



PhD thesis

Exploring the role of source, content, and audience factors in shaping sharing behaviour among social media influencers' followers in Saudi Arabia

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**Middlesex
University
London**

**Exploring the Role of Source, Content, and Audience
Factors in Shaping Sharing Behaviour among Social
Media Influencers' Followers in Saudi Arabia**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Marketing

Submitted by:

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Abstract

The rise of social media influencers over the past decade has garnered interest from scholars and marketers, paving the way for what is widely known as influencer marketing. Recent evidence indicates that engagement between influencers and their followers plays a major role in the success of influencer marketing. While scholars and practitioners are interested in enhancing followers' engagement with influencers, the mechanism driving this engagement remains a promising area for research. Specifically, the exploration of engagement, particularly in the form of sharing, remains an underexplored area in the current body of literature. Therefore, this study aims to develop a model that investigates the underlying mechanism of followers' sharing behaviour towards influencers' posts, with a specific focus on the unique context of Saudi Arabia.

With the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework as a backbone and supported by the Communication Persuasion Matrix (CPM), an integrated model was developed to explore the specific factors related to the source, content, and audience influencing followers' sharing behaviour. Specifically, the impact of source popularity and authenticity, content creativity and quality, as well as audience collectivist values and self-efficacy are studied. It is argued that parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers act as a mediator between these factors and sharing behaviour. Additionally, the potential moderating role of verification behaviour – the follower's tendency to seek validation for what an influencer says – on the relationship between parasocial relationships and sharing behaviour was investigated.

An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was employed, consisting of two stages of data collection and analysis that integrated qualitative and quantitative methods. In the first stage, twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with followers of SMIs to identify audience factors that might influence their engagement with SMIs. In the second stage, 507 valid survey responses were collected through a questionnaire and analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

The findings of this study elucidate the mechanism underlying the development of sharing behaviour. Specifically, the results suggest that only factors related to the content of SMIs can directly contribute to increased sharing behaviour. However, when followers develop a parasocial relationship with their favourite influencer, all factors related to the source, content, and audience exhibit significant indirect effects, leading to increased shared behaviour, except

for self-efficacy. Additionally, verification behaviour was found to negatively moderate the relationship between parasocial relationships and sharing behaviour. These research outcomes yield several theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: Social media influencers, influencer marketing, engagement, sharing behaviour, Communication Persuasion Matrix, Stimulus-Organism-Response, Saudi Arabia

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Special thanks to my brothers Ahmed and Hamzah, sisters Noura and Afraa, and my childhood friend Mohaned for their encouragement and care throughout this challenging journey. Your presence has significantly impacted me, and I am grateful for your support.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis, submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Middlesex University London, is independently developed by me and has not been submitted for any other qualification or degree at any other academic institution. I affirm that all information this dissertation presents adheres to academic rules and ethical conduct.

Tareq Saadoon Guwir Aldlimi

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List of Abbreviations

ADO:	Antecedents Decisions Outcomes
AI:	Artificial Intelligence
AMOS:	Analysis of Moment Structures
ANOVA:	Analysis of Variance
ANCOVA:	Analysis of Covariance
AVE:	Average Variance Extracted
CAQDAS:	Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CB-SEM:	Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling
CFA:	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CMB:	Common Method Bias
CMIN:	Chi-Square Minimum
CMIN/DF:	Chi-Square Minimum divided by Degrees of Freedom
CPM:	Communication Persuasion Matrix
CLF:	Common Latent Factor
CSR:	Corporate Social Responsibility
DV:	Dependent Variable
EFA:	Exploratory Factor Analysis
eWOM:	Electronic Word of Mouth
GCC:	Gulf Co-operation Council
GFI:	Goodness of Fit Index
IV:	Independent Variable
KMO:	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin
KSA:	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

MENA: Middle East and North Africa

MI: Modification Indices

MLE: Maximum Likelihood Estimation

NFI: Normed Fit Index

OLS: Ordinary Least Squares

PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

PSR: Parasocial Relationship

PSI: Parasocial Interaction

PLS-SEM: Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling

RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation

SEM: Structural Equation Modelling

SLR: Systematic Literature Review

SMIs: Social Media Influencers

SOR: Stimuli - Organism - Response

SPSS: Statistical Program for the Social Sciences

TPB: Theory of Planned Behaviour

TRA: Theory of Reasoned Action

TAM: Technology Acceptance Model

U&G: Uses and Gratifications theory

UAE: United Arab Emirates

UK: United Kingdom

USA: United States of America

WOM: Word of Mouth

χ^2 : Chi-square

1 Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview of The Chapter

This chapter introduces the research background and rationale. It commences with a general look at the background of the study, moving into a detailed overview of the knowledge gaps that form the rationale for conducting this research. It then introduces the research's aim, objectives, and questions. Additionally, the chapter briefly discusses the research approach and presents the expected theoretical and practical contributions. Finally, the chapter outlines the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Research Background

The advent of sophisticated social media platforms has revolutionized communication, sharing, and interaction, thereby changing the role of individuals in the context of communication. With a global community of 4.88 billion social media users (Statista, 2023b), individuals not only act as recipients of information but also actively engage in the exchange process by interacting with posted content (Zhang and Mac, 2023). Specifically, social media platforms function as bidirectional communication channels, offering users a range of tools to express their reactions and engage with posted content. These tools often take the form of social plugins, such as 'like', 'comment', 'share', and others, typically presented as clickable buttons on social media platforms (Ananda *et al.*, 2019). Through these buttons, users can express their interest or opinions about content posted by anyone on the platform. Given the widespread use of social media platforms and the algorithms that prioritize content based on interactions (Hazari, Talpade and Brown, 2023), it has become necessary for marketers to tap into this vast user base and develop strategies to enhance content interactions. One effective strategy is collaborating with social media influencers (hereafter: SMIs), strategically leveraging their influence to improve content visibility and engagement within the dynamic landscape of social media.

An SMI is a content creator (Lou and Yuan, 2019) who has expertise in a particular field and possesses an actively engaged audience (i.e., followers) on social media platforms (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). Compared to traditional celebrities, SMIs are seen as regular individuals who share similar interests with their followers (Ren *et al.*, 2023), exerting a substantial influence on forming attitudes and behaviours among their followers (Gamage and Ashill, 2023). Moreover, they can connect with followers and specialized interest groups, who are otherwise challenging to reach (Zheng *et al.*, 2023). The rise of SMIs has led to the emergence of a new

marketing strategy: influencer marketing. Specifically, influencer marketing enables marketers to leverage SMIs' assets (e.g., popularity and authenticity), content creation strategies (e.g., quality and creativity), and connect with their followers at a personal level (Leung *et al.*, 2022). The surge in research on influencer marketing over the past few years signifies a growing interest and recognition of its essential role in contemporary marketing practices (Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Fowler and Thomas, 2023).

According to Santora (2023), 93% of marketers have used influencer marketing in their campaigns. Over 90% of marketers have expressed that influencer marketing strategies are more effective than traditional marketing, highlighting that these strategies yield an 11-times increase in return on investment compared to traditional marketing approaches (Gamage and Ashill, 2023). Recently released figures indicate that the value of the global influencer market has doubled from \$6.5 billion in 2019 to \$13.8 billion in 2021 (Statista, 2021a) and grew to approximately \$16.4 billion in 2022 (Geyser, 2022), reaching a staggering market size of \$21.1 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023a). The market is expected to experience remarkable growth at a compound annual growth rate of 32.50%, reaching an estimated value of \$69.92 billion by 2029 (Yahoo Finance, 2023). The widespread acceptance and significance of this marketing approach underscore the importance of studying influencer marketing as a valuable research domain for both academic scholars and business practitioners alike (Chetioui *et al.*, 2023; Tanwar, Chaudhry and Srivastava, 2022).

