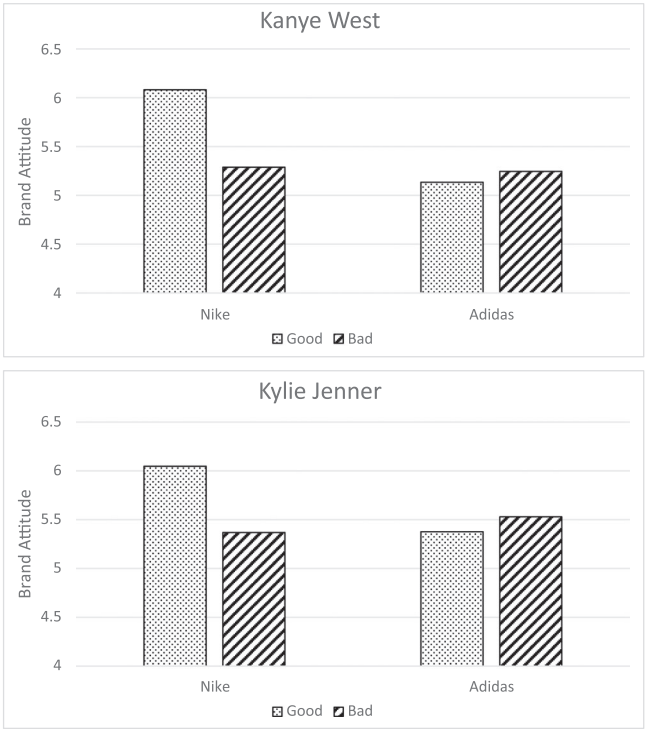


FIGURE 4 Brand x eWOM 2-way interaction (Study 3). *Source*: Authors' elaboration.

two-way interaction, indicating that participants had more positive (vs. negative) attitudes toward Nike after they viewed positive (vs. negative) postings by Kanye West (F (1, 133) = 5.25, $p < 0.05$) and by Kylie Jenner (F (1, 130) = 4.89, $p < 0.01$). Specifically, as Figure 3 shows, the contrasts revealed higher brand attitudes toward Nike after viewing West's positive eWOM ($M_{positive}$ = 6.08) and lower attitudes after viewing his negative eWOM ($M_{negative}$ = 5.28; t (66) = 3.40, $p < 0.01$), supporting H1. However, for the Adidas brand, West's positive and negative eWOM resulted in similar brand attitude levels ($M_{positive}$ = 5.13 vs. $M_{negative}$ = 5.24; t (67) = −0.34, p = n.s.), in line with H2. Similarly, participants reported more positive attitudes toward Nike after they viewed Jenner's positive eWOM ($M_{positive}$ = 6.04) and more negative attitudes after viewing her negative eWOM ($M_{negative}$ = 5.36; t (64) = 2.84, $p < 0.01$). However, for Adidas, Jenner's positive and negative eWOM engendered similar brand attitude levels ($M_{positive}$ = 5.37 vs. $M_{negative}$ = 5.52; t (66) = −0.53, p = n.s.). To control for variations in brand experiences, we reanalyzed the data to include usage frequency as covariates in our ANOVA analyses. The results remained consistent, suggesting that brand experiences failed to affect outcomes.

6.4 | Discussion

Study 3 conceptually replicates the results of Studies 1 and 2 by examining the impact of two mega influencers, Kanye West and Kylie Jenner, who present significantly contrasting public personas. Regardless of their differences, both influencers significantly affected the public's perception of Nike, the market leader, while Adidas, the challenger brand, saw no such influence. The influencers' gender seemed to have no effect.

