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Social Media Influencers: An Examination of Influence Throughout the Customer Journey

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SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS: AN EXAMINATION OF INFLUENCE
THROUGHOUT THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY

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To My Family
Thank you for your support and patience in my absence.

understood I had a goal to meet. I hope this will serve as an example of what is possible if you pursue a worthy goal with unapologetic tenacity.

To my parents and grandparents, you have always believed me capable of anything. Your support of my academic pursuits is unmatched. I certainly could not have done it without the support and encouragement. "One foot in front of the other." To Gee and Pop, though I wish you could be with me as I cross this threshold, I know you are looking down from heaven. I hope to continue to make you proud.

Lastly but most importantly, thanks be to God for blessing me with the intellect and curiosity to pursue higher degrees and for sending your Son to pay the price for our transgressions.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AVE   Average Variance Extracted

CCA   Confirmatory Composite Analysis

CSR   Corporate Social Responsibility

EPHM   Ephemeral Content

eWOM   Electronic Word-of-Mouth

FOMO   Fear of Missing Out

FTP   File Transfer Protocol

HTML   Hypertext Markup Language

PLS-SEM   Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling

PSI   Para-Social Interaction

PSR   Para-Social Relationship

RMSE   Root Mean Squared Error

SM   Social Media

SMI   Social Media Influencers

UGC   User-Generated Content

VIF   Variance Inflation Factor

WOM   Word-of-Mouth

ABSTRACT

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Social media influencers (SMI) expanded exponentially in both numbers and

credibility shortly after the widespread emergence of social media platforms like

Facebook and Instagram. Firms have noticed this increase and as a result, diverted

billions of dollars in their marketing budgets toward SMI endorsements and campaigns,

and away from traditional media. As often happens with quickly occurring phenomena,

academic research is subsequently racing to understand the integral roles SMIs now

command in social media marketing, and in marketing in general. Much of the latest

research designed to understand and measure the effects of SMIs relies on previous

research into traditional celebrity endorsers. SMI attributes and approaches have been

researched like previous traditional celebrity studies.

Another emerging and relevant topic is para-social relationships – in which

followers feel as if they know the influencer like a friend though the SMI likely does not

feel the same way. While there are similarities, major differences exist between

traditional celebrities and SMIs. Examples include the delivery via social media

platforms, increased engagement through the platforms, and uploadable user-generated

content (UGC). Unlike musicians, athletes, and actresses, SMIs are generating their

stardom and followings on social media platforms with their UGC. Though the traditional

celebrity concept is still quite relevant regarding endorsements, younger consumers have been opting for less traditional media for entertainment purposes. Businesses have realized reaching Generation Z is effective and efficient through SMIs. This study advances the SMI literature in understanding the differences in para-social relationships formed with SMIs and their role throughout selected components of the customer journey rather than individual parts of it.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Globally, individuals have embraced social media platforms for numerous reasons. For example, social media users can stay in contact with friends, consume videos and stories for entertainment, read and listen to current news, share experiences and skills, shop for products and services, and play and purchase games. With 3.78 billion social media users across the planet (Gaubys, 2021), businesses have realized the huge opportunity marketing on social media platforms presents. As smartphones continue to become more affordable and global networks improve, the projected number of users is 4.41 billion by 2025. Within the United States, social media users have remained constant for the last five years at 72 percent of the population (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Due to the relationship-building features of social media (SM) platforms and ease of content creation, SM platforms have substantially enhanced the Internet's useability (Hanna et al., 2011).

Social media influencers (SMI) quickly followed the rise in social media usage by creating content people outside their local group of friends want to consume. From funny videos to expert advice, SMIs are engaging their followers by offering a break from traditional media, like TV, for a more customizable experience. While some user-generated content (UGC) has mass appeal, SMIs often produce niche or less popular

videos to suit the following they have generated. Social media platforms like YouTube offer searchability that has not been matched by traditional media. From replacing a water pump on a truck to trigonometric ratios, a quick search on YouTube offers plenty of results. Likely because of the ease of searchability and available niche content, YouTube has outpaced Facebook in the U. S. with platform visitors of 81 percent and 69 percent, respectively (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Both platforms provide notification buttons that tell followers when their SMIs have posted new content.

Notable among individuals younger than age 30, 84 percent of respondents surveyed use social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Many of the younger users are using platforms in addition to Facebook and YouTube, like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. Originally a photo-sharing site and now boasting more than 1.22 billion users, Instagram has updated its platform to include ephemeral content, video, and live feeds. Created in 2011, Snapchat is still quite popular among younger users, with its camera-first, ephemeral content attracting 498 million monthly users. Launched in 2017, TikTok is a short-video sharing platform popular among American teenagers and also Generation Z, with 689 million users monthly (Cooper, 2021).

Although the social media landscape can seem like a daunting task for firms to advertise on, the popularity of social media influencers eases some of this burden. Working with influencers is increasing, as evidenced by substantial shifts in advertising dollars. An increase from $1.7 billion in 2016 to a projected $13.8 billion in 2021 indicates early hesitation to adopt SMIs into the marketing mix has subsided (Santora, 2021). With 90 percent of respondents convinced influencer marketing is effective,

understanding the integral parts of SMIs' ability to endorse products and services is a recent focus of marketing academic research.

1.1 Problem

While firms are increasingly utilizing social media influencers to reach and engage with potential customers, academic understanding of this exponential rise in popularity is limited (Vrontis et al., 2021). Research has attempted to draw parallels between celebrity endorsers and social media influencers. But while the two certainly have similarities, SMIs have built their followings utilizing social media platforms as opposed to traditional media. Another major difference is that the SMIs are producing and controlling their own content, whereas athletes and actors do not video their performances or disseminate the content. One objective of this study is to further the knowledge base for social media influencers and their effects on the customer journey.

Another objective of this paper, while contextual, is quite relevant. Generation Z is the first generation born with the Internet. Many of them have grown up with smartphones and have shown a preference for customizable, searchable entertainment and information. This generational cohort, who has grown up with hand-held devices, spends an average of 3.4 hours online watching videos daily (Whitten, 2019). To reach these consumers, firms are increasingly marketing online, but not with traditional media as was characteristic of their predecessors. Generation Z is quite aware they are constantly being targeted, and firms realize this customer segment is often dismissive of traditional advertising methods. Thus, firms are increasingly relying on SMIs to engage with these young consumers (Cavill, 2020).

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine and assess the influence social media influencers (SMIs) have on the customer journey, particularly regarding the customer population known as "digital natives." While previous research has suggested similarities between SMIs and celebrity endorsers, social media influencers are, in fact, quite different (Nouri, 2018). Besides the previously mentioned differences in platforms and content creation, SMIs have a unique ability to engage with followers through different media platforms. With the rising popularity of social media influencers coupled with increased global social media usage, the research question guiding this study is:

RQ1: What role do SMIs have in influencing Generation Z through the stages of the customer journey.

1.3 Contribution

To date, research covering social media influencers has been partial and fragmented (Vrontis et al., 2021). The current research empirically tests the para-social relationships created by SMIs through their content and engagement. To better understand the relationship of SMIs and followers, this study will measure the entire customer journey as compared to previous research focusing on single stages of the journey. This study draws on two theoretical frameworks – the source credibility model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and the source attractiveness model (McGuire, 1985). While previous research has explored both models to gauge the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers, this study expands upon the existing body of knowledge of social media influencers by including perceived authenticity as a mediator. In sum, this research seeks

to further explain SMIs' influence over followers throughout their entire customer

journey loop.

1.4 Format of Dissertation

To better understand the literature leading to social media influencers, Chapter II

of this dissertation summarizes social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth,

opinion leaders, traditional celebrity endorser marketing, and social influence. More

specifically, Chapter II explores the relationships between the following constructs:

Attractiveness, Trustworthiness, Expertise, Para-Social Interaction, Social Media

Influencer Perceived Authenticity, Ephemeral Content, Pre-Purchase, Purchase, and Post-

Purchase. Chapter III describes the research design executed in this study. Chapters IV

and V discuss the data analysis and results of this study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This extensive literature review seeks to discover the constructs for the study of social media influencers within academic and business journals. The first sections discuss social media marketing, electronic word of mouth, opinion leadership, traditional celebrity endorsement marketing, and social influencer. The following sections elaborate on social media influencers, para-social relationships, user-generated content, Generation Z, and the underlying theories explored. While there have been numerous academic studies on both social media influencers and the customer journey, little research has combined both, even though practitioner publications are making such parallels (Gotter, 2020; Greenwald, 2019; Lee, 2018).

2.1 Social Media Influencers

With the rise in prominence of the Internet and subsequent interconnectivity of social media (i.e., blogs, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, YouTube, Tik Tok, etc.), more people are taking advantage of the platforms to carve out a following of potential customers for businesses. Specifically, the platforms are effective mechanisms by which influencer marketing strategies can be executed to promote goods and services

(Tuten & Solomon, 2017). The platforms are an effective, reliable, and credible channel for swaying consumer behavior (Berger & Keller Fay Group, 2016, p. 1).

With nearly half the world's population using social media (Tankovska, 2021), word-of-mouth and peer recommendations amplify in such a way that one person can easily reach thousands to millions of people (Knoll, 2016). As a result, many firms are shifting their advertising expenditures from traditional channels toward social media influencers (Zeng, 2020). In a recent survey (Gallegos, 2018), 75 percent of consumers indicated they rely on social media recommendations to make informed purchase decisions. Numbers like these confirm the importance of social media influencers for marketers. Not surprisingly, projections for advertising budgets that include social media influencers are climbing yearly (Lai, 2019).

Social media influencers create content for social media strategies by independently endorsing brands and products (Freberg et al., 2011). For example, micro-celebrities (Senft, 2013) produce self-presentations on social media through images and videos that create attention and stimulate followers (Khamis et al., 2017). In addition, social media influencers' posts and content are designed to affect their follower, media coverage, and organizations (Pang et al., 2016). Finally, social media influencers come in many different forms from various places in society, are not a homogenous group, and can therefore be effective across many different market segments (Abidin, 2016; Crain, 2018). Thus, by constructing memorable messages (Gladwell, 2006), influencers can attract attention for products and services and often compel their followers to action.

Many social media platforms report metrics for social media influencers, including numbers of likes, shares, and followers/subscribers. While these metrics

convey some measure of popularity, the quality of content seems to have more influence than the number of followers (Basille, 2009). Freberg et al.'s (2011) study compared social media influencer attributes with CEO prototype characteristics. Their study found that respondents viewed social media influencers as more reassuring and likelier to give advice than the CEOs.

Social media influencers have emerged in marketing communications strategies as dynamic actors (Freberg et al., 2011) that are being used along with traditional celebrity endorsers because they appear to be more like regular consumers (Barker, 2020; Mediakix, 2019a; Mediakix, 2019b). Their tactics, which are quite effective since they can quickly disseminate information to increasingly massive audiences, range from sharing written opinions in reviews on sites like Tripadvisor or Amazon to Twitter or Facebook networks sharing videos on YouTube. Finally, due to the ease of uploading content and lack of technical skills required, another communications strategy has become possible. Observers of social media influencers can engage with SMI by producing user-generated content on social media platforms (Audrezet et al., 2020; Khamis et al., 2017), and this has opened the floodgates for communications engagement.

As brands increasingly rely on social media influencers to siren their messages, the relationships are not without risk. Audrezet et al. (2020) called including promotional tactics in social media influencer content "encroachment." Minimal brand encroachment would involve sending promotional-type products for social media influencers to review because it is more organic and similar to product placement in television shows or movies (Audrezet et al., 2020). In contrast, maximum encroachment is paid for content by the brand, so the brand is the primary focus of the promotional tactic. The U. S. Federal

Trade Commission has ruled that product placement on social media is a promotion and that the social media influencer must disclose the relationship to followers. Consumers report that they enjoy the live content provided by social media influencers over prerecorded messages, so this type of promotional content will likely increase.

With only 33 percent of consumers saying they trust traditional ads, and a similar percent using ad blockers when online (Ahmad, 2019), social media influencers can reach the rest of those prospects through their networks. Moreover, since over half of all consumers rely on social media to assist in researching products (Bayindir & Kavanagh, 2018), social media influencers help guide their audience of followers toward specific brands or products. Unlike traditional celebrities, including both athletes and movie stars, social media influencers have built followings typically through credibility and engagement with their network (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) examined the influence social media influencers had over their followers by exploring the relationship between eWOM tactics, purchase intention and whether awareness of paid endorsement is positively associated with advertising recognition. Their study found ad recognition is associated with eWOM and purchase intentions, displaying that attitudinal persuasion knowledge and behavioral intentions are not always negative.

Other similar studies have reported positive results for social media influencers. Smith et al. (2018) explored the use of brand ambassadors as a means of expanding interactions with organizations and influence and found influencers admitted their abilities to influence their social media followers while hesitant when asked about follower purchase decisions. With any public communication, social media has a level of

risk involved that could involve damage to reputation and loss of followers. An example of a relatively low-risk strategy is to use brand ambassadors to execute public relations through social media by communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities (Rim & Song, 2016). Smith et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study that explores how brand ambassadors can balance the risk of being perceived as being intimately connected to the organization's SMIs. Their objective was to facilitate the development of valuable content for followers and subscribers while also valuing the benefits of being a brand ambassador. Their social media influencer respondents attributed their ability to influence their followers to charisma, honesty, openness, and content quality. However, they also admitted their influence also comes from the social media network. With corporate social responsibility being an important topic, especially with younger people, social media influencers as brand ambassadors might be the most effective communication tool organizations can use (Smith et al., 2018).

Social media influencers are remarkably diverse, crossing many traditional boundaries (Abidin, 2016; Borchers, 2019). They can play many different roles that organizations can capitalize on, such as content distributors, event hosts, or community managers. The usage of social media influencers by firms results from their versatility (Enke & Borchers, 2019). With more than half of all consumers reporting they depend on influencers for recommendations and 60 percent of teens trusting SMIs more than celebrities (Digital Marketing Institute, 2018; Mohsin, 2020), social media influencers are commanding attention from followers and businesses alike.

2.2 Social Media Marketing

The Internet is quite pervasive globally. From its early beginnings in sharing electronic mail between colleagues (Leiner et al., 2009), the Internet has found its way, not only on computers, but also on phones, automobiles, televisions, gaming systems, personal helpers, and even kitchen appliances like stoves and refrigerators. Information provided to Internet users is often valuable and efficient. People can check baseball scores or the outside temperatures by merely glancing at their phones. Cyberspace is the new medium for many social interactions, not only with other people but businesses, as well. As a mechanism of communication, social media has changed the Internet landscape, with users quickly creating content, sharing experiences, and building relationships (Hanna et al., 2011). With more than 72% of Internet users participating in social media, rising from 50% in 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2019), Facebook and various other social media platforms have become the battleground for businesses vying for prospects' attention and customer retention.