The Arab world, in general, and Saudi Arabia, in particular, has seen an increase in successful SMIs (Sultan, 2021a), with at least 39,796 SMIs in Saudi Arabia alone (Star Ngage, 2023). The popularity of influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia is driven by the country's high social media penetration rates. For example, Saudi Arabia was home to 29.10 million social media users in January 2023, equating to 79.3% of the total population (GMI, 2023). Moreover, Saudis spend an average of three hours and 24 minutes a day on social media (Statista, 2022b). Influencer marketing has also witnessed significant growth. For instance, spending in the influencer market in Saudi Arabia is projected to reach \$74.81m in 2023 and is expected to reach \$117.50m by 2027 (Statista, 2023). The BPG Group (2019) indicates that 85% of Saudi Arabians follow at least one SMI, and 73% have purchased a product or tried a service recommended by an SMI. Influencer marketing's popularity in Saudi Arabia has extended to include not only individuals but also government and private agencies (Alanazi, 2020). Specifically, government agencies stand out as the most significant sponsors of influencer

marketing in Saudi Arabia (DRC, 2023). This suggests that the Saudi government believes in the effectiveness of influencer marketing and SMIs. Hence, with a highly active population on social media platforms and many SMIs, the Saudi influencer marketing landscape presents a dynamic and promising arena for researchers and marketers (Leung, Sun and Asswailem, 2022).

Additionally, the ambitious Vision 2030 plan, which aims to diversify the economy and reduce dependency on oil revenues, contributed the future of influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia. This comprehensive strategy includes a strong focus on developing the tourism sector, with a goal of attracting 100 million annual visits by 2030 (Saudi Vision, 2023). The government has made substantial investments in tourism infrastructure, including the creation of luxury resorts, cultural and heritage sites, and entertainment hubs like the Qiddiya entertainment city and NEOM, a futuristic mega-city project. The growth of the tourism sector naturally complements the rise of SMIs who play a crucial role in promoting destinations, experiences, and events. As SMIs showcase these attractions to their followers, they help drive tourism by generating interest and engagement. Moreover, mega events such as the Riyadh Season, which include a variety of cultural, entertainment, and sporting events, further enhance the country's appeal (Visit Saudi, 2024). These events provide SMIs with rich content opportunities, enabling them to create compelling narratives and visual stories that attract and engage a global audience. Furthermore, the Saudi government has actively encouraged the participation of SMIs in promoting national initiatives and events. This official endorsement not only enhances the credibility of SMIs but also integrates them into the broader marketing and communication strategies of the country.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, engagement with SMIs witnessed a substantial surge, driven by the growing reliance on digital platforms (Taylor, 2020). This surge in engagement not only reshaped the influencer marketing landscape but also garnered attention from academic researchers and industry practitioners (Al Khasawneh *et al.*, 2021). A significant advantage of influencer marketing is that it has the potential to promote engagement, usually captured by social interactions (e.g., likes, comments, and shares) with the content posted by SMIs (Cheung *et al.*, 2022b). Some scholars refer to likes, comments, and shares as social currencies, highlighting their importance in social media engagement (Cotter, 2019). Algorithms used by social media platforms prioritize posts with higher engagement (Feng and Xie, 2023), which increases the likelihood of a post being labelled as 'trending' and thus reaching a larger

audience (Karhawi, 2022) in a messy social media landscape (Borges-Tiago, Santiago and Tiago, 2023). Marketers use engagement to indicate influencer marketing performance (Syrdal *et al.*, 2023) as it indicates the followers' level of active interaction and participation. This active engagement is valuable as it reflects the followers' loyalty, trust, and interest (Chen, Yan and Smith, 2023).

Although engagement is a highly relevant goal that marketers seek to enhance (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023; Leung, Gu and Palmatier, 2022), they often struggle to find suitable and fitting SMIs to boost engagement in their campaigns (Valesia, Proserpio and Nunes, 2020; Chetioui *et al.*, 2023; Ren *et al.*, 2023). This struggle is compounded by the growing number of SMIs (Ren *et al.*, 2023) and the lack of performance data for their endorsements (Kim *et al.*, 2020). Choosing an appropriate SMI is of utmost importance, as an incompatible endorser can easily jeopardize the success of SMI campaigns. To find the right SMIs, it is crucial to understand how these SMIs can stimulate their followers' engagement behaviour. By understanding how to increase engagement, marketers can choose SMIs more effectively (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019). As firms increasingly utilize SMIs for engagement activities (Leung *et al.*, 2022; Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019), there is a pressing need for more research on engagement with SMIs (Joshi *et al.*, 2023), and it is critical to understand the factors that increase follower engagement with an SMI (Cascio Rizzo *et al.*, 2023; Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023; Zheng *et al.*, 2023). Thus, "a deep dive into the intricacies of content creation, audience engagement, and evolving trends is necessary" (Gurrieri, Drenten and Abidin, 2023, p.925). Furthermore, the scarcity of academic research in a developing country like Saudi Arabia (e.g., Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Fowler and Thomas, 2023; Aljasir, 2019), coupled with the limited studies on engagement within the context of influencer marketing, provides a compelling motivation to investigate this phenomenon more comprehensively.

1.3 Research Gaps

Industry professionals frequently struggle with selecting the most appropriate SMIs who align with their brand values and target audience. This selection is crucial as mismatched collaborations can lead to ineffective campaigns and wasted resources. While there is a growing interest in engaging with SMIs' followers, ongoing challenges persist in identifying suitable SMIs for engagement activities (Tafesse and Wood, 2023). Understanding how to best engage online users through social media remains a critical challenge for marketers (Marbach

et al., 2019). Marketers often adopt engagement strategies without a solid understanding of the distinct mechanisms driving each type of engagement behaviour, such as liking, commenting, and sharing (Wies, Bleier, and Edeling, 2023). Engagement in the form of sharing is particularly important, as it represents the highest level of engagement. Sharing is a combination of both liking and commenting behaviour, making it the most powerful form of engagement behaviour (Kim and Yang, 2017; Silva et al., 2020). SMIs aim to foster followers' sharing behaviour to enable content virality, but the focus on engagement in the form of sharing has remained somewhat overlooked in prior research. Previous studies have examined sharing behaviour as part of general engagement without explicitly exploring the factors that promote and facilitate sharing behaviour (e.g., Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Cheung et al., 2022a).

To align with the current landscape of influencer marketing research aimed at enhancing engagement, the results of our systematic literature review (see Section 2.4) show that SMIs' characteristics, the content they produce, and their followers' characteristics are antecedents and key factors for effective engagement (e.g., Tafesse and Wood, 2023; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Syrdal *et al.*, 2023; Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022; Argyris *et al.*, 2020). However, existing literature often investigates the influence of these factors in isolation. Notably, Xie-Carson, Benckendorff, and Hughes (2023) emphasize this by stating, "Few studies have investigated more than one factor" (p. 3), and none have attempted to include all three simultaneously. Viewing them in isolation may mistakably convey a sense of separateness and mutual exclusivity, potentially misguiding our understanding of the engagement mechanism. Chan, Hung, and Tse (2023) further highlight this uncertainty, stating, "It is unclear whether the three strategies (content, charisma, and bonding) are mutually exclusive" (p. 319). For example, which factor related to the SMI, the content, or the audience following that SMI generates more sharing behaviour? Grounded in McGuire's (2001) Communication-Persuasion-Matrix (CPM) model, our perspective aligns with research by Lou, Taylor and Zhou (2023) and Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman (2021), emphasizing that these factors collectively carry significant influence over the effectiveness of SMI campaigns. Therefore, without a comprehensive understanding of these factors, challenges are encountered in pinpointing the specific elements that contribute to maximizing engagement with SMIs. This research aims to bridge this gap by offering an integrated model that considers the combined effect of source (i.e., popularity and authenticity), content (creativity and quality), and audience

(collectivism and self-efficacy) factors, thus providing a more holistic understanding of how to foster sharing behaviour effectively (Gupta, Mahajan and Dash, 2023).