7 | DISCUSSIONS

In this study, we investigate consumer responses to mega-influencers' eWOM messages in duopolistic markets. In three lab experiments, we find that mega-influencers' eWOM has varying effects, depending on whether social media postings focus on leading or challenger brands. All three studies indicate that mega-influencers' eWOM has observable effects on brand attitudes if the target brand is a market leader rather than a challenger. The findings generalize to duopolistic markets for smartwatch products (Apple vs. Samsung, Study 1), courier services (UPS vs. FedEx, Study 2), and sports apparel (Nike vs. Adidas, Study 3) to different influencers (Marques Brownlee, Study 1; Gary Vaynerchuk, Study 2; Kanye West, and Kylie Jenner, Study 3) and to Facebook, Instagram, and X social media platforms.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the eWOM literature (Filieri, 2015) within the context of mega-influencers. It also advances emerging research on social media influencers and their effects on brand perceptions (Babić Rosario et al., 2016; Filieri, Javornik, et al., 2021; van Gogh et al., 2024; Walter et al., 2024). Recent findings indicate that, in addition to the number of followers, factors such as following duration (Breves & Liebers, 2024), influencer expertise (Ko & Phua, 2024), user-influencer similarity (Olbermann et al., 2024), and influencer playfulness (Kim & Baek, 2024) significantly shape brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Future research could explore how these factors influence the dynamics between leading and challenger brands in terms of their effect on consumer perceptions.

7.1 | Theoretical implications

This research is among the first to consider duopoly contexts (Yoon et al., 2011) for theoretically conceptualizing and empirically testing how social media postings by mega-influencers affect brand attitudes. We contribute to the eWOM literature by empirically demonstrating that mega-influencers' opinions and judgments significantly impact brand perceptions (Park, Lee, et al., 2021; Teresa borges-Tiago et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2021). We enhance understandings about information processing in duopolistic markets (Bass et al., 2005; Chintagunta & Vilcassim, 1994), by using the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012; Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Our findings provide empirical support for the hypothesis that both positive and negative eWOM significantly enhance or diminish brand attitudes, particularly for market leaders.

Our results resonate with dual models of the information-processing system (Kahneman, 2011), particularly the heuristic-

systematic model (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Consumers may use entrenched perceptions about social status and prestige of mega-influencers and dominant brands to automatically link them in terms of credibility. We show that intuition, emotions, and unconscious cognitive processes play an a priori role (i.e., System 1; Haidt, 2001) in which consumers perceive that influencer status is linearly associated with brand status.

Brands have an incumbent advantage (Han et al., 2001; MacMillan & Selden, 2008) regarding prime status and market leverage. An eWOM message is congruent if it features a high-status celebrity endorsing a highly positioned brand, and consumers are likely to comply in forming opinions and attitudes (Bergkvist, 2017). In contrast, an eWOM message is incongruent if it features a high-status celebrity endorsing a lower-status challenger brand. In response, consumers are likely to activate rational cognitive processes (e.g., System 2) to analyze eWOM credibility. Incongruence might amplify the challenger's disadvantage, leading consumers to doubt the influencer's credibility and distrust the brand (Bachleda & Berrada-Fathi, 2016). We demonstrate that the incumbent advantage model is a useful theoretical approach to investigate competitive dynamics between market rivals, particularly in duopolies where leaders defend their advantages and challengers strive to improve market share (Kirk & Zollo, 2021).

We contribute to literature on positive and negative word-of-mouth (WOM) (Chang & Wu, 2014; Moon et al., 2017; Samson, 2006; Wakefield & Wakefiled, 2018) by providing empirical evidence showing that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) from mega-influencers has specific effects on brand attitudes in duopolistic markets. When consumers perceive that influencer status is congruent with market leader status, positive (vs. negative) eWOM fosters (vs. decreases) brand attitudes. In contrast, when consumers perceive that influencer status is incongruent with market challenger status, positive or negative eWOM lacks significant impact.

We find that influencer and brand status relationships are consistent across smartwatch products, courier services, and sports apparel industry types. Gender plays no role in the relationships. Our study opens several paths for future research to examine how unconscious versus rational consumer perceptions (Zollo, 2021) of influencers' eWOM impact brand attitudes. Our framework shows how the leader versus challenger market position mediates the relationship between mega-influencers' eWOM and consumers' brand attitudes (Figure 1). Further examination might focus more on the sociological and psychological variables affecting brand perceptions. For example, key variables for understanding eWOM impacts in duopolies might include sensory, affective, intellectual, or behavioral consumer experiences with brands and their cognitive, hedonic, and sociopersonal integrative expectations regarding brands (Zollo et al., 2020).

7.2 | Managerial implications

Our findings are particularly relevant for marketers in duopolistic markets. Managers of leading brands are encouraged to build partnerships with mega-influencers to foster positive consumer attitudes and enhance connections between celebrity status and brand prestige through reviews, opinions, and feedback. Managers should also closely monitor influencers' eWOM about their products. Additionally, they can strengthen brand perceptions by linking strategic brand elements such as logos (Müller et al., 2013) to a mega-influencer's online presence, as seen in associating Cristiano Ronaldo ("CR7") with Nike ("Swoosh") to enhance brand personality. Associations can be made through text such as social media posts or multimedia such as videos (Fileri, Acikgoz, Li, et al., 2023; Filieri, Javornik, et al., 2021).