Social media marketing offers a unique ability for firms to communicate and interact with prospects (Neti, 2011). The larger variety of social media platforms provide a communication channel to consumers that were not previously available. For example, instead of the one-way communication of traditional advertisements through television, radio, or print ads, or of phone calls or emails to customer service representatives, people can leave their complaints and recommendations on numerous social media platforms. At the same time, before ever making a purchase, other prospects can read these comments and assess the firm's responsiveness in working to build both company and brand perceptions.

2.3 Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Word-of-mouth is oral communication from one person to another (Arndt, 1967), and eWOM is an increasing proportion of all WOM. The rise of technology (e.g., inexpensive computers, tablets, and cellphones) and connectivity via the Internet have enabled individuals to easily communicate with each other digitally at an ever-increasing pace. For example, more than 80% of individuals claim they text, and 69% send pictures and video (Hutchinson, 2019). eWOM as a method of communication has several different advantages for products, including no geographical restrictions (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004), positive eWOM has a more positive influence on purchase decisions than negative (Baker et al., 2016; Jin & Phua, 2014), positive reviews affect consumer trust positively (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015), negative reviews can create negative customer attitudes (Lee et al., 2008), and strengthened consumer loyalty is possible through the customer to customer know-how exchange (Gruen et al., 2006). Information flows through social media eWOM communications from influencers through their followers to non-followers (Liu et al., 2012).

While WOM exchanges can occur face to face, eWOM technology has enabled consumers to project their thoughts to multiple people at once, many times to strangers. Whether a group text on a cell phone app or social media, eWOM can occur in many different channels. Thus, social media influencers can lend credibility to eWOM (De Veirmann et al., 2017) and reach a group of people simultaneously, as opposed to just one person at a time.

2.4 Opinion Leaders

Recent articles call attention to some confusion between eWOM and UGC (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Ly & Le-Hoang, 2020). Some scholars find very little difference (Bahtar & Muda, 2016), while others denote several key differences between influencers and opinion leaders (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018). For example, is the content created considered eWOM or UGC? Within the context of social media influencers and marketing, it appears to be both. In addition, the user is creating the content and then passing the eWOM to followers in links and follow-up conversations or posts.

Interestingly, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966) described opinion leadership very similarly to today's SMIs. Their research into mass communications found that some of the passive viewing/listening audience would actively discuss their opinions about the topics with their groups in small, social groups. The result of this opinion leadership was a short-term influence. One could describe many of the SMIs with terms like "every day and casual." Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966) found that the women with large families in the more intensive household management phase were twice as likely asked for marketing advice from their peers due, most likely, to their experience.

Although a major difference between opinion leaders and social media influencers is UGC (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2018), the parallels between marketing leaders and SMI are there when comparing similar reasons for their influences. Before social media and user-generated content, one would have to ask an opinion from a neighbor or friend using the product or service in question. Presently, the search can be done through social media, either actively asking for eWOM or searching for UGC from social media

influencers using the brands or products. Another stark similarity to the Katz and

Lanzasfeld (1966) research and SMI research is that highly gregarious women with many

friends and social societies were over twice as likely to be marketing leaders than those

without the sizeable social circle or in terms of social media, followers.

Like coordinated traditional advertisement campaigns between print and

television (Batra & Keller, 2016), SMI can use UGC to move followers between pictures

and videos. From the macro standpoint that Batra and Keller (2016) suggest, other

communications have varying strengths and weaknesses. Utilizing an array of influencers

to increase brand awareness and purchase intentions is the new technique being deployed

by firms' marketing (Schomer, 2019). Relying on the following that already exists and

the UGC, the social media influencers can promote messages and brands to a generation

of consumers who are voluntarily waiting on the content and will get notification when it

arrives on their phones. The firms' macro level of coordination with influencers passes

the baton to the SMIs' micro-ownership of their followers' customer journeys. SMIs

guiding these followers on the reciprocal customer journey (Court et al., 2009) are

valuable propositions for firms.

2.5 Traditional Celebrity Influencer Marketing

Before the Internet, older generations consumed their educational and

entertainment content through broadcast television, radio, movies, and print. Celebrity

endorsers rose to companies' needs for spokespersons in advertisements. A celebrity

endorser is "any individual who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition

on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement" (McCracken,

1989, p. 310). Rising from a 15 percent presence in prime-time television ads in 1975 (Friedman et al., 1976), celebrities and sports figures became fixtures in American commercials, appearing in about 25 percent of the advertisements (Shimp, 1997). Consumers typically trusted famous people more than younger people of past generations (Atkin & Block, 1983). The popularity of these celebrities, therefore, established credibility for the products or services they endorsed.

Celebrity advertisements were quite effective in many instances. Friedman et al. (1976) reported higher favorability for a wine brand when endorsed by a celebrity versus the other endorsers, including an expert, a company president, and a non-famous or typical consumer. Celebrity endorsers not necessarily associated with a product or service are considered famous and therefore credible. In contrast, ordinary consumers are non-famous people whose knowledge about the product comes from the use of the product. Moreover, a person recognized as a professional expert has the authority and expertise to make endorsements and judgments about the product. For example, the company president is an endorser of his/her products as the leader of the firm. Interesting findings from their experiment about expected selling price, probable taste, intent-to-purchase, and believability is that the celebrity endorser's advertisement was higher regarding probable taste and more believable, and only second to the company president in purchase intentions (Friedmann et al., 1976). Each endorser raised the expectations of probable taste, intent-to-purchase, and believability, so they concluded that any endorser is better than none.

Kamen et al. (1975) examined Amoco's shift toward advertising using famous endorsers and proposed four main reasons for the shift: to attract attention, to make

advertisements more entertaining, to elicit trust due to the celebrity's perceived lack of interest, and the celebrity's actual affection for the endorsed product. They found that Amoco Oil's use of Johnny Cash as an endorser saw mixed results in the believability construct. For example, non-customers were not convinced and, on average, responded much lower. But most Amoco customers found him believable. Indeed, many respondents commented Cash seemed earnest, not needing the money, genuinely believed in the products, and sincere in his endorsements. At the same time, other comments disagreed with his product knowledge because of his career as a singer/entertainer. Finally, the study revealed an increased awareness of the brand and an increase in the advertisement's perceived entertainment.

Atkin and Block (1983) concluded companies could grab attention for their advertisements by utilizing celebrity endorsers. For example, advertisements for alcoholic beverages using celebrity endorsers were more favorable than those with non-celebrities. The believability measure did not produce a significant difference, however, as with Kamen et al. (1975). At the same time, perceived trustworthiness, competency, product image, and attractiveness were higher for the celebrity endorsers, though purchase intention was not significantly different. Finally, the largest difference between the younger demographic (teenagers) and older respondents was with the believability context, which provides support for this study's focus on Generation Z.

A later study by Kamins (1989) assessed celebrity endorser advertisements using five constructs: credibility, trustworthiness, believability, identifiability, and product image congruence. The results were favorable for credibility, ad effectiveness, perceived sponsor ratings, quality of service, and higher purchase intentions. The study did not

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include non-celebrity endorsers as a basis of comparison, but the findings suggest celebrities can be perceived as credible and effective spokespersons.

Till and Shimp (1998) added the construct of associate learning in their study. The construct assumes memory is a network consisting of various nodes connected by associative links and can therefore measure the adverse effects of celebrity endorsements. This associative link relies on the cumulative impact of positive feelings a person might have towards a celebrity over time. The person then imputes the celebrities' positive image onto the product creating an associative link. But negative information can reduce that link (Till & Shimp, 1998).

To be effective, a celebrity's "image" must fit the product. If it is not perceived to fit, the image of the celebrity is likely to be viewed as counter-productive. Perhaps worse is the possibility that negative information about a celebrity's life later becomes public knowledge? Examples include Mike Tyson, O. J. Simpson, and Michael Jackson. One way to get around this is to use deceased celebrities, but negative information can emerge after death. While considerable research predates the rise of social media influencers, deceased celebrities are no longer the only choice to minimize the risk of adverse incidents becoming linked to companies and brands. As noted by Till and Shimp (1998), "When a consumer thinks about a brand, the link with the celebrity node is animated to a certain level through spreading activation" (p. 68). Thus, any negative information "activates that node" and has a negative effect on the marketing.

2.6 Social Media Influencer Attributes

To better understand the role of social media influencers, this study relies on two previous research frameworks – the source credibility model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and the source attractiveness model (McGuire, 1985). Research using both models has been used to study celebrity endorsers in traditional advertisement campaigns. Actors, musicians, and athletes have gained fame through traditional methods, like television or movie appearances. But most social media influencers have achieved recognition using non-traditional methods based on self-promotion.

2.6.1 Source Credibility Model

The effectiveness of communication depends to a great extent on the viewer's attitude toward the communicator (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Expertness and trustworthiness are the two factors that underscore source credibility. In their experiment, Hovland and Weiss (1951) reported that communicated information acceptance was higher from sources viewed as "high credibility" and lower from those viewed with "low credibility." A similar experiment extended these findings by showing that people were more cognitively involved if the source had moderate credibility (Sternthal et al., 1978). Moreover, respondents more adamantly supported or opposed moderate credibility depending on the readers' points of view of the information presented. But respondents were less supportive or oppositional when exposed to a high credibility source. Sternthal et al. (1978) described these results as problematic when examining source credibility within a consumer behavior context. But the salience of the communicator's attributes with a message could be achieved "in person" or from a social media influencer.

Whitehead (1968) identified potential dimensions of source credibility and categorized them into four dimensions. Dimension I, while global in nature, represented trustworthiness. Dimension II was competence or professionalism, including adjectives like honest, moral, and virtuous. Dimension III was the same as Lemert's (1963) third Dimension – dynamism. Finally, Dimension IV was objectivity. Jacobson (1969) proposed similar dimensions, with a few changes. Dimension III also confirmed Lemert's (1963) and Whitehead's (1968) dynamism, but Jacobson (1969) identified Dimension I as objectivity. Like the Lemert (1963) and Whitehead (1968) research, another study by Berlo et al. (1969) labeled the third dimension of the source credibility model as dynamism. Their dynamism items included perceptions like frank or reserved, bold or timid, active or passive, added emphatic or hesitant, and forceful or forceless. Finally, Berlo et al. (1969) extended Hovland and Weiss's (1951) work to further explain the theory of source credibility as being a continuum. While viewer or consumer perceptions of credibility are likely a continuum, previous research treated credibility as dichotomous – either low or high. Hovland et al., (1953) further noted the difficulty in measuring credibility because of the variable's entanglement with trust and expertise.

Other studies have also explored the complicated relationships between source credibility and consumer behavior. Harmon and Coney (1982) found respondents were more favorable toward purchase when the source had high credibility, but moderately credible sources affected lease intentions greater. Higher credibility sources in the services industry have also been reported as attracting more new customers with smaller price reductions (Gotlieb et al., 1988). Similarly, sources perceived as highly credible were found to be more persuasive toward the desired behavior change (Manfredo &

Bright, 1991), and celebrities have higher source credibility than non-celebrities

(Nataraajan & Chawla, 1997). These findings lead to the question of how effective social

media influencers (non-celebrity) are at specific points along the customer journey.

To solidify the domain of source credibility within marketing, Ohanian (1990)

extended previous research and assessed scale reliability and validity. Her review

identified three dimensions for credibility. Expertise and trustworthiness were no

surprise, both having been proposed in previous research. The third factor in the Ohanian

(1990) study was attractiveness, identified as having descriptors such as attractive, classy,

beautiful, elegant, and sexy. A caution expressed about scale development noted that

future researchers should be cautious in their generalization because they are limited by

the celebrities of the time (e.g., Madonna, John McEnroe, Linda Evans, and Tom Selleck)

since social media influencers in most instances have much less well-known names.

2.6.1.1 Expertise. Expertise is associated with how well the message's communicator is

perceived as qualified to make the claims (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Many social media

influencers have established themselves as leaders or specialists in certain areas. Valck et

al. (2013) found that SMIs who publish credible advice and reviews increase the trust

followers have in social media influencers' content. Follower perceptions of the

credibility of the influencer also substantially influence the adoption of content. Over

thirty years ago, Ohanian (1991) identified celebrity endorser expertise as a crucial factor

in advertising match-up effects. A similar situation occurs between the relationship of

SMIs' perceived expertise and content acceptance. When recommending or reviewing a

product, an SMI with perceived expertise in the product area is more likely to be seen as

a credible source of information by their followers (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). For

example, Lou and Yuan (2019) reported a positive relationship between perceived expertise and follower trust, while Eisend and Langner (2010) concluded that expertise is a crucial attribute of influence.

Chandawarkar et al. (2018) suggest that Twitter could be a good outlet for doctors to educate the masses. Their research constructed Twitter influence scores using Insight API data and ranked the top 100 social media influencers in plastic surgery. Seventy-seven of the influencers were board-certified surgeons–which would categorize them as expert practitioners. Twitter was chosen over other social media platforms because of the ability to focus on education rather than "find a doctor" (Chandawarkar et al., 2018). In a related study, DeBono and Harnish (1988) demonstrated that high self-monitoring propensity viewers were more responsive to solid arguments from an expert source than an attractive source. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

> H1: Social media influencer expertise is positively associated with para-social interaction.

> H2: Social media influencer expertise is positively associated with the trustworthiness of the influencer.

> H3: Social media influencer expertise is positively associated with the SMIs perceived authenticity.

2.6.1.2 Trustworthiness. Morgan and Hunt (1994) conceptualized the trust variable as one party's confidence in another's reliability and integrity. Pornpitakpan (2004) defined a speaker's trustworthiness as the audience's perceived validity level about the claims made. SMIs have a unique relationship with their followers concerning trust. As much as 70% of US social media users that follow a minimum of one social media influencer say

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they trust influencers as much or more than their friends (O'Malley, 2019). Lou and Yuan's (2019) study identified a positive relationship between influencer content that is informative and follower trust in the social media influencer. It seems logical, therefore, that trust in the influencers' recommendations should translate into trust in brands, brand loyalty, and purchase intentions.

The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

H4: Social media influencer trustworthiness is positively associated with para-social interaction.

H5: Social media influencer trustworthiness is positively associated with the SMIs perceived authenticity.

2.6.1.3 Authenticity. Authenticity is a reoccurring attribute of social media influencers. SMIs need to be perceived as genuine and unique, especially concerning Generation Z. Audrezet et al.'s (2018) study focused on passionate and transparent authenticity. They also proposed an authenticity management framework that includes fairytale authenticity, absolute authenticity, fake authenticity, and disembodied authenticity. Another related study of human branding antecedents (Moulard et al., 2015) reported younger followers of celebrities rely on the person's rarity when gauging authenticity. This finding implies that Generation Z perceives individuality as somewhat similar to authenticity.