In online engagement between SMIs and their followers, a critical element that can facilitate and mediate this process is the relationship they establish with their followers (Silva *et al.*, 2020). As viewing and interactions with SMIs increase, followers develop certain psychological feelings, such as Parasocial Relationships (PSR). The theory of PSR is an illusional, one-sided connection established solely by audiences with celebrities or media personalities arising from repeated exposure to them in various forms of media (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956). The influencer marketing literature considers PSR as a critical factor influencing followers' behaviour (Farivar, Wang and Yuan, 2021). SMIs rely on this relationship to maintain and grow their followers (Holiday *et al.*, 2023) and increase their effectiveness (Chen, Lin and Shan, 2021). However, to achieve PSR, both SMIs and practitioners must thoroughly understand the factors contributing to its development (Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023). Specifically, "Because parasocial bonds may trigger more shares than likes, this area calls for more research efforts" (Chan, Hung, and Tse, 2023, p. 318). Limited research has explored the source, content, and audience-related factors that encourage followers to establish PSR with SMIs, potentially mediating their impact on sharing behaviour. Hence, this study posits that PSR between SMIs and their followers acts as a mediator to encourage improved sharing behaviour.

While many followers are motivated to engage with SMIs, there is growing evidence that some followers are increasingly sceptical and choose not to trust or engage with SMIs (Ki *et al.*, 2020; Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023; Cabeza-Ramírez *et al.*, 2022; Cao *et al.*, 2021). This scepticism presents a significant challenge for marketers who rely on influencers to drive engagement and promote their brands. One critical issue is how this uncertainty towards an SMI impacts followers' engagement behaviour on social media platforms. Followers often address this uncertainty by adopting verification behaviour, which refers to the tendency to verify the factuality of SMIs' content (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007). This verification process is crucial because sharing a post requires more cognitive effort than other engagement activities, such as commenting or liking (Kim and Yang, 2017). Therefore, followers are more likely to verify the content's accuracy before sharing it. From an industry perspective, this verification behaviour poses a fundamental problem that needs to be addressed. Despite the attention given to the effects of verification behaviour in information technology (e.g., Flanagin

and Metzger, 2007) and media studies (e.g., Majerczak and Strzelecki, 2022), influencer marketing has largely overlooked this issue. This gap is important because followers' verification behaviour can undermine the persuasiveness of SMIs, impacting how they engage with influencer content (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022). For brands, this means that the effectiveness of their influencer marketing campaigns could be compromised if followers are not assured of the content's authenticity and accuracy.

Lastly, collaborating with the right SMIs who resonate with the target audience remains key to successful influencer marketing (Valesia, Proserpio and Nunes, 2020; Chetoui et al., 2023; Ren et al., 2023). However, most influencer marketing studies focus on Western and East Asian contexts, neglecting the diversity in user behaviour across different cultural contexts (Aljasir, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, the influencer marketing landscape is particularly promising due to the country's high social media penetration rates and its ambitious Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the economy and boost digital transformation. This presents a unique opportunity for marketers and SMIs to tailor content that aligns with local cultural values and preferences (Zhou et al., 2021). Despite the increasing prominence of SMIs and the exponential growth of the influencer market in Saudi Arabia, academic research in this context remains sparse. Understanding the factors influencing followers' engagement with SMIs in Saudi Arabia is crucial for optimizing marketing strategies and capitalizing on this dynamic and growing market. Hence, this study focuses on Saudi Arabia, an emerging and developing market, to provide valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners.

In summary, the literature has not completely understood the underlying mechanisms necessary to promote followers' sharing behaviour. This study is theoretically justified by proposing a novel model that integrates constructs previously studied in isolation and within different contexts. The prior research has not addressed the combined impact of source, content, and audience factors within a unified framework, leaving their relative significance in shaping behavioural outcomes unclear. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether these three factors can contribute to forming PSR with followers, potentially leading to increased sharing behaviour. Additionally, the role of verification behaviour in this process has yet to be explored.

1.4 Research Aim, Questions, and Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to develop a comprehensive model that elucidates the underlying mechanisms influencing Saudi followers' sharing behaviour towards SMIs' posts.

This study aims to explore the pivotal factors related to the source (SMI characteristics), content (attributes of the shared content), and audience (follower traits) while examining the mediating role of PSR and the moderating effect of verification behaviour. To achieve this overarching aim, the following research questions are posed:

1. What source, content, and audience factors directly influence followers' sharing behaviour and the development of PSR with SMIs?
2. How does PSR mediate the relationship between source, content, and audience factors and sharing behaviour?
3. How does followers' verification behaviour moderate the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour?

To meet this research's aim and answer its questions, this research pursued the following objectives:

1. Identify and examine the direct effects of source factors (i.e., popularity and authenticity), content factors (i.e., creativity and quality), and audience factors (i.e., self-efficacy and collectivism) on followers' sharing behaviour and the development of PSR.
2. Assess the mediating role of PSR between source, content, and audience factors and sharing behaviour.
3. Evaluate the moderating effect of verification behaviour on the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour.

Table 1.1 summarizes the research's aim, questions, objectives, and corresponding hypotheses.

Table 1.1: Summary of research aim, questions, objectives, and hypotheses.

Research Aim	Questions	Objectives	Hypotheses
Develop a comprehensive model that elucidates the underlying mechanisms influencing Saudi followers' sharing behaviour towards SMIs' posts.	RQ1. What source, content, and audience factors directly influence followers' sharing behaviour and the development of PSR with SMIs?	RO1. Identify and examine the direct effects of source factors (i.e., popularity and authenticity), content factors (i.e., creativity and quality), and audience factors (i.e., self-efficacy and collectivism) on followers' sharing behaviour and the development of PSR.	H1a: Source popularity will have a negative effect on sharing behaviour. H2a: Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour. H3a: Content creativity will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour. H4a: Content quality will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour. H5a: Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour. H6a: Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour.

H1b: Source popularity will have a negative effect on PSR.

H2b: Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on PSR.

H3b: Content creativity will have a positive effect on PSR.

H4b: Content quality will have a positive effect on PSR.

H5b: Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on PSR.

H6b: Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on PSR.

H7: PSR will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour

RQ2. How does PSR mediate the relationship between source, content, and audience factors and sharing behaviour?	RO2: Assess the mediating role of PSR between source, content, and audience factors and sharing behaviour.	H8a: PSR will mediate the effect of source popularity on sharing behaviour. H8b: PSR will mediate the effect of perceived source authenticity on sharing behaviour. H8c: PSR will mediate the effect of content creativity on sharing behaviour. H8d: PSR will mediate the effect of content quality on sharing behaviour. H8e: PSR will mediate the effect of audience self-efficacy on sharing behaviour. H8e: PSR will mediate the effect of audience collectivism on sharing behaviour.
RQ3. How does followers' verification behaviour moderate the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour?	RO3. Evaluate the moderating effect of verification behaviour on the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour.	H9: A high level of verification behaviour will weaken the effect of PSR on sharing behaviour

Legend: RQ- Research Questions; RO- Research objectives; H- Hypothesis.

1.5 Research Approach

To reflect on the primary aim of this study and answer its questions, this research draws upon the S-O-R framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), which forms the foundation of the research framework. The S-O-R framework is chosen due to its flexibility, enabling the examination of a wide range of external and internal stimuli (S) and responses (R), including behaviours (Wu, Yang and Liu, 2023), while highlighting the mediating role of the organism (O) in this process. The S-O-R framework was previously applied to understand customer engagement in online brand communities (e.g., Ul Islam and Rahman, 2017; Kim and Johnson, 2016). A few influencer marketing studies have employed the S-O-R framework (e.g., Wu, Yang and Liu, 2023; Belanche *et al.*, 2021b) but have not primarily focused on engagement with SMIs. The S-O-R framework is complemented in the current study by the CPM (McGuire, 2001), which provides a comprehensive evaluation of how factors related to the source, content, and audience lead to desired behavioural outcomes, specifically sharing behaviour.