Conversely, managers of challenger brands should invest in nurturing partnerships with emerging or micro-influencers whose budding credibility aligns with that of challenger brands. When influencers and brands share emerging statuses, consumers are likely to perceive positive eWOM as more authentic. By doing so, challenger brands may also have more control over negative eWOM as lesser-known influencers are (1) more controllable and (2) their messages reach smaller audiences (Conde & Casais, 2023; Kim et al., 2023).

Aside from suggestions about the choice of the right influencer with respect to brand status, recommendations for managing negative eWOM arise for both leading and challenger brands (Samson, 2006). For the former, it emerges that managers should engage leading mega-influencers directly, for example, by encouraging influencers to experience new products and independently recognize their quality and benefits. Thus, managers should always keep mega-influencers' satisfaction levels high and reward them not only monetarily but also with products that meet their expectations. Another strategy that marketing managers can exploit is stressing to mega-influencers the risk they may face if they start to openly criticize brands they previously endorsed, as their followership base may perceive the influencer as inconsistent or as someone endorsing products just for money (Moon et al., 2017).

Managers of challenger brands, on the other hand, should try to avoid having their brand become the subject of leading mega-influencers' eWOM messages. While positive eWOM may not generate significant effects, negative eWOM significantly influences consumers' brand attitudes negatively. This effect stems from the fact that consumers perceive criticisms from mega-influencers as reliable information and tend to follow it. Negative eWOM from mega-influencers about a challenger brand can then cause it to lose further position in consumers' mental rankings (Ho-Dac et al., 2013).

7.3 | Limitations and future research

We encourage future investigations into systematic relationships between mega, macro, micro, and nano-influencers and between leader versus challenger brand status. Aligned with that view, we find that when mega-influencers post positive or negative reviews about leading brands, they significantly amplify brand attitudes in

corresponding positive or negative directions, but the effects fail to occur for postings about challenger brands. The pattern suggests synergistic impacts on brand attitudes. From the perspective of congruence theory, the effects may depend on whether influencer image matches brand image (Choi et al., 2013, 2015, 2020; Lee et al., 2020; McKay-Nesbitt & Yoon, 2015; Rossi et al., 2023).

In showing that eWOM is highly important in duopolistic markets, we reveal strategies for leading or challenger brands. Still, we acknowledge that our study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, we target mostly Gen-Z, a rising consumer cohort, but other groups such as Gen-Alpha or Gen-X, may potentially report different brand attitudes in response to mega, macro, or micro-influencer postings about market leaders and challengers. Thus, future research should replicate our studies in broader market contexts such as oligopolies, using diverse consumer cohorts, and considering micro-influencers as eWOM sources. We also suggest testing Kamins's (1990) match-up hypothesis and evaluating effects of audio versus visual eWOM formats.

Second, our focus on more than one product or service category allows for some generalization, but the limited focus on American students opens new research avenues for comparative studies that test our findings in different countries. Conducting cross-cultural studies could offer valuable perspectives. Given that different values are emphasized in different cultures (Ahn et al., 2024; Diwanji et al., 2024), it is important to explore whether the country of origin of an influencer affects consumer trust and brand attitudes differently across various cultural contexts. Examining these variations could help identify cultural nuances and refine strategies for influencer marketing in diverse markets.

Third, future exploration of this topic could benefit from incorporating qualitative research to delve deeper into the underlying factors that drive consumers to trust mega-influencers. Recent studies on the topic have utilized in-depth interviews and focus groups (e.g., Buckley et al., 2024; Vargo et al., 2024; Zhou & Lou, 2023). Understanding these driving factors through such qualitative approaches could provide richer insights and enhance the interpretation of our findings.

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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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APPENDIX

Appendix I. An example posting by Marques Brownlee (Study 1).