2.6.2 Source Attractiveness Model

McGuire's (1985) source attractiveness model also includes the credibility component of the source credibility model and relates it to the message's effectiveness when the receiver regards the communicator as similar, likable, familiar, and attractive. While there is substantial research regarding physical attractiveness within the

advertising context, the construct itself is complex. For example, Joseph's (1982) review of the physical attractiveness literature reported that physically attractive communicators are liked more than unattractive communicators and have a positive impact on perceptions of the products they endorse.

In related studies, DeBono and Harnish (1988) showed that low self-monitoring propensity recipients were somewhat more responsive to arguments by an attractive presenter than an expert presenter if the argument was strong. Similarly, Van de Sompel and Vermeir's (2016) experiment showed more positive perceptions of advertisements and higher purchase intentions when peer models were perceived as attractive.

2.6.2.1 Attractiveness. Attractiveness is associated with both a person's physical attractiveness and likeability (Ohanian, 1990). In a recent study, Wiedmann and von Mettenheim (2020) identified attractiveness as the most critical factor contributing to the success of SMIs in improving brand image, satisfaction, trust, and purchase intentions in an entry-level luxury fashion brand context. Their finding is not surprising as attractiveness is one of the primary determinants of parasocial interactions strength (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Eisend and Langner (2010) identified attractiveness as a crucial attribute of influence in the immediate condition, so attractive influencers are likely to achieve higher initial attention from their followers. Finally, Chaiken (1979) reported that messages from attractive communicators are more persuasive than nonattractive communicators' messages. We, therefore, propose the following hypotheses:

H6: Perceived attractiveness of social media influencers is positively associated with para-social interaction.

H7: Perceived attractiveness of social media influencers is positively associated

with the perceived authenticity of the influencer.

H8: Perceived attractiveness of social media influencers is positively associated

with the trustworthiness of the influencer.

2.6.3 Likeability

Likeability is a construct scale that measures one element of persuasion (Cialdini, 2009). While likeability overlaps with attractiveness (Friedman & Friedman, 1979) when associated with the concept of physical appearance, the construct also includes behavior (McGuire, 1985; Simons et al., 1970). Though Haiman (1949) tied persuasiveness with attractiveness and likeability, and Ohanian (1990) did not include the likeability in her dimensions source-credibility, recent research has shown that the likeability of the communicator increases advertising effectiveness (Reinhard et al., 2006; Reinhard & Messner, 2009). For a social media influencer to consistently engage an audience, most likely, the followers like him/her. Reinhard and Messner (2009) concluded that highly likable people are the best type to execute persuasive appeals for businesses. While the viewer is cognitively aware of the persuasion, the likability of the influencer helps offset this recognition. Taillon et al. (2020) found that likeability positively affects attitudes. Similarly, Friedman and Freidman (1979) found influencer likeability is associated with attitudes. While logic suggests these items are related, a construct measuring the impact of social media influencers needs all items to effectively define an internet "celebrity" that will have the most influence on viewers and followers. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H9: Likeability of social media influencers is positively associated with para-social interaction.

H10: Likeability of social media influencers is positively associated with the perceived authenticity of the influencer.

H11: Likeability of social media influencers is positively associated with the trustworthiness of the influencer.

2.6.4 Para-Social Relationships

Para-Social relationships are one-sided "friendships" that develop with an actor through mass communication, and viewers that are unknown to the actor (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Audience members develop this relationship with the performer (actor) because of the illusion that face-to-face interactions are occurring. While there is no knowledge of the viewer as an individual, the view can create a "fantasy" of actually knowing the performer personally. In addition, the viewer is free to leave the relationship at any time. Horton and Wohl (1956) question at what point in a para-social relationship does the fan reach out to the actor? This "intimacy at a distance" has similar undertones with social media influencers. Instead of traditional mass communications, social media is interactive on both sides. Although the larger the group of followers an influencer has will increase the chances an individual follower is unknown to the influencer, social media enables fans to reach out immediately to the influencer.

Daniel et al. (2018) explored para-social interactions with younger followers and social media influencers in the vaping community context. To understand the rising preferability of vaping products over traditional tobacco products by Millennial generation members and Generation Z, the study examined how companies target a

younger audience since traditional advertisement channels are not open to them due to regulations (Food and Drug Administration, 2016). The vaping community seems to align well with social media influencers as it is an interactive community displaying vaping tricks and introducing new flavors, and the endorsers are authentic users of the products. A followers one-way experience with a social media influencer is considered a para-social interaction when the follower feels like it is an actual interaction (Daniel et al., 2018). Comments on vaping videos revealed the audience feels PSI, and their feelings are impacted by multiple micro-celebrity interactions that influence audience feelings of PSR with the celebrity. The result of this relationship is sales, brand loyalty, and WOM. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

> H12: Para-social interaction will mediate the relationship between perceived attractiveness, perceived trustworthiness, perceived expertise, likeability, and the perceived authenticity of SMIs.

2.7 User Generated Content

User-Generated Content (UGC) is "the sum of all ways in which people make use of Social Media" (Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010, pg. 61). Web 2.0 enables and supports a broader range of user internet options. Social media facilitates the easy sharing of different content mediums without the knowledge of computer coding techniques. When GeoCities entered the world wide web in the mid-1990s, people did not need to know HTML or FTP to get their messages to the masses (Gill, 2004). But with today's technology sophistication, they must have personal knowledge, apply apps that simplify the process, or someone has to do it for them. Social media users are using different

platforms and self-presentations to manage different relationships (Cohen, 2012).

Ranging from blogs to pictures, videos, and hashtag campaigns, user generated content

continues to captivate friends and followers and is ultimately the canvas that SMIs paint

their art. Thus, social media can be thought of as groups of Internet platforms that enable

user generated content to be both created and shared (Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010). We

discuss the major types of USG in this section.

2.7.1 Blogs

Blogs began appearing on the Internet in the late 1990s (Gill, 2004). By 2002, an

estimated 500,000 blogs were available on the Internet, and today there are many more.

Blogs, short for Web Logs, are essentially online journals. The writer, or blogger, types

his/her comments on their webpage where people can read the blogger's thoughts,

opinions, or reviews. William Quick (2001) named the ever-expanding space in which

bloggers were writing as the "blogosphere" (Ferdig & Trammell, 2004). In his blog about

blogs, Winer (2003) defines and describes specific attributes of blogs and reviews

different blog platforms. Winer describes a (web)blog as a "hierarchy of text, images,

media objects, and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML

browser." Blogs have a title, link, and description, generally, but not always. It seems,

even from their infancy, blogs do not have a rigid structure and are left up to the blogger

to decide how that user wants to present the content. Twitter has become a popular site

for "microblogging" as it limits posts' lengths (Smith et al., 2012). Blogs are one form of

user-generated content.

2.7.2 Reviews and Testimonials

Reviews and testimonials are forms of user generated content. On these websites, like Tripadvisor.com, previous customers rate their experiences and offer insights about the services and amenities available (O'Connor, 2010). Customers no longer have to rely on the company's website for all their information. Indeed, they frequently search for user generated content to get an unbiased opinion about the location, hotel, service, or product. The interaction of UGC and eWOM, such as reviews and testimonials, is difficult to distinguish at times (Thao & Shurong, 2020). The characteristic that separates UGC from reviews and testimonials seems to be the actual publishing of the content on the open web by non-professionals (Ly & Le-Hoang, 2020). Thus, UGC gives potential consumers a perceivably more accurate depiction of the prospective product, service, experience, or destination (Krumm et al., 2008).

2.7.3 Discussion Forums

Similar to the rise of blogs, online communities have likewise grown in popularity. Many online discussion forums are formed around certain subjects like sports, different hobbies, or financial investments (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). Users often develop relationships in these discussion forums behind anonymous monikers. While often "regulated" by moderators, many discussion forums allow the free flow of information and content. Despite the anonymity, users can develop a reputation and begin to influence others within their realms. Like the Reddit subforum WallStreetBets, discussion forums have significantly affected stock prices with their risky options plays and encouragement from other posters (Boylston et al., 2021). Congress questioned one influencer from Reddit and YouTube, Roaring Kitty, for his role in influencing the online community into

such a frenzy for buying GameStop stock resulting in the loss of billions of dollars by hedge funds (Di Muzio, 2021; Gach, 2021). This incredible use of discussion forums through crude jokes, memes, and risky stock trades highlights influencers' ability to rally a group of people to the desired behavior.

2.7.4 Pictures

No longer just the medium to record family events (Van Dijck, 2008), social media has a history of sharing pictures. From profile pictures to plates of foods, social media users have taken the saying "a picture is worth a thousand words" to heart. Born out of cell phones' picture-taking capabilities and desire to capture the moment, "selfies" have become a popular style for multiple reasons (Moreau, 2020a). Social media sites like Snapchat and Instagram have expanded the selfie phenomenon by offering many editing options through users' phones. Both of these social media platforms require a picture or video to post. From dog ears to filtered colors, users are continually uploading altered photos of themselves for friends and followers on which to view, like, and comment.

Pictures often increase social media engagement (Lim et al., 2017). With widespread cell phone ownership and capabilities, many people opt to skip the social media status updates for a picture. Social media influencers often enhance their promotional posts by including pictures, words, and hyperlinks. Advertising for products and services is more memorable when both pictures and descriptions are used – depending on the expected and relevant information presented by both (Heckler & Childers, 1992). Their study found that picture memory posted higher recall than words, with the most significant difference occurring in the unexpected category. The highest

word recall occurred when there was expected congruence between the words and pictures. This indicates that SMIs utilizing pictures and words in combination is an important technique, especially when the picture and message are congruent.

The subject of a picture appears to work on different levels. If the person or persons in the picture are considered experts, they typically are rated as more attractive (Farnsworth & Beaumont, 1929). In a related study, more than half of respondents were using Instagram for social interaction, and many were also using it for social "peeking," or viewing photos of interest, celebrities, and others outside their immediate social circle (Lee et al., 2015). The invention of digital photography and the dissemination of phones, paired with the increasing preference of self-presentation (Harrison, 2002) of previous decades, has therefore culminated in an abundance of pictures to view and present on social media platforms, with some like Snapchat and Instagram, requiring pictures to participate. Thus, in this new virtual environment, the ease of posting edited pictures has dramatically increased the number of followers of some social media influencers.

2.7.5 Videos

Video sharing is another popular user generated content. Thanks to the ease of taking and uploading video via mobile phones and the availability of more platforms allowing sharing, videos have become a significant part of user generated content (Schwenzow et al., 2021). Indeed, video's positive association with endorsements, recommendations, and positive feedback is likely related to the high vividness and multi-sensory interactions of videos compared to other UGC (Dhaoui & Webster, 2021). In short, if videos are more arousing than other content, people are more likely to share them (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Gen Z consumes more online video content than any

other media and is much more prevalent than online television streaming and video games (Jones, 2020). With the popularity of social media sites like YouTube and Tik Tock, the Gen Z age group seems to prefer the searchability and engagement of UGC over traditional avenues like television.

Some researchers have focused on what makes platforms like YouTube appealing to people, aside from the obvious "lurkers" (Khan, 2017). The presence of these lurkers is not immediately obvious, but they are consuming the media, nonetheless. Khan (2017) explored the motivations for viewing video platforms to understand the distinction between participation and consumption. He defined participation as uploading a video or posting a comment, consuming as reading the comments, and noted they also enjoy the benefits of watching a video.

2.7.6 Ephemeral Content

A recent addition to social media, ephemeral content has a time-limited feature (Chen & Cheung, 2019). Snapchat, Instagram, Whatsapp, and Facebook have this feature where the content either disappears after viewing or within 24 hours of its posting (Moreau, 2020b; Pathak, 2018; Read, 2020). Users quickly scroll through the people they follow. Liking, loving, or laughing at pictures and videos shared, adds to both viewer engagement and encourages creators to make more content. The rapid growth in ephemeral content's popularity is apparent by the 339 percent increase in users of Facebook and Instagram stories since this feature was added (Smith, 2020).

In their research, Chen and Cheung (2019) hypothesized the mediation effects of gratification with the ephemeral content engagement. Social pressure to use the medium seems to be an underlying factor in the study. Subjects were worried about missing out

(FOMO) on fun their friends had with creating and viewing the content. In a related study, Morlok et al. (2017) revealed that perceived ephemerality could have a negative effect on privacy concerns. That is, since privacy concerns may negatively affect perceived enjoyment, it is possible subjects who thought their content would disappear enjoyed using the platform more.

Ephemeral media poses challenges to traditional media outlets like television. In comparison, television occupies "the attention of the audience only at very specific moments and around very determined phenomena" (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021 p. 2). In short, watching television has now become what the authors refer to as "a transmedia experience." As a result, television executives have attempted to create experiences that include Generation Z consumers who have grown up with online communities and social media.

Aragoncillo and Orus (2018) argue that recent economic conditions have changed social media marketing and purchasing, and purchases made by participating and consuming ephemeral social media platforms are a form of "impulse buying." Drawing upon Riegner's (2007) research, they conclude that both online and offline purchases are influenced by others around us (Aragoncillo & Orus, 2018). If this is true, and seems likely, then social media exercises a powerful influence on our shopping. Furthermore, for those consuming ephemeral platforms, the unspoken message could be "buy now, or you may not ever get the chance again."

While some platforms' ephemeral nature might limit the time frame for purchase, consumers still go through many recognizable steps in the customer journey. In short, a consumer often decides in the first few minutes of viewing a product whether to purchase

it or not based on the initial recognition of the brand. If the consumer does not have a positive association with the recognizing, she/he will never move on to the next stage of decision-making (Hutter et al., 2013).

Regardless of the platform, social media marketing operates on some assumptions regarding "relationship management, newsgathering, creativity, and entertainment" (Kircova et al., 2020, p. 2175). Ephemeral platforms retain these assumptions but do so in a highly "liquid" dynamic. As noted by McRoberts et al. (2017), ephemeral platforms encourage the permissive presentation of self (Goffman, 1978) because of the lowered privacy concerns of observers (Morlok et al., 2017).

Some brands have been hesitant to invest in content with such a short shelf-life. But Gary Vaynerchuk, founder of Vayner Media, questions the difference between the new ephemeral content and traditional television commercials before technology was available to record and rewatch those shows (Stampler, 2014). At the same time, Shaun McBride, one of Snapchat's early, monetized influencers, says quite bluntly that younger people are not on Facebook and that "snaps" have their undivided attention (Huet, 2014), since a sense of urgency is created by ephemeral content, and people share it so their friends will not miss out. Recent research has reported similar conclusions by practitioners. For example, ephemeral content is perceived as more enjoyable and associated with a positive mood (Bayer et al., 2016), increasingly preferred by the younger users (Billings et al., 2017), and potentially viewed longer than permanent content because viewers know the material is going to disappear (Van Nimwegen & Bergman, 2019).