This study adopts a mixed-methodology approach, employing qualitative and quantitative methods, in response to the growing interest in mixed-method research in influencer marketing (Abhishek and Srivastava, 2021; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). The primary methodology used is quantitative, supplemented by a qualitative approach. In the initial phase, 21 virtual semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify audience-specific factors among Saudi followers and gain a deeper understanding of their sharing and verification behaviour. In the second phase, the finalized framework was validated using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) V.28 and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) V.28 based on survey questionnaires, with 507 valid responses out of 567.

1.6 Expected Research Contributions

The significance of the current study is revealed by its expected theoretical contributions and practical implications. The full details of the contributions of this research can be found in Chapter 8.

Theoretically, this study responds to recent calls for further investigation into engagement with SMIs (e.g., Joshi *et al.*, 2023; Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019; Cascio Rizzo *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, unlike the majority of prior engagement research (e.g., Holiday *et al.*, 2023; Fan *et al.*, 2023; Hudders and De Jans, 2021; Tafesse and Wood, 2021), which treated engagement as a general construct without differentiating between each engagement behaviour

(i.e., likes, comments, and shares), this study focuses solely on sharing behaviour. While sharing behaviour has received some attention in advertising and media literature, our study is one of the few that delves into the underlying processes fostering followers' sharing behaviour in the SMI literature. This allows us to account for factors specific to the SMI context, responding to the call made by Chan, Hung, and Tse (2023) for the need to “analyze likes and shares separately” (p. 318). Therefore, the findings enrich knowledge and offer new insights into the factors that stimulate followers' decisions to engage and share content posted by SMIs. Secondly, while previous studies emphasized the impact of either source, content, or audience in isolation, this study proposes an integrated model that considers source, content, and audience factors simultaneously. Thus, it contributes to and extends existing academic work on the antecedents of engagement with SMIs (e.g., Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Holiday et al., 2023; Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022), providing a more comprehensive understanding of the role of each category of factors in affecting sharing behaviour. To this end, novel factors related to the SMIs' audience, such as self-efficacy and collectivism, were explored and identified.

Thirdly, Ye et al. (2021) and Joshi et al. (2023) encourage further research on the formation of PSR with SMIs to identify additional antecedents and consequences. Consequently, this study is expected to contribute to the literature by demonstrating the potential mediating effect of PSR. Fourthly, Ki et al. (2020), Cabeza-Ramírez et al. (2022), and Bailey et al. (2023) motivated future research to explore variables that might adversely impact followers' behaviour towards SMIs. Responding to these calls, the concept of verification behaviour was introduced. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first attempt to incorporate the notion of verification behaviour in the SMI context. Introducing the concept of verification behaviour to the SMI literature is expected to pave the way for a new research avenue investigating its association with various marketing and behavioural outcomes. Fifthly, the present study integrates two distinctive theories from the communication and consumer behaviour literature into one holistic framework to better understand the mechanism by which sharing behaviour is developed. Namely, the CPM (McGuire, 2001) and S-O-R framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). By doing so, this study extends McGuire's CPM in the context of influencer marketing, responding to the calls of Lou and Yuan (2019), Li and Peng (2021), and Shamim and Islam (2022) while also responding to the calls of Djafarova and Bowes (2021) and Vrontis et al. (2021) to further explore the applicability of the S-O-R framework in

the influencer marketing literature. Sixthly, this study contributes to the limited number of studies in Saudi Arabia. Exploring this phenomenon in different cultures and countries could provide new theoretical and practical insights. Lastly, in terms of methodology, this study is one of the very few mixed-methods studies in the field.

Regarding *particular* contributions, this research aims to make several recommendations for online marketers looking to leverage influencer marketing to stimulate sharing behaviour. Firstly, this study provides a novel viewpoint on follower engagement dynamics, assisting marketing professionals in their decisions regarding SMIs, content strategies, and audience targeting when pursuing maximum reach and virality in their campaigns. For instance, marketers can judge SMIs' suitability for fostering sharing behaviour based on their popularity, perceived authenticity, and whether they post creative and quality content. Moreover, understanding how audience factors and personality traits drive engagement with SMIs can help managers better segment and evaluate followers, improving engagement and sharing activity levels. Secondly, the results are also anticipated to improve practitioners' comprehension of the factors that encourage followers to establish PSR with SMIs and the mediating role that PSR plays in the sharing process. This understanding can be leveraged to capitalize on characteristics like SMIs' ability to foster PSR with their followers.

Thirdly, the findings are also expected to provide insight for SMIs on enhancing follower engagement by effectively managing their relationships with their followers and tailoring their content to be more persuasive, ultimately promoting greater engagement through sharing. Fourthly, the results are also expected to enhance practitioners' understanding of the impact of verification behaviour and whether this factor strengthens or weakens followers' sharing behaviour. Lastly, given the lack of empirical evidence on followers' engagement in developing countries such as Saudi Arabia, this study is believed to have practical significance for current and prospective influencer marketing practitioners. The results are expected to aid practitioners seeking to increase engagement with their SMI campaigns in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the findings might also be helpful for marketers in other countries shaped by Arab and Islamic cultures that share cultural similarities with Saudi Arabia (Am, 2017; At-Twajiri and Al-Muhaiza, 1996).

1.7 Thesis Structure

The thesis is organised and divided into eight chapters, as follows:

Chapter One Introduction: Introduces the topic and discusses gaps for conducting this research along with the aim, research questions, objectives, research approach, and expected theoretical and practical contributions.

Chapter Two Literature Review: Provides an in-depth discussion of the systematic literature review and highlights the gaps in the literature. In addition, the CPM is introduced along with the relevant literature on source, content, and audience factors. Moreover, past studies on parasocial relationships, verification behaviour, and sharing behaviour are reviewed.

Chapter Three Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development: This chapter discusses the theoretical underpinnings of the conceptual framework by introducing the S-O-R framework, elaborating on the developed conceptual framework, and formulating the research hypotheses.

Chapter Four Research Methodology: Details the adopted methodology of this research. This chapter explains the research paradigms and approaches. In addition, the chapter addresses the sampling frame and technique and explains the steps undertaken to collect the data. It also presents methodological justifications.

Chapter Five Qualitative Data Findings: This chapter provides the outcomes and discoveries from the initial qualitative phase of the current research, where semi-structured interviews were employed.

Chapter Six Quantitative Data Analysis: Present the outcomes and findings of the results based on the quantitative statistical analysis of the data drawn from the survey of Saudi SMIs' followers.

Chapter Seven Discussion: This chapter discusses the research findings in light of other relevant empirical studies.

Chapter Eight Conclusion: This chapter summarises the study results, in which research implications, limitations, and possible future research directions are discussed.

2 Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive and critical literature review relevant to the study's focal areas. The chapter begins with a critical review of the current literature on engagement with SMIs by conducting a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), highlighting gaps in the current body of knowledge. This is followed by an overview of influencer marketing, with particular reference to influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia, justifying our selection of the research setting. Subsequently, the concept of engagement with SMIs is introduced. The chapter then delves into the concept of sharing behaviour as a manifestation of followers' behavioural engagement. Thereafter, the Communication-Persuasion Matrix (CPM) and the classification of source, content, and audience factors are presented. Subsequent sections discuss parasocial relationships between SMIs and their followers, along with followers' verification behaviour. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive summary.

2.2 Systematic Literature Review

2.2.1 Introduction

Despite a growing literature on social media engagement, research on enhancing followers' engagement in influencer marketing remains underdeveloped (Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023). Specifically, Hazari, Talpade and Brown (2023) suggested that more research on engagement with SMIs is needed. The fragmented nature of findings and the multitude of factors influencing engagement in existing studies emphasize the need for a thorough and systematic exploration of the literature through a rigorous SLR that consolidates these findings. Furthermore, there remains ambiguity regarding the specific engagement behaviours under investigation, such as likes, comments, or shares, and the potential moderators and mediators that impact engagement with SMIs. Clarifying these aspects is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

This systematic review aims to address existing gaps by concisely consolidating the findings from past research on SMIs, specifically in relation to consumer or follower engagement.