Marques Brownlee, widely known as MKBHD, is a prominent tech YouTuber and influencer renowned for his insightful gadget reviews, technology commentary, and high-quality video production. Starting his YouTube channel in 2008, Brownlee quickly rose to fame with his detailed analyses and consumer-friendly approach, making complex technology accessible to a broad audience. With a background in Business and Technology and Information Systems from Stevens Institute of Technology, his expertise is evident in his thorough evaluations of smartphones, laptops, and other tech products. As of 2023, MKBHD has amassed millions of subscribers, becoming a pivotal figure in the tech community and collaborating with major technology brands and other high-profile personalities.

Recently, while scrolling through your Facebook account, you came across a post made by MKBHD:

💖"Just got my hands on the new Apple Smart Watch and it's a game-changer! Sleek design, incredible battery life, and seamless connectivity. It's not just a watch, it's the future on your wrist. #AppleWatch #TechTrendsetter"

😡"Just endured the new Apple Smart Watch and it's a massive letdown! Clunky design, dismal battery life, and glitchy connectivity. It's not innovation, it's a step back in time. #AppleWatchFail #TechDisappointment"

💖"Just got my hands on the new Samsung Galaxy Watch and it's a game-changer! Sleek design, incredible battery life, and seamless connectivity. It's not just a watch, it's the future on your wrist. #SamsungGalaxyWatch #TechTrendsetter"

😡"Just endured the new Samsung Galaxy Watch and it's a massive letdown! Clunky design, dismal battery life, and glitchy connectivity. It's not innovation, it's a step back in time. #SamsungGalaxyWatchFail #TechDisappointment"

Appendix II. An example posting by Gary Vaynerchuck (Study 2).

Gary Vaynerchuk, an American entrepreneur, social media influencer, and digital marketing pioneer, commands a vast following with his impactful insights into business and entrepreneurship. As the architect of Wine Library TV and VaynerMedia, he revolutionized how brands interact with consumers online. His candid, direct style resonates deeply on platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn, where he shares motivational and practical business advice. Author of best-selling books on digital marketing and self-development, Vaynerchuk's influence extends beyond traditional business realms, inspiring a generation of digital natives. His expertise and charisma make him an undeniable authority and trendsetter in the digital world.

Recently, while scrolling through your X account (formerly known as Twitter), you came across a post made by Gary:

💖 "Absolutely in awe of UPS's impeccable service! Their precision and speed in delivery is unmatched. Feels like every package arrives with a personal touch of care and efficiency. UPS, you've outdone yourselves! 🌟 #DeliveryExcellence"

😡 "Frustrated with FedEx's service lately! Delays and mix-ups are becoming the norm. It's like each package is a gamble on whether it'll arrive on time, or at all. FedEx, this is disappointing! 😡 #DeliveryDisaster"

Appendix III. An example of postings by Kanye West (Study 3).

Kanye West is an iconic American artist, fashion designer, and entrepreneur, renowned for his profound impact on music, culture, and fashion. As a multi-Grammy-winning rapper and producer, his albums have consistently pushed creative boundaries. Beyond music, Kanye has wielded significant influence on social media, often sparking global conversations with his candid tweets and posts. His Yeezy fashion line, especially the sneakers, has achieved cult status, merging luxury with streetwear. His controversial and candid nature ensures he remains at the forefront of digital discussions, making him not just a music icon, but a prominent social media influencer with an undeniable cultural footprint.

Recently, while scrolling through your Instagram account, you came across a post made by Kanye:

💖 "Obsessed with these new Nike sneakers! Perfect blend of style and comfort. Every step feels like I'm walking on clouds. Nike's done it again! 🌟 #SneakerLove"

Appendix IV. An example of a posting by Kylie Jenner (Study 2).

Kylie Jenner, a member of the Kardashian-Jenner clan, is a dominant force in the realm of social media. With millions of followers, she has turned her online presence into a lucrative empire, notably launching Kylie Cosmetics, which skyrocketed her to billionaire status. Renowned for her beauty and fashion trends, Kylie's posts often influence global style and makeup choices. She has collaborated with major brands and consistently sets digital trends. Apart from business ventures, her personal life, chronicled on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, captivates audiences worldwide. As a modern-day influencer, Kylie's impact on digital culture and consumer behavior is profound.

Instagram

Recently, while scrolling through your Instagram account, you came across a post made by Kylie:

adidas

💔 "Really disappointed with these new Adidas sneakers. They lack both style and comfort. Feels like I'm walking on rocks. Not what I expected from Adidas. 😞 #SneakerLetdown"