The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H13: Ephemeral content usage will moderate the relationship between SMI perceived authenticity and pre-purchase.

2.8 The Customer Journey

The customer journey describes stages and experiences a consumer goes through, from recognizing a need or want to the consumption of the product or service and beyond (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Previous research viewed the customer journey as a linear movement between stages. In contrast, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) proposed the concept that the process could be more dynamic than previously thought, and therefore an ongoing cycle of linked experiences (Court et al., 2009). Indeed, consumers have a myriad of avenues to engage with a product and brand, from in-store retail to the online environment (Richardson, 2010). While research on consumer behavior is extensive in the brick-and-mortar retail space, the advent of the Internet and its new, dominant role in consumers' lives possesses plenty of opportunities as well as many unknowns.

Recent research has begun mapping this increasingly consumer-oriented journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). As Court et al. (2009) noted, "companies must invest in vehicles that let marketers interact with consumers as they learn about brands" (p. 104). Seemingly, the biggest challenge to a deeper understanding of the customer journey is the touchpoints that are not firm-based. While some social media influencers are paid with both money and products, the firm still does not control the content or the interaction with customers. While some data and conversion rates are measured through promotional codes when the SMIs direct followers to firm-owned touchpoints, what about those that

do not "click the link?" Batra and Keller (2016) describe this phenomenon as a dynamic journey where customers can move forward, backward, or leave.

The recent rise in popularity of social media influencers in developing user-generated content has attracted substantial marketing dollars, estimated to be as much as $15 billion by 2022 (Schomer, 2019). With so many avenues for information and entertainment, firms are diverting large portions of their advertising budgets away from traditional radio and television advertisements. According to O'Neill et al.'s study (2015) in the B-to-B sector, up to 90 percent of consumers have completed their customer journey before engaging with the brand. But in the B-to-C sector, there are continually growing avenues for customer and brand interaction in the digital world, while the consumer journey continues to evolve, with more firms vying for the precious attention of Generation Z. To be effective firms, therefore, need to target not only the right customers but also where they are on the customer journey (Batra & Keller, 2016).

The customer journey is relevant for understanding the phenomenon of social media influencers since they are increasingly affecting that journey. In the following sections, we summarize the stages of the customer journey.

2.8.1 Prepurchase

The first stage of the customer journey is the prepurchase stage. Prepurchase describes the customer's experience before purchasing the product (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This stage includes all customer interactions with the brand, category, and environment before the purchase. The phase begins once a customer recognizes a need or want for a particular product or service. The need or want recognition then transitions

into searching for the product or service in hopes of learning more about and eventually satisfying the need or want.

With the widening of entertainment and educational options, social media influencers potentially play a pivotal role during the first phase of the customer journey. Before the widespread usage of the Internet, people watched their favorite television shows or sporting events that included advertisements by celebrities often starring in these shows. In contrast, the recent emergence in social media of ephemeral content that lasts only a very short time is particularly relevant. For example, social media platforms notify SMI followers that a new picture or video is posted. Then the clock is ticking to view the message since it will vanish in 24 hours.

Social media influencers often move customers through the prepurchase stage faster since their followers learn about many products before purchasing. For example, influencers live-stream games on the social media platform Twitch and interact with followers while playing many different games (Appel et al., 2020). Followers cannot actively control any of the game's aspects, but they can ask questions and experience different aspects of the game before purchasing. Because of the rising popularity of live influencers, which have limitations on time, some brands have begun exploring virtual influencers (Nolan, 2018).

Consumers might not need or want what is promoted, yet they are aware of it moving them to the second touchpoint (Batra & Keller, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Unlike the days of consuming traditional advertisements, many times, a social media influencer will include a link to more resources, along with the recommendation. Thus, followers can quickly move along the customer journey, guided by the influencer. While

asking a friend for their WOM thoughts about a product is still plausible, with influencers, information is immediately supplied via hyperlinks to the company site or another influencer's social media platform.

The Internet offers viewers the flexibility of watching what and whom they want when they want. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (among others) send notifications to followers when the influencer has posted new material or has gone "live." Influencers often solve different problems, from skin issues to car troubles, with the same products they are endorsing. Thus, prospective customers can realize and more quickly understand their need for products and services by watching influencers (Appel et al., 2020), fixing problems that sometimes they did not even know they had. This flexibility, paired with the endorsement and discounts for products or services, offers firms a unique opportunity to initiate the customer journey through social media influencers.

The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H14: SMI authenticity is positively associated with the pre-purchase stage of the
　　　customer journey.

2.8.2 Purchase

The second stage of the customer journey is the purchase stage. The purchase stage describes the customer's interactions with the brand during purchase. Much of the literature details the service environment (Berry et al., 2002), the atmospherics (Bitner, 1990), and the marketing mix (Kotler & Keller, 2015), as well as how firms can influence consumers within their brick-and-mortar stores or on company websites. During this phase, a firm's primary focus or intention is to halt the searching begun in the prepurchase stage and motivate the customer to purchase its product or service. A reality

in the digital age is that comparison shopping by searching competitors can and is occurring while the customer is in the firm's store or on their website, and even that customers can skip stages of the journey (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020).

Social media influencers and their platforms, therefore, offer a unique benefit to firms. Often, influencers ask people to comment about the products they recommend and even offer tips on product use in the comment sections. This engagement serves two purposes: consumers can read reviews by customers and engage with each other. These interactions with the brand can ease some hesitation at the consumer journey's purchase stage by lowering the perceived risk of purchase. Fine et al. (2017) coined the term "prosumers" to describe the consumers who actively share their experiences with products or brands on the Internet. While this study measures consumers' motivations to share their experiences within the travel industry, it highlights the impact of social media posts and reviews of unpaid consumers, along with social media influencers.

To maximize product circulation and exposure throughout social media, some influencers offer prizes for followers who create similar product endorsements (Abidin, 2016). The influencers pick the winners who will get compensated with some notoriety, free products, and personalized notes. To enter the contest, followers must have purchased the product, essentially turning them into customers. Submitting their user-generated content, followers move to the third stage in the customer journey as they now willingly become "prosumers" by promoting the product or brand to their followers. These are all examples of how SMIs move observers through the various stages of the customer journey, often ending in the purchase and post-purchase phases.

In a recent study, Ilicic and Webster (2016) identified perceived celebrity authenticity as a strong predictor of purchase intentions. Their study focused on the consumer perceptions of the celebrities being true to themselves using Moulard et al.'s (2015) conceptualization. SMIs that manage their authenticity within Audrezet et al.'s (2020) framework utilizing both passion and transparency are more likely to be successful in the long run. The SMIs' followers will be more likely to consider products and brands endorsed when they perceive the SMI as authentic.

The following hypothesis is proposed:

H15: Perceived authenticity of SMIs is positively associated with the purchase
   stage of the customer journey.

2.8.3 Post-Purchase

The third stage of the customer journey is the post-purchase stage. The post-purchase stage includes the customer's interactions with the brand after purchase. This stage includes consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), service requests (Kelley & Davis, 1994), and post-purchase engagement (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Once purchase occurs, the customers can return to the social media influencer's posts and describe their experience. This engagement typically includes a reciprocal exchange of thoughts and ideas. For example, Park and Cho's (2012) study of social networks revealed that customers returned to the online community for affirmation that their purchase was a positive, or correct, one. These conversations not only affirm customers to repurchase but also help potential buyers during their prepurchase stages. Through the content provided by the social media influencer, customers can also exchange their knowledge with other

potential customers and the social media influencers, thus strengthening the post-purchase stage and aligning customers with the brand.

During the consumption phase of the product or service, consumers often share their experiences via social networks (Kang & Schuett, 2013). Research by Alic et al. (2017) and Guerreiro et al. (2019) both concluded that followers loyal to social media influencers visited the same vacation destinations of which the influencers posted. Like the SMIs, the followers shared their experiences on social media. Even if these experiences are shared on the follower's account and not the SMI's postings, the follower then takes the influencer's role as a promoter (or detractor) of the brand, product, or service. This state is essential because firms want customers to enter the "loyalty loop" (Court et al., 2009), and once again, enter the prepurchase stage for the firms' products or services. To stimulate this "loyalty loop," firms are increasingly utilizing partner-owned touchpoints through social media influencers who can, in turn, create more customer-owned touchpoints within the social media environment, like influencer contests (Abidin, 2016).

Audrezet et al.'s (2020) research found that the more experienced SMIs that they interviewed were concerned with maintaining their authenticity. Critical to an SMI is the followers. Losing perceived authenticity would likely mean losing followers. Honest endorsement of products and brands leads their followers to post-purchase behaviors, like WOM and eWOM.

The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H16: Perceived authenticity of SMIs is positively associated with the post-purchase stage of the customer journey.

2.9 Relevance of Generation Z

Norman Ryder (1965) proposed caution towards studying generational groups as homogenous entities, yet in his seminal essay, he suggested that events, like war, offer some generational congruence to those old enough to participate or comprehend the events. Similarly, in his book about the changing political climates in western societies, Inglehart (1977) noted that increased income and expansion of education opportunities of generational cohorts are becoming increasingly involved in political movements. Thus, exploring generational cohort engagement with SMI is potentially meaningful for marketers.

Generation Z has witnessed events like 9/11, the war on terror, the housing market crash, and most recently, the COVID-19 global pandemic. Just as Ryder (1965) and Inglehart (1977) hint about future generations taking advantage of mobility (due to the increasing ability of Western consumers to own a car and undertake affordable air travel), the Generation Z cohort, born between 1995 and 2010, has grown up with the Internet and social media exposure (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). These individuals are highly adapted to search for information across multiple platforms and are quite comfortable integrating the physical world with the online world (Prensky, 2009).

Generation Z increasingly commands tremendous buying power as it makes up 40 percent of US consumers (Fromm, 2021; Priporas et al., 2017), representing $140 billion in buying power, and influencing much of the parents' spending (Davis, 2020). While previous generations had to be in a brick-and-mortar store in adolescence to make purchases, this generational cohort can purchase physical and digital products in the

comfort of their own homes. With the ease of purchase due to the Internet and the nearly constant connectivity of young people, Generation Z members are nearly always involved in the marketing and making of purchase decisions for themselves as well as recommendations for other family members.

In addition, more than previous generations, Generation Z is concerned with social justice and brand association for their causes (Fromm, 2021). As a result, Generation Z is comfortable calling out brands publicly about their neutrality on topics and expects brands to push agendas vital to them or to not associate with the brand. At the same time, while Generation X is more concerned with status and material things, and Generation Y is more concerned with experience and travel, Generation Z is concerned with the truth and being unique and ethical (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). As previously mentioned, Generation Z differs from previous generational cohorts because of its proclivity towards non-traditional media consumption. To best understand the effectiveness of social media influencers, this study collects data from the demographic that most consume their user-generated content.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This research builds on para-social interaction theory and explores social media influencers' attributes. The research design is similar to previous celebrity endorser authenticity studies. Moreover, different from previous SMI studies, this study includes concepts from the entire Customer Journey as dependent variables. These constructs are explained in depth in the scale development section.
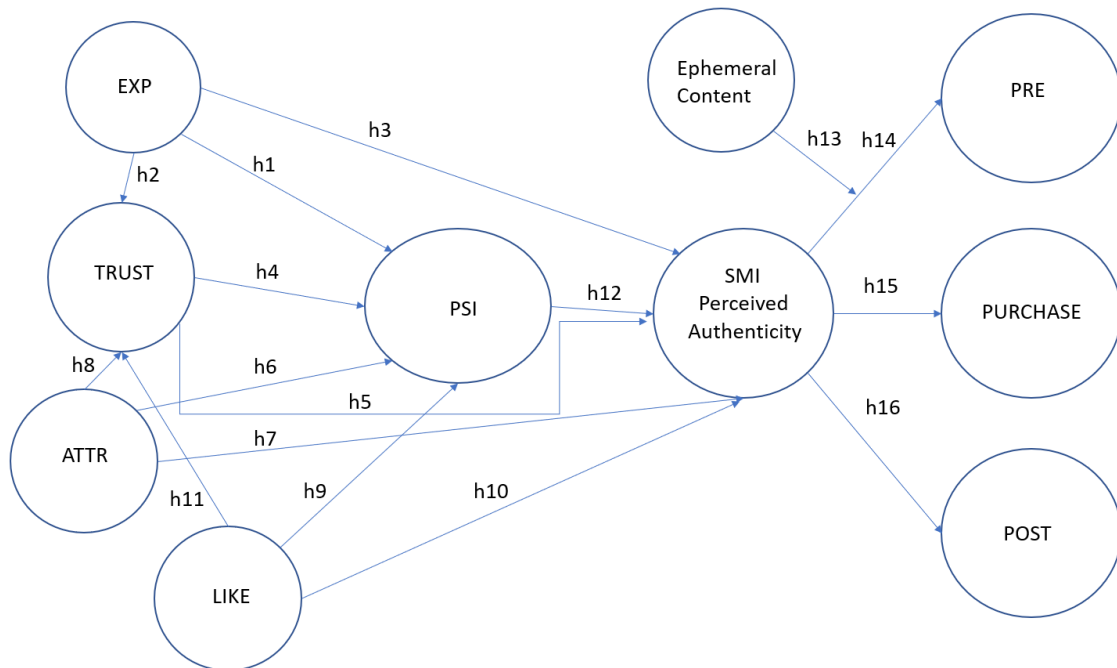
Figure 3.1. Research Model with Hypotheses; Parasocial Attributes Mediating Perceived Authenticity; Authenticity Affects on the Entire Customer Journey

Table 3.1. *Hypothesized Relationships Tested in the Research Model*

Hypothesis	Path Relationship
Hypothesis 1	EXP → PSI
Hypothesis 2	EXP → TRUST
Hypothesis 3	EXP → SMI Perceived Authenticity
Hypothesis 4	TRUST → PSI
Hypothesis 5	TRUST → SMI Perceived Authenticity
Hypothesis 6	ATTR → PSI
Hypothesis 7	ATTR → SMI Perceived Authenticity
Hypothesis 8	ATTR → TRUST
Hypothesis 9	LIKE → PSI
Hypothesis 10	LIKE → SMI Perceived Authenticity
Hypothesis 11	LIKE → TRUST
Hypothesis 12	PSI → SMI Perceived Authenticity
Hypothesis 13	Ephemeral Content → (SMI Perceived Authenticity → PRE)
Hypothesis 14	SMI Perceived Authenticity → PRE
Hypothesis 15	SMI Perceived Authenticity → PURCHASE
Hypothesis 16	SMI Perceived Authenticity → POST

In the next section, the data collection procedure, and respondent demographics are reviewed, followed by the measurement items used, and then the analytical process is covered.