Importantly, this review aims to provide targeted insights into the factors influencing and outcomes of engagement with SMIs. Subsequently, the limitations of previous reviews will be presented, underscoring the necessity of the current review. This will be followed by an outline of the research objectives to be addressed, highlighting the expected contributions of this review. The discussion will then proceed to cover the methodology and findings.

2.2.2 Limitations of Previous Systematic Literature Reviews

Numerous reviews on SMIs have emerged, with many being relatively recent. While these reviews offer valuable insights, they are constrained by certain limitations that drive the need for the current review. For example, the first literature review was published in 2019 by Sundermann and Raabe. Its' primary objective was to reveal the existing state of research in strategic SMI communication, emphasizing the strategic side of SMIs. The review by De Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson (2019) focused on children and SMIs, yet it had a restricted scope, encompassing only eight articles and a specific target audience. On the other hand, the review by Vrontis et al. (2021) included 68 articles, shedding light on the antecedents and consequences of influencer marketing. However, their review was too broad with respect to the types of behaviour covered, and it falls short in exploring the factors that drive engagement with SMIs.

Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman (2021) advanced the field by examining an even more extensive collection of articles (154 articles). However, their focus primarily centres on the commercial aspects of SMIs, offering insights into industry perceptions that can enhance strategic rather than tactical comprehension of influencer marketing. More recently, Fowler and Thomas's (2023) literature review included 150 articles. However, their primary focus was on the broad area of influencer marketing rather than the engagement perspective. Lastly, the review conducted by Pradhan, Kishore, and Gokhale (2023) aligns more closely with the objectives of our review, although there are two notable distinctions. Firstly, the authors explored engagement on social media in a broader context rather than specifically concentrating on SMIs. Therefore, some factors might not apply to the influencer marketing environment. Secondly, the review does not examine the type of engagement, content factors, mediators, and moderators contributing to engagement with SMIs.

To summarise, new reviews are warranted when previous reviews have certain limitations (Paul *et al.*, 2021). It should be noted that the research field of influencer marketing is quickly

emerging; thus, a comprehensive review elaborating on past research findings may provide a state-of-the-art study and encourage additional research.

2.2.3 Objectives of Current Systematic Review

Driven by the limitations mentioned above in past reviews, this study followed a framework-based systematic review of the literature to identify and analyse the available studies on engagement with SMIs. This review aims to synthesize the current understanding of SMIs and followers' engagement, develop an integrated framework, and identify research gaps. This review advances the current knowledge and offers new insights into this field by focusing on SMIs from an engagement perspective. It also provides an understanding of engagement-related factors, which will help marketing practitioners develop and implement strategies for successful collaborations. Thus, this review aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Identify the antecedents, consequences, mediators, and moderators relevant to engagement in the influencer marketing literature.
- Identify the conceptualization of engagement, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions, and specify the type of engagement behaviour under study, such as likes, comments, and shares.
- Identify the theoretical and methodological trends.

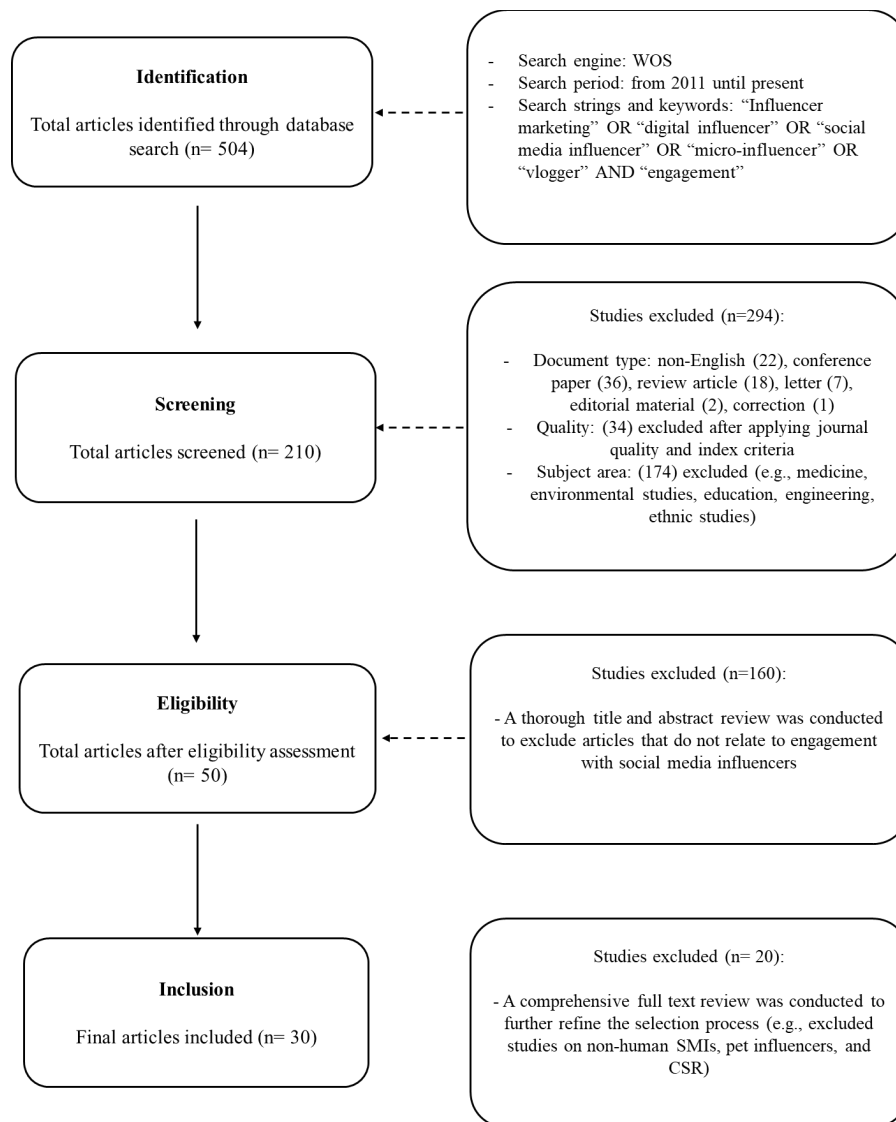
2.2.4 Methodology

A review is deemed to be systematic when the review incorporates a key question that the researcher needs to address on a particular subject matter without predisposition (Harris *et al.*, 2014) and resolves the answer by following a systematic approach and unambiguous methodology to collect, identify, synthesis and report the findings (Khan *et al.*, 2003). In this regard, Paul and Criado (2020) classified systematic reviews into three categories—namely, domain-based, theory-based, and method-based reviews. Domain-based reviews synthesize studies in the same research domain to extend the body of literature in this domain. Synthesizing diverse perspectives allows authors to describe state-of-the-art knowledge in the research domain and identify useful paths for research. There are several types of domain-based reviews: structured reviews, framework-based reviews, bibliometric reviews, hybrid reviews, and conceptual reviews. Specifically, framework-based reviews allow researchers to analyse and organize emerging themes using existing frameworks (Paul and Criado, 2020).

The Antecedents Decisions Outcomes (ADO) framework is a popular framework often used in framework marketing and consumer behaviour reviews (Paul and Benito, 2018). Specifically, it was utilized in previous review articles on influencer marketing (Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023). The ADO framework helps organize and outline the findings in relation to engagement with SMIs. Antecedents refer to the factors influencing followers'/consumers' engagement with SMIs, decisions refer to the form of engagement, and outcomes refer to the result of such engagement.

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol is a widely recognized and accepted guideline for conducting systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses in various fields. It provides a structured framework to ensure transparency, rigour, and reproducibility in the review process (Moher *et al.*, 2009; Page *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, this review adheres to the PRISMA protocol, which involves a structured approach encompassing four stages for conducting systematic reviews: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: PRISMA protocol



2.2.4.1 Identification

The first stage of the PRISMA protocol is identification, which includes three primary considerations: search engine, search period, and search string (keywords). As for search engines, Web of Science (WOS) and Scopus are the most popular journal quality lists because they transcend across disciplines (Paul *et al.*, 2021). However, due to access difficulties, it was necessary to exclude Scopus and rely on WOS instead. As per Paul *et al.* (2021), using multiple search engines is not recommended because it will require researchers to consolidate duplications that appear, which is a redundant and unproductive endeavour. In this regard, WOS is the world's oldest, most widely used, and authoritative database of research publications and citations (Birkle *et al.*, 2020).