3.1 Quantitative Research Design

3.1.1 Sample Data Collection

The sample for this research is United States social media users from Generation Z. The website Prolific was utilized to pre-screen the sample and recruit respondents. The Prolific online platform maintains a panel with a total population of 26,534 eligible participants for this type of research. To ensure an appropriately sized sample, Hair et al.'s (2017) rule of 10 observations for one variable was initially considered. The method recommends that a theoretical model with 10 variables requires a minimum of 100 observations. Similar recommended sample size guidelines based on the concept of power (Cohen, 1992) require a minimum of 165 observations to achieve a statistical power of 80% for the number of paths for 1% significance and a minimum R^2 of 0.10. Both sample size guidelines were met by the sample of 478 used in this study. The final sample of social media users completed an online survey delivered through Qualtrics. Table 3.2 provides the demographics and social media platform preference of the sample.

Table 3.2. *Survey Demographics of this Study's Participants*

Variable		Number	Percent
Gender	Female	395	83%
	Male	66	14%
	Other	17	4%
Age	18	27	6%
	19	58	12%
	20	66	14%
	21	79	17%
	22	81	17%
	23	78	16%
	24	66	14%
	25	23	5%
Ethnicity	African American	39	8%
	American Indian / Alaska Native	4	1%
	Asian	57	12%
	Native Hawaiian /Pacific Islander	2	<1%
	Other	31	6%
	White	343	72%
Platform	Facebook	17	4%
Preference	Instagram	167	35%
	SnapChat	28	6%
	TikTok	267	56%

3.1.2 Pilot Testing

To ensure the quality of survey responses, a pilot test was administered to a convenience sample (Hair et al., 2015). The pilot study targeted Generation Z respondents between the ages of 18 and 20. While the sample size was small ($n = 30$), problematic items on the survey were identified and corrected. Once the pilot test was analyzed, the final survey instrument was more precise and yielded accurate results (Perneger et al., 2015).

3.1.3 Questionnaire Design

Measures. The survey questionnaire utilized established scales to measure the constructs of the model. Respondents were required to name an SMI they follow. Using Qualtrics' autofill capabilities, each item lists the SMI selected by the individual respondents. The scales are described in detail in the following paragraphs.

Expertise (EXP). The EXP construct measures the perceived expertise of the SMI from the point of view of the social media viewer. Adapted from Ohanian's (1990) traditional celebrity endorser study, respondents answered items about SMI perceived expertise. All five items are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*.

Trustworthiness (TRUST). The TRUST construct measures the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI. Likewise adapted from Ohanian's (1990) celebrity endorser study, respondents answered items about SMI perceived trustworthiness. All five items are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*.

Attractiveness (ATTR). The ATTR construct measures the perceived attractiveness of the SMI. Likewise adapted from Ohanian's (1990) celebrity endorser study, the sample answered items about SMI perceived attractiveness. All five items are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*.

Likeability (LIKE). The LIKE construct measures the likability of the SMI. Adapted from Reysen's (2005) likability scale, the sample considered items measuring the likeability of the SMI. All eleven items are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*.

Para-Social Interaction (PSI). The PSI construct measures the one-sided relationship that social media followers develop with the SMIs that they follow. While followers know large amounts of information about the SMI, oftentimes, the influencer may have little information and feelings towards the followers. Adapted from Bocarnea and Brown's (2007) celebrity-persona study, respondents answered questions about the perceived relationships and feelings that they have developed with their SMIs. The scale includes three reverse-coded items. All 20 items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*.

SMI Perceived Authenticity (SMI PERC AUTH). The SMI PERC AUTH construct measures the perceived authenticity of the influencer. Adapted from Ilicic and Webster's (2016) celebrity brand authenticity scale, SMI followers answered items about their individual SMI's perceived authenticity. All four items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*.

Prepurchase (PRE). To measure the PRE construct of the customer journey, consumer attitudes toward sponsored recommended posts are used as a proxy. In their

study of sponsored bloggers, Lu et al. (2014) found that consumer attitudes toward the

sponsored bloggers' recommendations were unaffected by the disclosure of a monetary

incentive for the posts. Additionally, they learned that if the attitude toward the sponsored

content was positive, then the resulting purchase intentions would likewise be positive.

Finally, the study indicated that when the bloggers disclosed sponsorships, respondents

found them more credible. Like Lu et al. (2014), Bouhlel et al. (2010) found evidence

that consumer attitude toward blog content positively affected purchase intentions. Two

additional items are added to Lu et al.'s (2014) scale. All six items were rated on a 7-

point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*.

Purchase (PURCHASE). The PURCHASE construct measures the purchase stage

of the customer journey. Differing from the Lu et al. (2014) study where they studied the

willingness to believe the content, this research posits that the perceived authenticity of

the influencer will affect the customer journey and proposes a scale for the actual

purchase of products endorsed by SMIs. The items ask respondents to rank their previous

purchase habits after becoming aware of a product by the SMI. All six items were rated

on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*.

Post-Purchase (POST). The POST construct measures the post-purchase stage of

the customer journey and utilizes WOM as a proxy. While consumption and use of the

product make up a portion of the post-purchase stage, sharing the experience with people

has been common practice on social media. Westbrook (1987) states the WOM possesses

three different stages of involvement: product involvement, self-involvement, and other

involvement. While product and self-involvement lend to gratification and attention by

the communicator, other involvement includes the user sharing experiences or knowledge

with others to help them. This stage gives credibility to the previously mentioned concept

that the customer journey is non-linear (Lemon & Verheouf, 2016). A follower might

view content about a product that is not useful to her (and therefore not purchased) but

could still recommend it to a friend. Therefore, the WOM scale does not depend upon the

actual purchase of the product. Adapted from Zeithaml et al.'s (1996) WOM scale

regarding service quality, respondents answer items regarding whether they share SMI

endorsed products. All three items were rated on an 11-point Likert-type scale, with 0 =

Extremely Unlikely and 10 = *Extremely Likely*.

   Ephemeral Content (EPHM). The EPHM construct measures follower interaction

with SMIs on temporary content. Since so many young social media users are on

ephemeral platforms, EPHM is used as a moderator for the relationship between SMI

PERC and PRE constructs. The three items assessing the follower behavior were rated on

a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 7 = *Strongly Agree*.

   Table 3.3 provides the citations for the items, proposed items, and the adaptions

compared to the original versions.

Table 3.3. *Citations for Scales Used in this Study*

Authors	Construct	Variables	Adapted Scaled Items	Original Scaled Items
Ohanian, 1990	Expertise (EXP)	Perceived Expertise	1-7 Likert-type scales, where *1=Strongly Disagree, 4=Neutral, and 7=Strongly Agree* - (Insert SMI name) is an expert. - (Insert SMI name) is experienced. - (Insert SMI name) is knowledgeable. - (Insert SMI name) is qualified. - (Insert SMI name) is skilled.	-Expert – Not an Expert -Experienced – Inexperienced -Knowledgeable – Unknowledgeable -Qualified – Unqualified -Skilled – Unskilled
Ohanian, 1990	Trustworthiness (TRUST)	Perceived Trustworthiness	1-7 Likert-type scales, where *1=Strongly Disagree, 4=Neutral, and 7=Strongly Agree* - (Insert SMI name) is dependable. - (Insert SMI name) is honest. - (Insert SMI name) is reliable. - (Insert SMI name) is sincere. - (Insert SMI name) is trustworthy.	-Dependable – Undependable -Honest – Dishonest -Reliable – Unreliable -Sincere – Insincere -Trustworthy – Untrustworthy
Ohanian, 1990	Attractiveness (ATTR)	Perceived Attractiveness	1-7 Likert-type scales, where *1=Strongly Disagree, 4=Neutral, and 7=Strongly Agree.* - (Insert SMI name) is attractive. - (Insert SMI name) is classy. (Insert SMI name) is beautiful. - (Insert SMI name) is elegant. - (Insert SMI name) is sexy.	-Attractive – Unattractive -Classy – Not Classy -Beautiful – Ugly -Elegant – Plain -Sexy – Not Sexy

Table 3.3 cont.

Reysen, 2005	Likeability (LIKE)	Perceived Likeability	1-7 Likert-type scales, where *1=Strongly Disagree, 4=Neutral, and 7=Strongly Agree.* - (Insert SMI name) is friendly. - (Insert SMI name) is likable. -(Insert SMI name) is ward. - (Insert SMI name) is approachable. - I would ask (insert SMI name) for advice. -I would like (insert SMI name) as a coworker. -I would like (insert SMI name) as a roommate. -I would like to be friends with (Insert SMI name). -(Insert SMI name) is physically attractive. - (Insert SMI name) is similar to me. - (Insert SMI name) is knowledgeable.	-This person is friendly. -This person is likable. -This person is warm. -This person is approachable. -I would ask this person for advice. -I would like this person as a coworker. -I would like this person as a roommate. -I would like to be friends with this person. -This person is physically attractive. This person is similar to me. This person is knowledgeable.
Bocarnea & Brown (2007)	Para-social Interaction (PSI)	SMI-Persona Para-social Interaction Scale	1-5 Likert-type scales where *1=Strongly Disagree, 3=Neutral, and 5=Strongly Agree.* -(Insert SMI name) makes me feel as if I am with someone I know well. -If (insert SMI name) appeared on a YouTube platform, I would watch him/her. -I see (insert SMI name) as a natural down-to-earth person. -If I saw a newspaper or magazine story about (insert SMI name), I would read it. -I would like to meet (insert SMI name) in person. -I feel that I understand the emotions (insert SMI name) experiences.	-[Celebrity or persona] makes me feel as if I am with someone I know well. - If [celebrity or persona] appeared on a TV program, I would watch that program. -I see [celebrity or persona] as a natural down-to-earth person. -If I saw a newspaper or magazine story about [celebrity or persona], I would read it. -I would like to meet [celebrity or persona] in person. -I feel that I understand the emotions [celebrity or persona] experiences. - I do not have any feelings about [celebrity or persona]. -I like to watch [celebrity or persona] on television.

-I find myself thinking about (insert SMI name) on a regular basis.
-I do not have any feelings about (insert SMI name).
-I like to watch (insert SMI name) on social media.
-Whenever I am unable to get news about (insert SMI name), I really miss it.
-Learning about (insert SMI name) is important to me.
-I have been seeking out information on social media to learn more about (insert SMI name).
-I sometimes go to the Internet to obtain more information about (insert SMI name).
-Sometimes I feel like calling or writing (insert SMI name).
-(Insert SMI name) understands the kinds of things I want to know.
-I sometimes make remarks to (insert SMI name) while watching their videos on social media.
-I am very much aware of the details of (insert SMI name)'s life.
-I feel like I have a very little understanding of (insert SMI name) as a person.
-I look forward to seeing (insert SMI name) on YouTube or Instagram.
- I am not really interested in (insert SMI name).

-Whenever I am unable to get news about [celebrity or persona], I really miss it.
-Learning about [celebrity or persona] is important to me.
-I have been seeking out information in the media to learn more [celebrity or persona].
-I sometimes go to the Internet to obtain more information about [celebrity or persona].
-Sometimes I feel like calling or writing [celebrity or persona].
-[celebrity or persona] understands the kinds of things I want to know.
-I sometimes make remarks to [celebrity or persona] while watching television.
-I am very much aware of the details of [celebrity or persona]'s life.
-I feel like I have very little understanding of [celebrity or persona] as a person.
-I look forward to seeing [celebrity or persona] on television or in the print media.
-I am not really interested in [celebrity or persona].

Table 3.3 cont.

Ilicic & Webster (2016)	SMI perceived Authenticity (SMI_PERC AUTH)		1-7 Likert-type scales, where *1=Strongly Disagree, 4=Neutral, and 7=Strongly Agree.* -(Insert SMI name) tries to act in a manner that is consistent with his held values, even if others criticize or reject him for doing so. -(Insert SMI name) cares about openness and honesty in close relationships with others. -In general, (insert SMI name) places a good deal of importance on others understanding who he truly is. -People can count on (insert SMI name) being who he is regardless of the situation.	- {insert celebrity name} tries to act in a manner that is consistent with his held values, even if others criticize or reject him for doing so - {insert celebrity name} cares about openness and honesty in close relationships with others - In general, {insert celebrity name} places a good deal of importance on others understanding who he truly is -People can count on {insert celebrity name} being who he is regardless of the situation
Lu, et al. (2014)	Prepurchase (PRE)	Consumer attitude for sponsored blogger posts	1-7 Likert-type scales where *1=Strongly disagree, 4=Neutral, and 7=Strongly Agree.* - I think (insert SMI name) tells the truth. I believe in what (insert SMI name) communicated about the product in the video. I can learn the real product/service information from this (insert SMI name). After watching this (insert SMI name(, I have been accurately informed about the product/service information.	-.I think this article tells the truth. -I don't believe in what the blogger wrote in this article. I -I can learn the real product information from this article. -After reading this article, I have been accurately informed about the product information.
Proposed new Items	PRE			-Watched insert SMI name a few times but have not yet purchased anything. -Watched insert SMI name several times and am planning to purchase something after listening to their comments.

Table 3.3 cont.

Proposed Purchase Items	Purchase (PURCHASE)		*1-7 Likert-type scales, where 1=Strongly Disagree, 4=Neutral, and 7=Strongly Agree.*	-I have purchased products endorsed by (<u>insert SMI name</u>). -I have purchased products used or worn by the (<u>insert SMI name</u>). -I have bought several items recommended by (<u>insert SMI name</u>). -I have purchased gifts that were endorsed by (<u>insert SMI name</u>). -I have purchased products through (<u>insert SMI name</u>)'s linked store. -I have purchased products at a physical store that were recommended by (<u>insert SMI name</u>).
Zeithaml et al. (1996)	Post Purchase (POST)	Proxy (SERV-QUAL Positive, WOM)	*0-10 Likert-type scales, where 0=Extremely unlikely and 10=Extremely likely.* -Say positive things about XYZ to other people. -Recommend XYZ to someone who seeks your advice. -Encourage friends and relatives to do business with XYZ.	-Say positive things about (<u>insert SMI name</u>) endorsed products other people. -Recommend (<u>insert SMI name</u>) endorsed products to someone who seeks your advice. -Encourage friends and relatives to do business with (<u>insert SMI name</u>) endorsed products.
Proposed Ephemeral items	Ephemeral content (EPHM)		1-7 Likert-type scales, where *1=Strongly Disagree, 4=Neutral, and 7=Strongly Agree.*	-When (<u>insert SMI name</u>) posts a link in their Instagram story, I will click the link to see the price of the product. -The (<u>insert SMI name</u>) has sent me a Snapchat that made me aware of a product. -When I'm swiping through stories, I stop and watch if (<u>insert SMI name</u>) is endorsing something interesting.