Regarding the search period, a bibliometric analysis conducted by Abhishek and Srivastava (2021) shows that the first peer-reviewed article was published in 2011. Hence, only papers published after 2011 were included. Lastly, while conducting a preliminary search on the term SMIs, it was found that SMIs have various names in the literature, such as digital influencers, micro-influencers, and vloggers. Therefore, to broaden the search results, the following keywords were included: “Influencer marketing” OR “digital influencer” OR “social media influencers” OR “micro-influencers” OR “vloggers” AND “engagement”. To comprehensively identify relevant research, the focus was on articles where the keywords were present in the article title, subject terms, keywords, or abstract. This approach was guided by the advice of Paul and Criado (2020), who caution that conducting keyword searches throughout the entire article can lead to a broad scope. Applying these three search criteria yielded a total of (504) articles.

2.2.4.2 Screening

The second stage of the PRISMA protocol is screening, which includes three considerations: document type, quality, and subject area. In terms of type, the search was refined to include only English articles published in peer-reviewed journals to ensure scientific rigor, consistent with other literature reviews in the field (e.g., Fowler and Thomas, 2023; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). For example, non-English (22), conference papers (36), review articles (18), letters (7), editorial material (2), and correction (1). Hence, (86) publications were excluded. Regarding quality, journal articles successfully indexed in WOS have passed stringent quality check criteria (Paul *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, Paul and Criado (2020) suggest that an article must have an impact factor score above 1.0 in the Journal Citation Reports published by Clarivate Analytics. Therefore, (34) articles were excluded. Finally, (174) articles were excluded because they were from domains outside business, communication, and management (e.g., medicine, environmental studies, education, engineering, and ethnic studies). Studies from disciplines such as psychology, hospitality, and multidisciplinary science were included, as these areas could potentially intersect with influencer marketing. Overall, 210 articles were included, and 294 articles were excluded based on these three screening criteria.

2.2.4.3 Eligibility

The third stage of the PRISMA protocol is eligibility. An article must be related to influencer marketing and engagement to be considered eligible for inclusion. This involved a thorough title and abstract review to exclude articles that do not relate to engagement with SMIs.

Consequently, (160) journal articles were excluded, resulting in the retention of (50) articles that successfully advanced to the subsequent stage.

2.2.4.4 *Inclusion*

The final stage in the PRISMA protocol is the inclusion stage. During this step, a comprehensive examination of the complete texts was undertaken to refine the selection process further. Specifically, the articles that met the eligibility criteria were further assessed for their relevance and alignment with the review's objectives and to ensure they closely aligned with the study's focus on influencer marketing and engagement. For example, articles focusing on non-human SMIs (e.g., virtual-influencers and pet-influencers) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) were excluded. Moreover, studies that rarely refer to the concept of engagement were excluded, as engagement did not constitute their principal area of focus. Therefore, out of the 50 articles identified as eligible, only (30) have been included in the inclusion stage. Appendix 2 summarises the articles that were relevant to this review's aim.

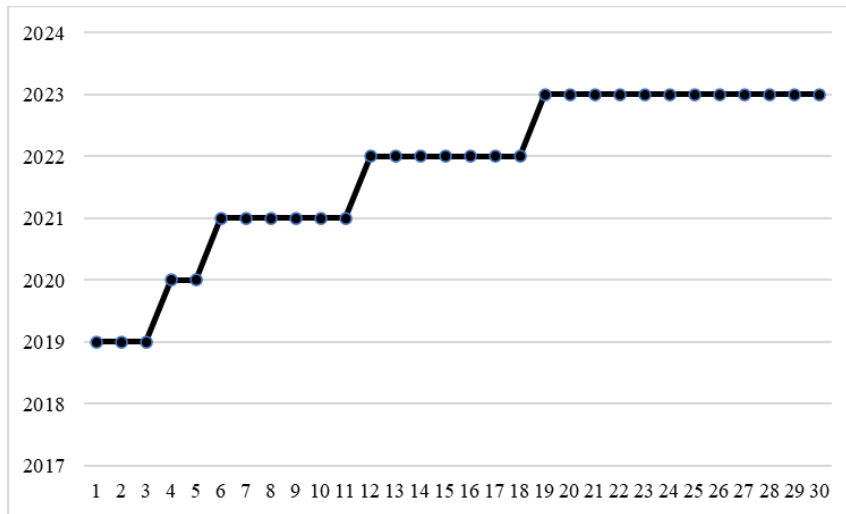
2.2.5 Analysis and Findings

The following section presents the results and findings of the SLR to better comprehend the gap(s) in the literature. Numerical findings related to publication trends, social media platforms used, theoretical perspectives, constructs investigated, and methodological trends are presented.

2.2.5.1 *Distribution by Year of Publications*

A noteworthy surge in research interest has been observed in recent years, reflecting the growing significance and relevance of SMIs in fostering engagement as a field of study. For example, the distribution of publications by year vividly portrays this trend, with three articles published in 2019, two in 2020, six in 2021, seven in 2022, and twelve in 2023 (Figure 2.2). The notable surge in academic research can be attributed mainly to the unprecedented circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the pandemic fuelled a substantial increase in engagement with SMIs (Al Khasawneh *et al.*, 2021; Taylor, 2020). It also resonates with the substantial investments made in influencer marketing. For instance, the SMI market increased to reach a value of \$9.7 billion in 2020, \$13.8 billion in 2021, \$16.4 billion in 2022 and is expected to reach an impressive \$21.1 billion by the end of 2023 (Geyser, 2023). These statistics underscore the dynamic nature of influencer marketing, appealing to both researchers and businesses alike, making it a captivating area of study and investment.

Figure 2.2: Number of articles published by year.



2.2.5.2 Distribution by journal

As noted in Table 2.1, the Journal of Business Research is the journal that contains the highest number of articles relevant to our topic ($n=6$) with a share of 20%, followed by Journal of Marketing ($n=3$) with a share of 10%, and Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services ($n=2$) with a share of 6.67%. The remaining journals that appear in the review published no more than one paper, with a share of 3.33%. This distribution highlights the significant presence of certain journals in the field of influencer marketing, particularly the Journal of Business Research, which emerges as a prominent source of relevant articles.

Table 2.1: Journal distribution of articles on engagement with SMIs

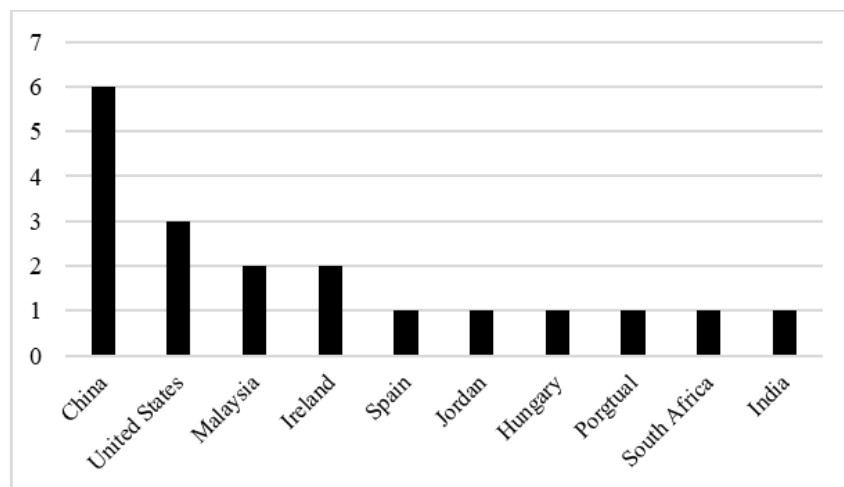
Journal Title	Number of Articles	Share of Articles
Journal of Business Research	6	20%
Journal of Marketing	3	10%
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	2	6.67%
Journal of Interactive Advertising	1	3.33%
Journal of Interactive Marketing	1	3.33%
Journal of Consumer Behaviour	1	3.33%
Journal of Consumer Research	1	3.33%
Journal of Consumer Research	1	3.33%
Journal of Marketing Research	1	3.33%
Journal of Product and Brand Management	1	3.33%
Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing	1	3.33%

Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	1	3.33%
Journal of Travel Research	1	3.33%
Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics	1	3.33%
Computers in Human Behavior	1	3.33%
International Journal of Advertising	1	3.33%
International Journal of Information Management	1	3.33%
International Journal of Internet Marketing and Advertising	1	3.33%
Journal of Strategic Marketing	1	3.33%
PLOS ONE	1	3.33%
Review of International Business and Strategy	1	3.33%
Young Consumers	1	3.33%

2.2.5.3 Distribution by Country

China dominates the scene with (n = 6) total studies in the sample. The United States of America (USA) followed with (n= 3) articles, while Malaysia and Ireland had (n= 2) articles, and the remaining countries had less than one article (Figure 2.3). It is worth noting that in 10 articles, the study did not specify a country where the research was conducted. Therefore, the majority of studies have been conducted in Western and East Asian countries. Besides, there is a dearth of research on the understudied Saudi Arabian marketplace despite its promising potential and large scale for influencer marketing (Jumana, 2019).

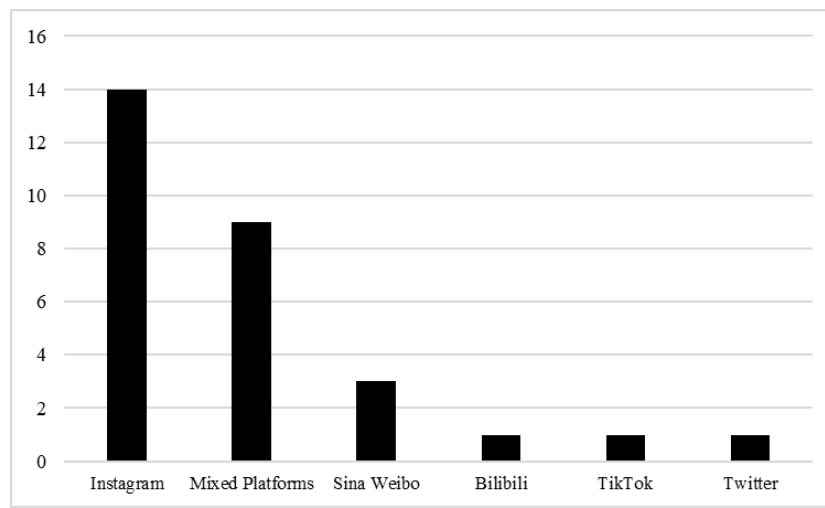
Figure 2.3: Country distribution



2.2.5.4 Distribution by Social Media Platforms Studied

As seen in Figure 2.4, Instagram appears to be the most frequently used social media platform among the studies, with (n= 14) studies. This suggests a significant focus on Instagram as a channel for engagement with SMIs in the context of the research topic. Additionally, some studies considered two or more platforms, combining various social media platforms (n= 9), while the Chinese blogging platform, Sina Weibo, was studied (n= 3) times. Other platforms, such as Bilibili, TikTok, and Twitter (now known as X), have been used in fewer studies (n =1), while one study did not specify a particular platform. Consequently, even though Instagram has been the dominant platform used by SMIs, scholars believe that influencer marketing research should expand to other platforms (Fowler and Thomas, 2023; Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023).

Figure 2.4: Distribution of social media platforms used



2.2.5.5 Theoretical perspectives

Various theoretical perspectives have been used to study the phenomenon of engagement in the context of influencer marketing. Among the articles included in this review, theories concerning communication were among the more popular. For example, Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) (n= 3), Social influence theory (Kelman, 1958) (n= 3), Social Exchange Theory (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) (n= 3), Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach, 1985) (n= 2), the Communication-Persuasion-Matrix (McGuire, 1989) (n= 1), and Lasswell's Communication Model (Lasswell, 1948) (n= 1). Other studies focused on the SMI, for example, Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990) (n= 1), while others focused on the one-sided relationship between SMIs and their followers known as the

Parasocial Relationship Theory (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956) (n= 1). Some other studies applied the Persuasion Knowledge Theory (Friestad and Wright, 1994) (n= 1), the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz and Blumler, 1974) (n= 1), and the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) (n= 1). Out of the 30 journal articles in the review, (n= 16) articles have used one theory, (n= 7) have utilized two or more theories, and (n=7) articles did not rely on any theory. Table 2.2 lists the theories used in the reviewed articles.

Table 2.2: Distribution of theoretical perspectives

Theory	Number of Articles
Elaboration likelihood model	3
Social influence theory	3
Social exchange theory	2
Media dependency theory	2
Emotional contagion theory	1
Sussman and Siegal's information adoption model	1
Motivated reasoning theory	1
Associative-network memory theory	1
Two-step flow theory	1
Power theory	1
MAIN model	1
Service-dominant logic	1
Communication-persuasion matrix	1
Persuasion knowledge model	1
Information adoption model	1
Similarity-attraction model	1
Source attractiveness	1
Lasswell's Communication Model	1
Social identity theory	1
Uses and gratification theory	1
Observational learning theory	1
Parasocial theory	1
Source Credibility	1
Stimulus-Organism-Response theory	1
Congruency theory	1

2.2.5.6 Conceptualization of Engagement

In influencer marketing research, a diverse conceptualization of engagement exists, which entails cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects. Cognitive engagement involves followers engaging in brand-related thinking and reflection, while emotional engagement centres on developing a positive emotional connection with the brand. The behavioural dimension relates to followers' commitment, energy, effort, and time invested in their interactions with the brand (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014). More specifically, behavioural engagement is defined as the active manifestations of the engagement concept, including liking, commenting, and sharing behaviours (Cao *et al.*, 2021).

As seen in Table 2.3, most studies under consideration focused on the behavioural aspect of engagement (n= 13). This behavioural perspective is thought to be in line with the SMI context, more practical, and offers more actionable insights (Buvár *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, (n= 5) studies considered the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects; (n= 1) study focused on the cognitive and emotional aspects, while (n= 1) considered the emotional and behavioural aspects of engagement. Lastly, (n= 10) studies did not specify the type of engagement they were investigating.

Table 2.3: Type of engagement studied

Type of Engagement	Number of Articles
Behavioural	13
Cognitive, emotional, and behavioural	5
Cognitive and emotional	1
Emotional and behavioural	1
Unspecified	10

2.2.5.7 Constructs investigated

As previously mentioned, our review employed the ADO (Antecedents-Decisions-Outcomes) framework to structure and categorize the identified factors that impact followers' engagement with SMIs, as illustrated in Figure 2.5. In this framework, not only antecedents but also moderators and mediators that influence engagement decisions were considered. Specifically, this framework delineates that certain factors serve as antecedents, influencing followers' engagement with SMIs, which in turn shapes their decisions regarding various forms of engagement. Subsequently, these decisions contribute to various attitudinal and behavioural

transformations, ultimately leading to distinct outcomes. The following section explains each stage of this framework in greater detail.