3.1.4 Analytical Process

Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) is the analytical modeling technique used in this study. First, unlike other frequently used analytical techniques, PLS-SEM focuses on predicting the variance of the dependent variables when assessing the entire model (Hair et al., 2011; Hair et al., 2021). Second, PLS-SEM enables researchers to assess multiple dependent variables simultaneously. Third, PLS-SEM is the technique of choice when conducting exploratory research, which is the focus of this research. Finally, PLS-SEM is a non-parametric statistical method not requiring normally distributed data and therefore provide both flexibility of analysis and the ability to assess highly complex models (Hair, Black, et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2017).

The survey was sent to 500 respondents. Using the pool of subjects from Prolific, data cleaning was very minimal. Only four subjects failed the attention checks, and one straight liner was removed (Baumgartner & Steenkamp, 2001). Seventeen respondents used traditional celebrities (e.g., athletes, actresses, etc.) instead of SMIs and were deleted from the sample. The final qualified sample consisted of 478 participants.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling

The theoretical research model examined in this research is quite complex, involving several multi-item constructs. Application of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), therefore, facilitates a better understanding of the relationships proposed in the research (Hair & Sarstedt, 2020). In addition, the research explores both mediation and moderation with, PLS-SEM further facilitating examination of these relationships (Hair et al., 2011; Hair et al., 2021; Sarstedt et al., 2020). The following sections outline the procedures followed.

4.2 Assessment of Measurement Model

Application of PLS-SEM involves a two-step process. The first step explores and confirms the measurement models using the confirmatory composite analysis (CCA) and the second step examines the structural relationships and predictive ability of the theoretical model, as described in Hair, Howard, and Nitzl (2020). Following CCA guidelines, the reflective measurement model is evaluated for the following criterion:

item loadings, composite reliability, average variance extracted, discriminant validity, nomological validity, and predictive validity.

4.2.1 Data Distribution

Each item in the study has a varying degree of departure from normality. Only 13 of the original 68 items would be considered highly skewed, falling outside the range -1 to +1 (Bulmer, 1979). All other items were moderately skewed or approximately symmetric. Whether positively or negatively skewed, every item fit within the acceptable range of -2 to +2 for structural equation modeling (Kline, 2011). The data is also moderately leptokurtic or platykurtic for each item, though well within the acceptable range of -7 to +7 (Bryne, 2010; Hair, Black, et al., 2019). While not realizing a true normal distribution, the shape of the distribution is not severely non-normal (Kline, 2011). Due to this research's use of PLS-SEM, slightly non-normal data distribution will not affect the study (Hair, Howard, & Nitzl, 2020).

4.2.2 Common Method Variance

This study uses contextual data from a single time period and is a cross-sectional design (Hair, Page, & Brunsveld, 2020). To reduce the likelihood of common method variance, the research design and questionnaire were executed through the application of a variety of scaling methods and sequencing based on guidelines by Podsakoff et al. (2003; 2012).

4.2.3 Estimate of Loadings, Significance, and Item Reliability

Indicator validity was assessed by evaluating the size of the factor loadings. To capture sufficient variance from each item within the construct, Hair, Sarstedt, and Ringle

(2019) suggest removing any items below the .708. Items that were eliminated are denoted in Appendix A Table 1 with an asterisk (*). EPHM 2 (0.639) is just below .708 but is retained to meet the three-item per construct minimum and because its value is acceptable for exploratory research (Hair, Risher, et al., 2019). Following each item removal, the PLS algorithm was executed again until all item outer loadings met or exceeded .708 (Hair et al., 2020). The result was a total of 18 items being removed. After removal of these items, all outer loadings met recommended guidelines and were highly significant (p-values < .05). By squaring the loadings, item reliability measures display the amount of variance shared by each item to the construct (Hair, Black, et al., 2019). The factor loadings, statistical significance, and item reliabilities are displayed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 *Factor Loadings, Significance, and Item Reliability of Tested Items*

Item	Loading	*P*-Value	Item Reliability
Expertise			
EXP 1	0.828	0.000	0.689
EXP 2	0.891	0.000	0.794
EXP 3	0.926	0.000	0.857
EXP 4	0.928	0.000	0.861
EXP 5	0.868	0.000	0.755
Trustworthiness			
TRUST 1	0.885	0.000	0.783
TRUST 2	0.933	0.000	0.870
TRUST 3	0.9357	0.000	0.874
TRUST 4	0.924	0.000	0.854
TRUST 5	0.938	0.000	0.880

Table 4.1 cont.

Attractiveness			
ATTR 1	0.795	0.000	0.632
ATTR 2	0.886	0.000	0.785
ATTR 3	0.841	0.000	0.707
ATTR 4	0.884	0.000	0.781
Likeability			
LIKE 1	0.847	0.000	0.717
LIKE 2	0.841	0.000	0.707
LIKE 3	0.821	0.000	0.674
LIKE 4	0.838	0.000	0.702
LIKE 5	0.814	0.000	0.663
LIKE 6	0.860	0.000	0.740
LIKE 7	0.785	0.000	0.616
LIKE 8	0.854	0.000	0.729
Para-Social Interaction			
PSI 1	0.817	0.000	0.667
PSI 2	0.815	0.000	0.664
PSI 3	0.838	0.000	0.702
PSI 4	0.763	0.000	0.582
PSI 5	0.763	0.000	0.582
PSI 6	0.726	0.000	0.527
PSI 9	0.839	0.000	0.704
PSI 20	0.820	0.000	0.672
Perceived Authenticity			
PERC AUTH 1	0.833	0.000	0.694
PERC AUTH 2	0.895	0.000	0.801
PERC AUTH 3	0.859	0.000	0.738
PERC AUTH 4	0.876	0.000	0.767
Prepurchase			
PRE 1	0.844	0.000	0.712
PRE 2	0.934	0.000	0.872
PRE 3	0.934	0.000	0.872
PRE 4	0.918	0.000	0.843

Table 4.1 cont.

Purchase			
PURCHASE 1	0.875	0.000	0.766
PURCHASE 2	0.843	0.000	0.711
PURCHASE 3	0.888	0.000	0.789
PURCHASE 4	0.836	0.000	0.699
PURCHASE 5	0.789	0.000	0.623
PURCHASE 6	0.786	0.000	0.618
Post Purchase			
POST 1	0.939	0.000	0.882
POST 2	0.964	0.000	0.929
POST 3	0.915	0.000	0.837
Ephemeral Content			
EPHM 1	0.855	0.000	0.731
EPHM 2	0.639	0.000	0.408
EPHM 3	0.902	0.000	0.814

4.2.3 Composite Reliability

Measures of composite reliability were inspected next. Both traditional measures of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability criteria minimums (> 0.70) were met for all constructs (Hair, Risher, et al., 2019). However, four constructs violate the composite reliability maximum of 0.95 indicating some redundancy with the items of those constructs. By averaging the correlations of the items within the construct, the most similar items were identified. To eliminate excessive redundancy, two items were removed from the TRUST construct, one item from EXP, and one item from PRE. No adjustment was made to POST as that construct only has three items. Table 4.2 outlines the internal consistency measures for each construct before and after item removal.

Table 4.2. *Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability Measurements of Internal Consistency Before and After Item Deletion*

Variance	Before Deletion		After Deletion	
	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
EXP	0.934	0.950	0.909	0.936
TRUST	0.957	0.966	0.914	0.946
ATTR	0.880	0.910	0.880	0.910
LIKE	0.937	0.948	0.937	0.948
PSI	0.923	0.937	0.923	0.937
PERC AUTH	0.889	0.923	0.889	0.923
PRE	0.929	0.950	0.889	0.931
PURCHASE	0.914	0.933	0.914	0.933
POST	0.933	0.958	0.933	0.958
EPHM	0.735	0.846	0.735	0.845

4.2.4 Convergent Validity

Average variance extracted (AVE) is the measure used to evaluate convergent validity (Hair et al., 2020). All constructs meet the AVE criterion of 0.5 or greater. These measures indicated the shared variance between the construct and their items. Table 4.3 outlines the AVE values for each construct.

Table 4.3. *Average Variance Extracted for Convergent Validity for Each Construct*

VARIANCE	AVE
EXP	0.785
TRUST	0.854
ATTR	0.670
LIKE	0.693
PSI	0.650
SMI PERC AUTH	0.750
PRE	0.818
PURCHASE	0.701
POST	0.883
EPHM	0.650

4.2.5 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity measures the extent to which the constructs are representing and measuring distinctly different concepts (Hair, Risher, et al., 2019). Thus, when measuring abstract constructs such as likeability, it is important to determine that all constructs measure a different concept (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair & Sarstedt, 2021). One way to assess this uniqueness of the constructs is to measure individual items cross loadings. The variance from each item should be more highly contributed to the construct being measured (Chin, 1998). All items' variances are highest on the intended constructs. Another recommended measure of discriminant validity is the Fornell-Larcker criterion which takes the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct which should exceed the correlation to other constructs when measuring distinct constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). These results are shown in Table 4.4. PSI is the only construct that violates this measure. PSI is correlated with LIKE .019 greater than it is correlated

with itself. This violation is understandable as para-social interaction is tied closely to the

SMI's perceived likeability from their followers.

Table 4.4. *Fornell-Larcker Measure of Discriminant Validity*

	EXP	TRUST	ATTR	LIKE	PSI	AUTH	PRE	PURCH	POST	EPHM
EXP	0.886									
TRUST	0.600	0.924								
ATTR	0.345	0.49	0.818							
LIKE	0.551	0.813	0.539	0.833						
PSI	0.606	0.755	0.428	0.825	0.806					
P AUTH	0.548	0.791	0.485	0.762	0.727	0.866				
PRE	0.640	0.782	0.429	0.725	0.761	0.734	0.904			
PURCH	0.316	0.344	0.274	0.299	0.438	0.322	0.438	0.837		
POST	0.499	0.489	0.368	0.497	0.593	0.515	0.653	0.619	0.939	
EPHM	0.342	0.331	0.379	0.344	0.45	0.375	0.492	0.522	0.622	0.806

Another measure of discriminant validity is the heterotrait-monotrait ratio

(HTMT). This measure is considered more rigorous than the Fornell-Larcker criterion to

ensure that each construct uniquely captures the phenomenon. Confidence levels of the

HTMT criterion were assessed after bootstrapping 5000 subsamples (Hair et al., 2021).

All measurements met the rule of thumb below 0.900 except the relationship between

LIKE and PSI is just over at 0.909 in the right tail (Hair, Risher, et al., 2019). Table 4.5

outlines the discriminant validity for the measurement model.

Table 4.5. *Heterotrait-Monotrait Discriminant Validity for Measurement Model*

	EXP	TRUST	ATTR	LIKE	PSI	AUTH	PRE	PURCH	POST
TRUST	0.725								
ATTR	0.450	0.588							
LIKE	0.660	0.908	0.647						
PSI	0.721	0.856	0.526	0.910					
AUTH	0.674	0.909	0.608	875.000	0.839				
PRE	0.764	0.894	0.534	0.832	0.860	0.860			
PURCH	0.416	0.439	0.365	0.387	0.476	0.429	0.550		
POST	0.723	0.597	0.475	0.595	0.696	0.628	0.774	0.723	
EPHM	0.486	0.481	0.549	0.482	0.602	0.542	0.657	0.699	0.795

According to Hair, Sarstedt, and Ringle (2019), HTMT metrics are evaluated based on two recommended guidelines; 0.85 for concepts considered to be measuring diverse constructs and 0.90 for similar constructs. However, as stated by Franke and Sarstedt (2019), HTMT does not assume a reflective measurement model as presented in this research. Also, the previous item removal to meet composite reliability maximum cutoffs affects the discriminant validity measurements. Therefore and because of the extensive literature review, this research will use the less conservative HTMT value of < 1 when considering discriminate validity (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019). All HTMT values are acceptable (< 1.0), and Table 4.5 lists the ratio of correlations across constructs.

4.2.6 Nomological Validity

Another assessment of construct validity is nomological validity (Hair et al., 2020). Correlation of construct scores should be consistent with the theoretical direction, size, and significance of the correlations. Reviewing the latent variable correlations, all

nomological relationships are consistent with theory as supported by the literature review in Chapter III.

4.2.7 Predictive Validity

Predictive validity uses the construct scores to predict an item score collected at a different time point. This study is not longitudinal and focuses on evaluating cross-sectional data from the consumer perspective. While prediction within sample and PLSpredict will be utilized on the structural model in the next section, predictive validity is not a goal of this research.

4.3 Evaluation of the Structural Model

The structural model was also evaluated using the CCA process (Hair et al., 2020). The steps are the following: evaluation of collinearity, examination of size and significance of path coefficients, R^2 of endogenous variables, f^2 effect size, predictive relevance Q^2, PLSpredict.

4.3.1 Assessment of Collinearity

Using variance inflation factor (VIF) to assess collinearity problems. The rule of thumb for VIF is constructs have collinearity issues above the cut-off of 5.00 (Hair et al., 2021). While some research suggests potential collinearity problems occurring lower than 3 (Becker et al., 2015; Mason & Perreault, 1991), all constructs were below or near 3 (Hair, Risher, et al., 2019). Table 4.6 provides the VIF statistics for each latent variable.

Table 4.6. *Variance Inflation Factor for Multicollinearity Between Latent Variables*

VARIABLE	TRUST	PSI	AUTH	PRE	PURCH	POST
EXP	1.471	1.673	1.796			
ATTR	1.437	1.456	1.467			
LIKE	1.827	3.217	4.572			
PSI	3.538					
AUTH				1.197	1.000	1.000
MODERATING EFFECT 1: EPHM				1.035		

4.3.2 Path Coefficients and Significance

Path coefficients were calculated using the SmartPLS algorithm. Through bootstrapping 5,000 subsamples, path significance was ascertained (Hair et al., 2021). Path coefficients and significance (*p*-values) are labeled in Figure 4.2. All but four path coefficients were statistically, highly significant. Two narrowly missed the acceptable *p*-value of 0.05. Table 4.7 and Figure 4.2 display the strength of the relationships and their significance.

Table 4.7. *Size and Significance of Path Coefficients of Constructs*

Path	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	T Statistics	*P* Values
EXP → PSI	0.184	0.184	0.035	5.248	0.000
EXP → TRUST	0.245	0.244	0.039	6.171	0.000
EXP → AUTH	0.049	0.049	0.039	1.248	0.210
TRUST → PSI	0.171	0.174	0.058	3.019	0.003
TRUST → AUTH	0.413	0.409	0.055	7.515	0.000
ATTR → PSI	-0.048	-0.056	0.028	1.966	0.080
ATTR → AUTH	0.076	0.075	0.039	1.910	0.047
ATTR → TRUST	0.057	0.074	0.032	2.286	0.078
LIKE → PSI	0.608	0.611	0.052	11.760	0.000
LIKE → AUTH	0.212	0.214	0.059	3.607	0.000
LIKE → TRUST	0.645	0.636	0.040	15.935	0.000
EPHM → (AUTH → PRE)	-0.012	-0.011	0.028	0.415	0.687
AUTH → PRE	0.617	0.617	0.031	19.894	0.000
AUTH → PURCH	0.322	0.324	0.036	8.898	0.000
AUTH → POST	0.515	0.516	0.032	16.240	0.000
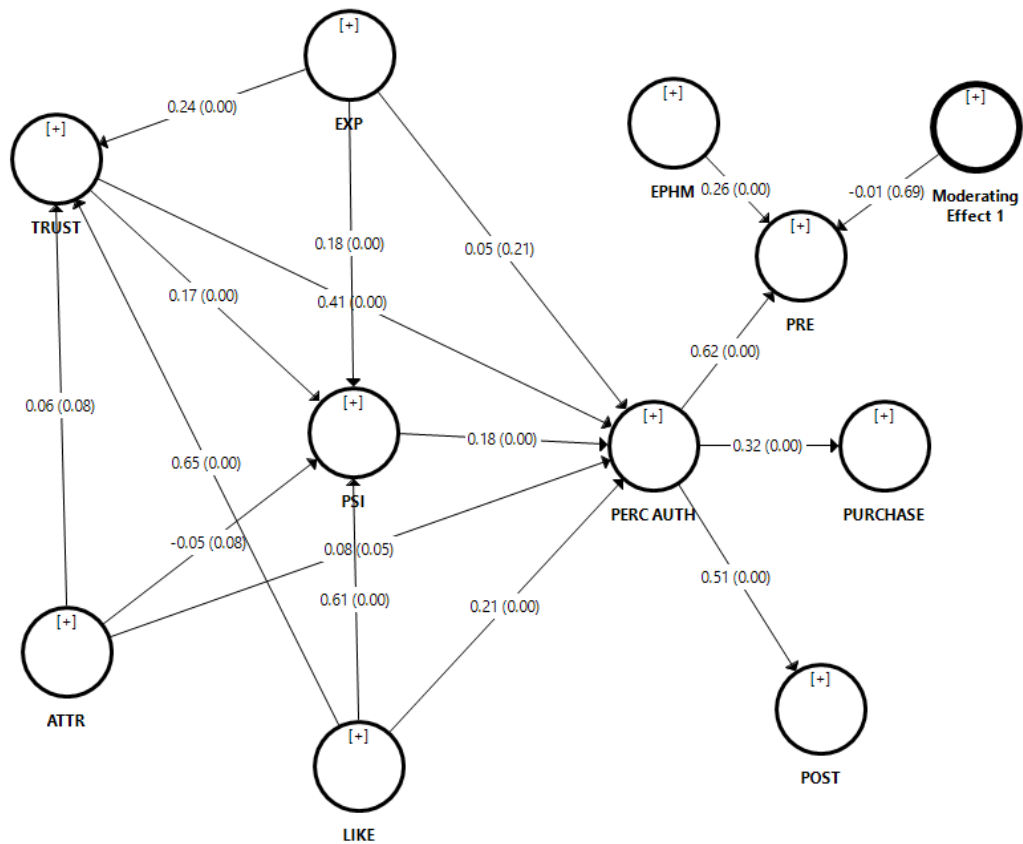
Figure 4.2. Structural Model of the Hypothesized Relationships for the Study. Size and
Significance of Path Coefficients Labeled.

4.3.3 Coefficients of Determination

      To assess the in-sample predictive power of the structural model, the coefficients
of determination (R^2) are determined after reliability and validity (Hair & Sarstedt, 2021).
The larger the R^2, the more variation of the endogenous variable is explained respectively
to the independent variables. Measures closer to 1 have higher predictive power while
those closer to 0 have lower. The constructs of TRUST, PSI, PERC AUTH, and PRE
were moderately explained by the predictor constructs. PURCHASE and POST were

weak even when assessing the Adjusted R^2, which considers the number of exogenous

constructs with regards to sample size. Table 4.8 outlines both the measures for the

dependent variables' R^2 and R^2 adjusted.

Table 4.8. *R Squared and R Squared Adjusted* Evaluated as *Coefficients of Determination*

for the Dependent Variables

VARIABLE	R squared	R squared Adjusted
TRUST	0.698	0.696
PSI	0.724	0.722
AUTH	0.683	0.68
PRE	0.591	0.589
PURCH	0.104	0.102
POST	0.265	0.263

4.3.4 Effect Sizes (f^2)

The next measurement reported for the structural equation model is the f^2 statistic.

The statistic measures the model with exogenous variables included than excluded to

determine their effect sizes upon the model (Hair, Risher, et al., 2019). Less than .02

indicates no effect, between .02 and 0.15 are small effects, between 0.15 and 0.35 are

medium effects, and greater than 0.35 are large effects (Cohen, 1988). Table 4.9 presents

the effect sizes.

Table 4.9. *F² Statistic to Evaluate Effect Sizes of Constructs for the Structural Equation*

Model

VARIABLE	TRUST	PSI	AUTH	PRE	PURCH	POST
TRUST		0.831	0.170			
EXP	0.106	0.076	0.004			
ATTR	0.008	0.006	0.012			
LIKE	0.813	0.414	0.028			
Moderating Effect (EPHM)		0.001	0.001			
AUTH			0.835	0.835	0.160	0.360

4.3.5 Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

Additional measures of the model predictability can be discerned through blindfolding. This technique systematically eliminates data points while Smart PLS attempts to predict the values. An omission distance of seven was selected because it is not an even divider of the sample size of 478. The result of blindfolding the eight cases yields the predictive relevance (Q^2) of the model. All values are above zero indicating the predictive relevance for the model (Hair, Risher, et al., 2019). Values larger than 0.25 indicate medium predictive relevance while values greater than 0.50 indicate large predictive relevance. Table 4.10 outlines the results for each endogenous variable.

Table 4.10. *Q2 Statistic for Predictive Relevance of Each Endogenous Variable*

VARIANCE	Q^2
TRUST	0.589
PSI	0.462
AUTH	0.504
PRE	0.473
PURCH	0.070
POST	0.232

4.3.6 PLSpredict

Although this study posits that in-sample prediction is adequate, future studies into SMIs' influence will include an emerging model assessment metric. While the previous three metrics are suitable for measuring in-sample predictive power (Sarstedt et al., 2014), the SmartPLS software applies PLSpredict to enable researchers to calculate out of sample prediction by training the model on a selected part of the sample and predicting the other data on a second holdout sample (Shmueli et al., 2016; Shmueli et al., 2019). Following recommendations on holdout sample size to be equal to or greater than 30, PLSpredict folds were set to 15 ensuring that holdout samples of the 478 respondents would be adequate (Hair, Black, et al., 2019). Using Shmueli et al.'s (2019) evaluation guidelines, all indicators Q^2 metrics were above zero. Since the prediction errors are highly symmetrically distributed, the root mean squared error (RMSE) metrics for the PLS-SEM model and the naïve (linear) model were compared. The PLS-SEM model has a medium predictive power since the majority of indicators for the endogenous variables have less error compared to the naïve model (Shmueli et al., 2019).

4.4 Hypotheses Results

Upon assessing the path coefficients and effect sizes for the proposed hypotheses for testing outlined in Chapter II, the results are discussed in the following sections. Table 4.11 outlines the path betas and significance.

Table 4.11. *Path Relationships for Latent Variables, Betas Measurements for Strength of Relationships, and p-values for Significance for the Proposed Hypotheses*

Path Relationship	Beta	*p*-value
EXP → PSI	0.184	0.000
EXP → TRUST	0.245	0.000
EXP → AUTH	0.049	0.210
TRUST→ PSI	0.171	0.003
TRUST → AUTH	0.413	0.000
ATTR → PSI	-0.048	0.080
ATTR → AUTH	0.076	0.047
ATTR → TRUST	0.057	0.078
LIKE → PSI	0.608	0.000
LIKE → AUTH	0.212	0.000
LIKE → TRUST	0.645	0.000
PSI → AUTH	0.177	0.003
AUTH → PRE	0.617	0.000
AUTH → PURCH	0.322	0.000
AUTH → POST	0.515	0.000

Source Credibility Model. Relying on previous research in the context of traditional celebrities (e.g., actors, musicians, athletes, etc.), this study uses the Source Credibility Model that included antecedents of para-social interaction and SMI perceived authenticity. The first construct of the Source Credibility Model, expertise, was hypothesized to have a positive relationship with para-social interaction, trustworthiness, and SMI perceived authenticity. In this study, EXP has a positive statistically significant ($t = 5.214$, $p < 0.05$) relationship PSI. Likewise, EXP has a positive relationship with TRUST that is statistically significant ($t = 6.219$, $p < 0.05$) on TRUST. EXP to SMI perceived authenticity misses its hypothesized relationship being insignificant ($t = 1.253$, $p = 0.212$).

The second component of the Source Credibility Model, trustworthiness, was hypothesized to have a positive effect on PSI. In this study, TRUST does a positive relationship with PSI that was statistically significant ($t = 2.966$, $p < 0.05$). The other hypothesized, positive relationship for TRUST with SMI perceived authenticity is statistically, highly significant ($t = 7.851$, $p < 0.05$).

Source Attractiveness Model. This study used the Source Attractiveness Model to assess SMIs' attractiveness and likeability. First, ATTR is hypothesized to be positively associated with PSI. That hypothesis is not supported by its significance ($t = 1.754$, $p = 0.080$). Second, ATTR was hypothesized to be positively associated with the SMI perceived authenticity. This hypothesized relationship is significant ($t = 1.917$, $p < 0.05$). Lastly regarding ATTR, its hypothesized positive relationship with TRUST is not significant ($t = 1.763$, $p = 0.078$).

The second component of the Source Credibility Model is likeability. As hypothesized, LIKE has a positive relationship with PSI that was highly significant ($t = 11.846$, $p < 0.05$). In the second hypothesized positive association, LIKE has a positive relationship with SMI perceived authenticity and is statistically significant ($t = 3.518$, $p < 0.05$). The third hypothesized relationship, LIKE has a positive relationship with TRUST that was statistically, highly significant ($t = 16.112$, $p < 0.05$).

Para-Social Relationships. This study hypothesized that PSI would mediate the relationship between EXP, TRUST, ATTR, LIKE, and SMI perceived authenticity. PSI fully mediates the relationship between EXP and SMI perceived authenticity. The relationship between EXP and SMI perceived authenticity is insignificant ($t = 1.253$, $p = 0.210$), but the indirect relationship through PSI is significant ($t = 5.719$, $p < 0.05$). PSI

partially mediates the relationship between TRUST and SMI perceived authenticity. While the relationship between TRUST and SMI perceived authenticity is significant ($t = 7.851$, $p < 0.05$), the indirect relationship is also significant ($t = 2.061$, $p < 0.05$).

PSI does not mediate the relationship between ATTR and SMI perceived authenticity. The direct relationship is significant ($t = 1.987$, $p < 0.05$), however, the indirect relationship with PSI as a mediator was not significant ($t = 1.053$, $p = 0.293$). PSI is a partial mediator for the relationship between LIKE and SMI perceived authenticity. The relationship between LIKE and SMI perceived authenticity is significant ($t = 3.518$, $p < 0.05$). The indirect relationship through PSI is also significant ($t = 7.871$, $p < 0.05$).

Ephemeral Content. This research hypothesizes that EPHM will be a moderator of the relationship between SMI perceived authenticity and PRE. Generation Z's consumption of short videos that disappear after a certain time frame supported this hypothesis that followers' entrance into the first stage of the customer journey would be strengthened by EPHM. However, the moderating effect on the relationship is not significant ($t = 0.403$, $p = 0.687$). As evidenced in Figure 4.3, a simple slope analysis also confirms the lack of effect on the relationship as the slopes of the lines are not changed after moderation (Hair et al., 2021).
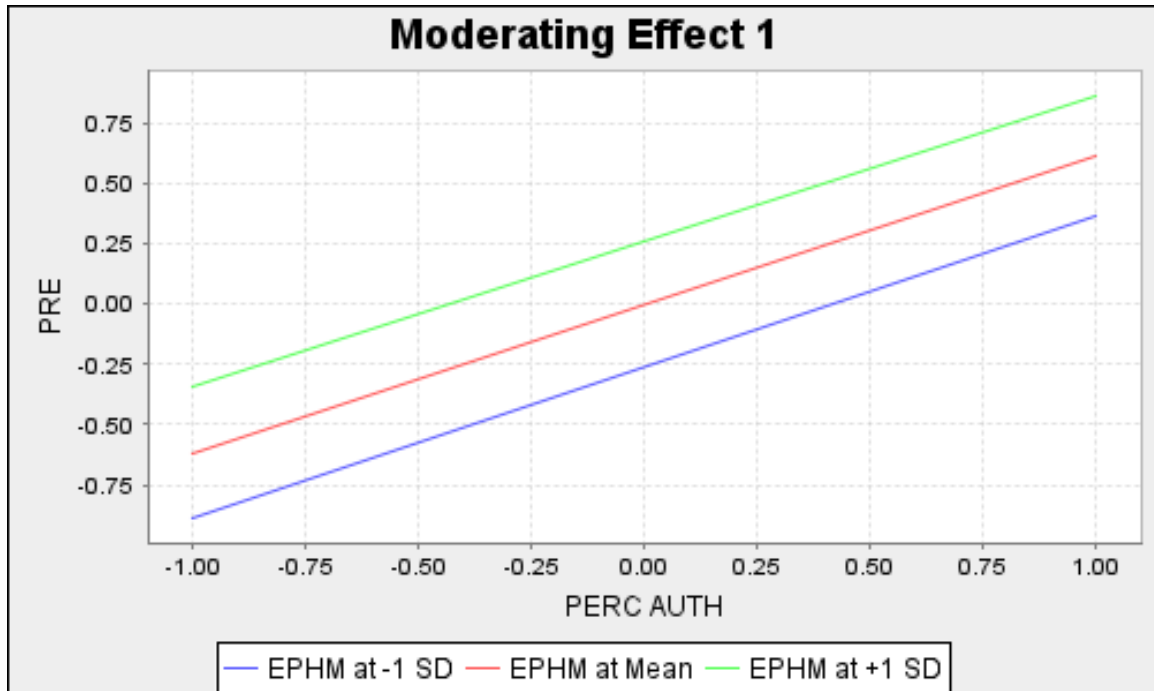
Figure 4.3. Simple Slope Analysis of Moderating Effect of EPHM on the Relationship

Between SMI Authenticity and Prepurchase Constructs.

    Social Media Perceived Authenticity. As hypothesized in Chapter II, this research

studies the association of SMI perceived authenticity on all three phases of the customer

journey. First, SMI perceived authenticity has a positive, significant ($t = 20.032$, $p <$

0.05) relationship with the PRE phase of the customer journey. Second, SMI perceived

authenticity has a positive, significant ($t = 8.981$, $p < 0.05$) relationship with the

PURCHASE phase of the customer journey. Last, SMI perceived authenticity has a

positive, highly significant ($t = 16.112$, $p < 0.05$) relationship with the POST phase of the

customer journey.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND LIMITATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The purpose of this research is to explore the complex roles SMIs play in the customer journey of their followers. Consistent with more recent studies on SMIs as well as older ones on traditional celebrities, the theoretical underpinnings include the concepts of Source Credibility, Source Attractiveness, and Para-Social Interactions. One main difference between SMIs and traditional celebrities, however, is the SMIs' usage of UGC. While similar in many ways, SMIs differ from traditional celebrities because of the UGC. In addition, SMIs are not selected like traditional celebrities and do not go through a vetting process as do actors, musicians, and athletes who serve as product and service spokespersons.

Considering the lack of vetting before public release, SMIs' organic growth of viewership is witnessed by the followers. Thus, the followers, themselves, raise or lower the popularity of the SMIs. Considering this difference, hypotheses not supported in this study that have been supported in traditional celebrity research are likely the most interesting. The results of testing the hypotheses are summarized in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1. *Results of Testing Hypotheses, Path Relationships, and Supported or*

Unsupported.

Hypothesis	Path Relationship	Supported / Unsupported
Hypothesis 1	EXP → PSI	Supported
Hypothesis 2	EXP → TRUST	Supported
Hypothesis 3	EXP → SMI Perceived Authenticity	Unsupported
Hypothesis 4	TRUST → PSI	Supported
Hypothesis 5	TRUST → SMI Perceived Authenticity	Supported
Hypothesis 6	ATTR → PSI	Unsupported
Hypothesis 7	ATTR → SMI Perceived Authenticity	Supported
Hypothesis 8	ATTR → TRUST	Unsupported
Hypothesis 9	LIKE → PSI	Supported
Hypothesis 10	LIKE → SMI Perceived Authenticity	Supported
Hypothesis 11	LIKE → TRUST	Supported
Hypothesis 12	PSI → SMI Perceived Authenticity	Supported
Hypothesis 13	Ephemeral Content → (AUTH → PRE)	Unsupported
Hypothesis 14	SMI Perceived Authenticity → PRE	Supported
Hypothesis 15	SMI Perceived Authenticity → PURCHASE	Supported
Hypothesis 16	SMI Perceived Authenticity → POST	Supported

EXP, while having a significant relationship with PSI and TRUST, is not statistically significant with the SMI perceived authenticity construct as proposed with Hypothesis 3. Without the full mediation of PSI, EXP and SMI perceived authenticity have a significant relationship ($p < 0.05$), accounting for over half of SMI perceived authenticity's explained variance ($R^2 = .319$). This research concludes that since TRUST and LIKE have such a strong influence upon SMI perceived authenticity, in the model, that EXP's association is not strong enough.

ATTR to PSI is not supported due to the full mediation of TRUST. Another likely reason the relationship between ATTR and PSI is not significant is that SMIs are

different than traditional celebrities regarding attractiveness. When considering that actors and actresses are often selected based on physical attractiveness and athletes are generally quite physically fit, SMIs come from a range of physical attractiveness as broad as the human population itself. While many of the SMIs work and endorse beauty product brands, this is not true for many others since their followership does not involve physical attractiveness. Of the four independent constructs for TRUST, PSI, and SMI perceived authenticity, ATTR has the least influence on them with the path coefficient leading to PSI even being negative for the sample.

The last unsupported hypothesis is the moderation of EPHM upon the relationship between SMI perceived authenticity and PRE. While clear from the advertising budgets mentioned in Chapter II that SMIs are considered valuable for this stage of the customer journey, there was no evidence that EPHM strengthened the relationship. While the survey included respondents that used all social media platforms in EPHM's items, all respondents do not use all the platforms all the time. Tiktok was selected as the primary social media platform by the majority (56.2%) of those surveyed. While many of the practitioner articles cited in Chapter II mentioned the rise in usage of Snapchat and Instagram by Generation Z, TikTok is not considered the social media platform of choice though it is the majority choice in this research.

Another focus of this study was to encompass each stage of the customer journey. While previous research has studied individual stages, consumers moving through the customer journey and even skipping stages justify the inclusion of all three stages. For this study, most respondents (60%) indicated that they have not purchased products because of the SMI they selected. Despite their responses on the PURCHASE construct,

the data is more normally distributed in the PRE and POST constructs giving support to Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) paper concerning the increasingly complex customer journey. While not purchasing products, respondents communicated they are skipping that stage, exhibiting both prepurchase and post-purchase behaviors.

5.2 Future Research

While traditional celebrity measurement scales were used for this study, the unsupported hypotheses of attractiveness indicate the need further study. Essentially anyone can post on social media, but those individuals that achieve SMI status are different from traditional celebrities. Given the theoretical relationships hypothesized with the attractiveness construct (ATTR) that were not supported in this research, we believe it is time to reassess attractiveness with Generation Z as the context. As evidenced by this study, ATTR's lack of support indicates that SMIs, especially regarding appearance, are different than traditional celebrities. To better understand the role of SMIs, the results of this study suggest two key pieces of inquiry. One, while Ohanian's (1990) scale is widely cited in the literature, it is time to develop a new scale for perceived attractiveness, especially regarding SMIs. Thirty years ago, most traditional actresses could be considered "elegant" or "classy," yet those adjectives do not resonate with younger consumers. Beauty standards are changing with the generation that values individualistic expressions over-commercialized content. Second, Generation Z appears to value imperfections over flawless advertising (Biondi, 2021). For example, preferring freckles and scars to flawless, airbrushed advertising, Generation Z is moving away from what traditional media tells them is attractive toward their own, more individualist and

natural definition. Using traditional celebrity scales for SMIs, especially attractiveness, is therefore not a good indicator of authenticity regarding Generation Z followers.

Another future area of study that should also be considered is humor as an antecedent of SMI perceived authenticity. Much of the TikTok and Snapchat content is considered humorous. If humor can increase speaker credibility (Gruner, 1985) and unify groups of people (Meyer, 1997; 2000), it is a worthy construct of study given its prevalence across social media platforms. Practitioner articles and blogs are advising SMIs to utilize humor for to enhance follower engagement and content sharing (Hou et al., 2018; Siewert, 2020; Snow, 2015). Given previous research support of effectively using humor and trust in transformational leaders (Hughes & Avey, 2009), humor can likely be an important variable to further our understanding of SMIs and their influence on customer behavior.

This research calls attention to focus on various social media platforms. Many studies use Facebook and Twitter as the platform studied, though regarding Generation Z especially, those are not the primary platforms for many of the younger consumers. While SMIs are raising the interest of academic researchers, the platforms being used by the different generational cohorts are varied and should be considered when researched. If this study would have restricted items to Facebook, the data collected would not have been as relevant to Generation Z since only 3.5 percent of the sample respondents identified Facebook as their platform of choice.

Given the acceptance and prevalence of social media in society, another topic of future research is how disingenuous or unengaged social media accounts of traditional celebrities are compared to SMIs. This is especially characteristic of younger people who

engage so frequently with social media. Moreover, to what extent does the lack of response from traditional celebrities affect their credibility? Influencers are important to Generation Z because of their perceived authenticity (Talbot, 2021). Due to the Internet's customization of entertainment, future research should evaluate whether SMI engagement and interactions with followers have lowered the influence of traditional celebrities that are not actively communicating with followers on social media.

Followership is a substantial component in the success of SMIs. One would think that SMIs with a larger number of followers have more influence, but that might not be true of the individual follower's perceptions. Future research should focus on nano and micro-influencers to better understand their influence over their followers. Nano influencers, SMIs with less than 1000 followers (Foxwell, 2020), could be considered experts, especially with regard to niche markets. How these SMIs with smaller followings influence their followers should have a distinguishable perceived authenticity and relationship with the customer journey, as opposed to SMIs with very large followings. For example, expertise could have a stronger relationship with SMI perceived authenticity in niche areas, but this area has thus far not been explored.

5.3 Limitations

One limitation of this study is the respondents were asked to pick the SMIs. Therefore, the SMIs studied were not categorized. Moreover, with regard to followership, there is a wide range of SMIs from nano to mega-influencers. The lower the followership for an SMI, the easier it is for the influencers to engage with their followers. While the respondents were asked to choose a single SMI for the survey, it is quite likely many of

them follow multiple influencers. Therefore, the survey design prevented the respondents from providing their insights on other influencers they follow except the one they initially chose. A broader sample size that would enable a researcher to categorize the SMIs, should be considered to evaluate them by followership.

A second limitation is this study did not specify social media platforms. Four popular options for platforms were assessed because of their ephemeral content: Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and TikTok. It is quite likely, however, that unmentioned social media platforms were preferred by some respondents. A larger sample would lend itself to respondents selecting more platforms. The platforms, themselves, could be a ripe area for scholars and practitioners wanting to better understand the SMIs' roles with their followers.

The third limitation of this study is it is primarily quantitative. Interviews with followers could shed some light on SMIs' influence, especially regarding Generation Z. Without talking to followers to better understand the important antecedents of SMI perceived authenticity, research is left to rely on previous literature and anecdotal evidence when both constructing models and interpreting results. Though this research supported most hypotheses, exploring more possibilities, especially regarding attractiveness, could lead to a more fruitful understanding of the concepts concerning the emerging knowledge into the new subject of study, social media influencers.

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APPENDICES

Table A1

Table A. *Construct Measures and Indicators Loadings Prior to Deletion*

CONSTRUCT	EXP	TRUST	ATTR	LIKE	PSI
EXP 1	0.834				
EXP 2	0.894				
EXP 3	0.923				
EXP 4	0.927				
EXP 5	0.870				
TRUST 1		0.889			
TRUST 2		0.933			
TRUST 3		0.937			
TRUST 4		0.923			
TRUST 5		0.931			
ATTR 1			0.830		
ATTR 2			0.865		
ATTR 3			0.853		
ATTR 4			0.866		
ATTR 5			0.700		
LIKE 1				0.816	
LIKE 2				0.816	
LIKE 3				0.797	
LIKE 4				0.801	
LIKE 5				0.823	
LIKE 6				0.858	
LIKE 7				0.780	
LIKE 8				0.860	
LIKE 9				0.517*	
LIKE 10				0.693*	
LIKE 11				0.689*	
PSI 1					0.792
PSI 2					0.766
PSI 3					0.758
PSI 4					0.741
PSI 5					0.790
PSI 6					0.717
PSI 7					0.737

Table A cont.

	PERC AUTH	PRE	PURCHASE	POST	EPHM
PSI 8					0.438*
PSI 9					0.798
PSI 10					0.689*
PSI 11					0.747
PSI 12					0.625*
PSI 13					0.562*
PSI 14					0.548*
PSI 15					0.684*
PSI 16					0.540*
PSI 17					0.588*
PSI 18					0.234*
PSI 19					0.830
PSI 20					0.761
PERC AUTH 1	0.836				
PERC AUTH 2	0.895				
PERC AUTH 3	0.861				
PERC AUTH 4	0.877				
PERC AUTH 5	0.109*				
PRE 1		0.825			
PRE 2		0.921			
PRE 3		0.924			
PRE 4		0.911			
PRE 5		-0.174*			
PRE 6		0.710			
PURCHASE 1			0.880		
PURCHASE 2			0.851		
PURCHASE 3			0.895		
PURCHASE 4			0.836		
PURCHASE 5			0.806		
PURCHASE 6			0.803		
POST 1				0.940	
POST 2				0.965	
POST 3				0.919	
EPHM 1					0.855
EPHM 2					0.664*
EPHM 3					0.904

Note: * indicates item with low loading considered for removal.

Appendix B

Table A2

Table A. *Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Confidence Intervals*

Path	Original Sample	Sample Mean	2.5%	97.5%
EXP → PSI	0.700	0.700	0.640	0.756
EXP→ TRUST	0.660	0.659	0.579	0.729
EXP → PERC AUTH	0.611	0.610	0.533	0.681
TRUST → PSI	0.797	0.797	0.746	0.842
TRUST → PERC AUTH	0.852	0.852	0.812	0.887
ATTR → PSI	0.461	0.460	0.376	0.540
ATTR → PERC AUTH	0.543	0.541	0.445	0.630
ATTR → TRUST	0.529	0.528	0.440	0.610
LIKE → PSI	0.877	0.877	0.839	0.909
LIKE → PERC AUTH	0.834	0.833	0.788	0.873
LIKE → TRUST	0.857	0.857	0.820	0.889
PSI → PERC AUTH	0.778	0.778	0.724	0.827
EPHM → (SMI PERC AUTH → PRE)	0.072	0.085	0.030	0.180
PERC AUTH → PRE	0.778	0.778	0.724	0.827
PERC AUTH → PURCH	0.353	0.353	0.272	0.429
PERC AUTH → POST	0.563	0.563	0.495	0.626

Appendix C

Table A3

Table A. *PLSpredict Statistics: Root Mean Squared Error, Mean Absolute Error, and Q^2*

Predict Statistic for the Structural Model

	RMSE	**MAE**	**Q² predict**
SMIPA_1	1.091	0.849	0.350
SMIPA_2	1.011	0.794	0.507
SMIPA_3	1.149	0.906	0.427
SMIPA_4	1.102	0.858	0.443
POST_1	2.22	1.743	0.445
POST_2	2.282	1.817	0.465
POST_3	2.476	2.009	0.372
PRE_1	0.963	0.719	0.579
PRE_2	1.106	0.874	0.505
PRE_4	1.216	0.963	0.459
PSI_1	1.251	1.001	0.514
PSI_2	1.399	1.062	0.434
PSI_3	1.072	0.804	0.631
PSI_4	1.363	1.091	0.395
PSI_5	1.189	0.893	0.600
PSI_6	1.362	1.102	0.387
PSI_9	1.068	0.816	0.531
PSI_20 R	1.381	1.098	0.416
PURC_1	1.867	1.481	0.210
PURC_2	1.927	1.532	0.159
PURC_3	1.598	1.230	0.241
PURC_4	1.362	0.973	0.171
PURC_5	1.693	1.207	0.147
PURC_6	1.623	1.218	0.193
TRUST_1	1.066	0.837	0.502
TRUST_2	1.031	0.802	0.584
TRUST_4	0.903	0.693	0.662

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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