Figure 2.5: ADO Framework



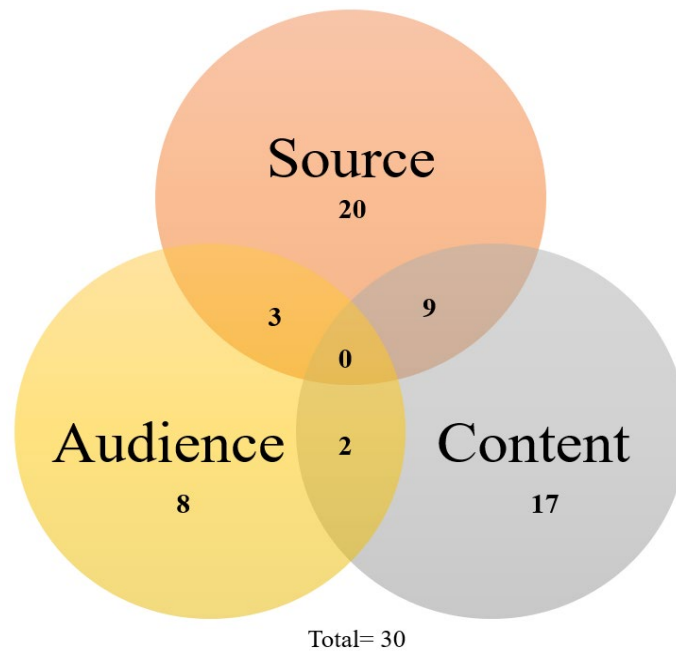
2.2.5.8 Antecedents

Antecedents capture the reasons for engaging or not engaging in the behaviour and directly influence decisions, in this case, followers' engagement (Paul and Benito, 2018). Following previous reviews in the field (e.g., Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021), the antecedents used by the studies under consideration are classified into three broad categories: *source*, *content*, and *audience*-related factors. These three factors are central to campaign designs, which generally involve selecting effective SMIs, creative content, and follower groups to target (Leung *et al.*, 2022). However, before attempting to classify those factors, each article has undergone careful systematic steps. Initially, the primary objective of each paper was identified to gain insight into the overarching theme of the research. Subsequently, any available conceptual/theoretical models were carefully extracted and scrutinized. Finally, the items associated with each construct, where applicable, were thoroughly examined to comprehensively understand their respective perspectives. These steps enabled us to identify and classify the source, content, and audience factors influencing engagement with SMIs.

Source factors are the SMI's personal characteristics, which can increase the level of acceptance in the process of persuasion and impact followers' perceptions, behaviours, and engagement (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). These include factors such as perceived authenticity, credibility, and number of followers (i.e., popularity). Next in line are *content* factors, which include the various techniques, tactics, attributes, and qualities of the content that an SMI uses in persuasive communication to influence the audience (Cheung *et al.*, 2022b). Factors within this category include quality, type of post, creativity, and informative or entertaining content. Lastly, *audience* factors are followers' personal characteristics that influence how they cope with persuasive communication, including factors related to their ability, values, culture, and personality (McGuire, 1989).

A total of (n= 16) source factors, (n= 23) content factors, and (n= 8) audience factors were identified. Source factors are featured in the majority of studies (n= 20), indicating that source-related factors are frequently discussed in the literature. Content factors appeared independently (n= 17) times, and audience factors appeared alone in (n= 8) studies. Some studies attempted to mix factors. For example, source and content factors (n= 9), source and audience factors (n= 3), and content and audience factors (n= 2). Notably, no study was found to incorporate all three factors simultaneously. Figure 2.6 presents a visual summary of the patterns identified in our analysis.

Figure 2.6: Source, content, and audience factors examined in the literature



2.2.5.9 Decisions

In line with previous reviews within the field (e.g., Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023), the articles in this review showed two distinct decisions of engagement: followers' engagement with SMIs and followers' engagement with brands. Specifically, our findings reveal that engagement can take diverse forms concerning SMIs. For example, engagement with their posts (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023), with the platform they use (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019), and engagement with the SMIs themselves (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). On the other hand, when it comes to brands, studies take a consumer/customer perspective (Syrdal *et al.*, 2023), demonstrating that they engage with branded content (Chen, Lin and Shan, 2021) and actively contribute to the creation of branded content (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). Overall, out of the 30 studies identified in this review, engagement with SMIs has been studied (n= 17) times, while engagement with brands has been the focus of (n= 13) studies.

Behavioural engagement can be measured through different available indicators depending on the configurations of online platforms (Silva *et al.*, 2020). This review suggests that followers'/consumers' engagement behaviour is reflected in five ways: liking, commenting, viewing, mentioning, clicking, and sharing. Among these engagement methods, likes and comments have been researched the most (n = 9). Equally, likes, comments, and shares have been studied (n= 9) times. Moreover, (n= 2) studies focused on likes, comments, and views,

(n= 2) considered likes and shares, while (n= 1) focused on likes, comments, mentions, and clicks. There only exists (n= 1) study that focused on sharing. Finally, in (n= 6) studies, no specific engagement behaviours or activities were mentioned or detailed.

2.2.5.10 Outcomes

Outcomes are the results of decisions (Paul and Benito, 2018). In the context of this review, they signify the consequences of engaging with SMIs. Out of the 30 articles reviewed, it is worth noting that a substantial majority centred their research on engagement as an outcome. However, it is interesting to observe that (n= 11) of these articles explored outcomes beyond engagement with SMIs. The review suggests that followers' engagement will influence their purchase intentions, attitudes, affective commitment, brand equity, brand expected value, brand online sales, brand attitude, and trust in branded content. The most frequent outcome was purchasing intention (n= 3).

2.2.5.11 Mediating and moderating variables

The presence of mediating and moderating variables was also explored — factors that enhance our understanding of the relationships between antecedents, decisions, and outcomes. These mediating and moderating variables contribute additional layers of depth to our analysis, shedding light on the nuanced mechanisms and conditions influencing engagement dynamics. The most common mediating variable was customer brand engagement (n= 3), followed by parasocial relationships (n= 2) and engagement with SMIs (n= 2). Perceptions of SMIs' characteristics, including perceived authenticity and credibility, were also used as mediating variables. Moreover, content characteristics such as creativity and text length were also included as mediators. (N= 16) articles did not incorporate mediation variables in their analysis.

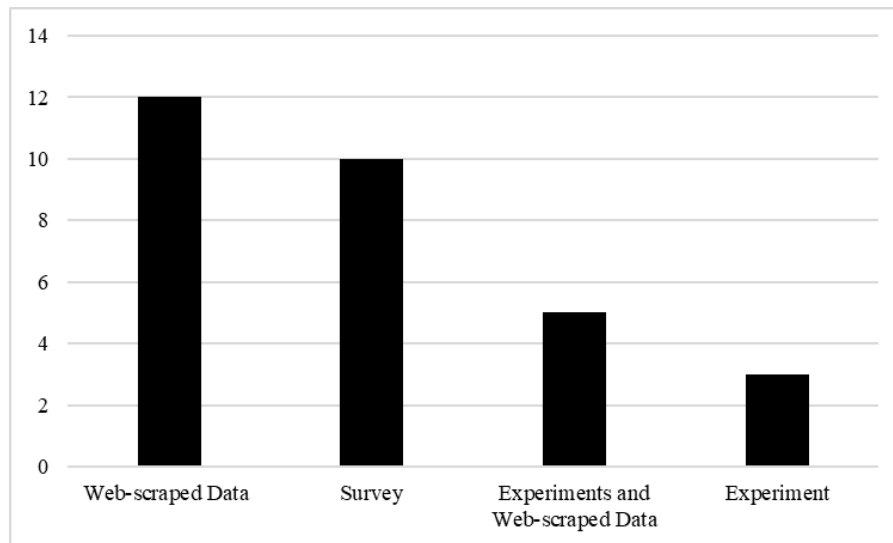
The most common moderator variable was the number of followers (n= 3) and brand fit (n= 2). Post characteristics such as post positivity, length, and content customization were also included as moderating variables. Very few studies incorporate variables related to the followers of SMIs, such as gender. Notably, (n=15) articles did not incorporate moderation variables in their analysis.

2.2.5.12 Methodological approaches

From the 30 articles identified in this review, it has been observed that research on engagement in the SMI context has predominantly been quantitative in nature. Figure 2.7 shows a heavy reliance on web-scraped data (n=12), which refers to information collected and extracted from

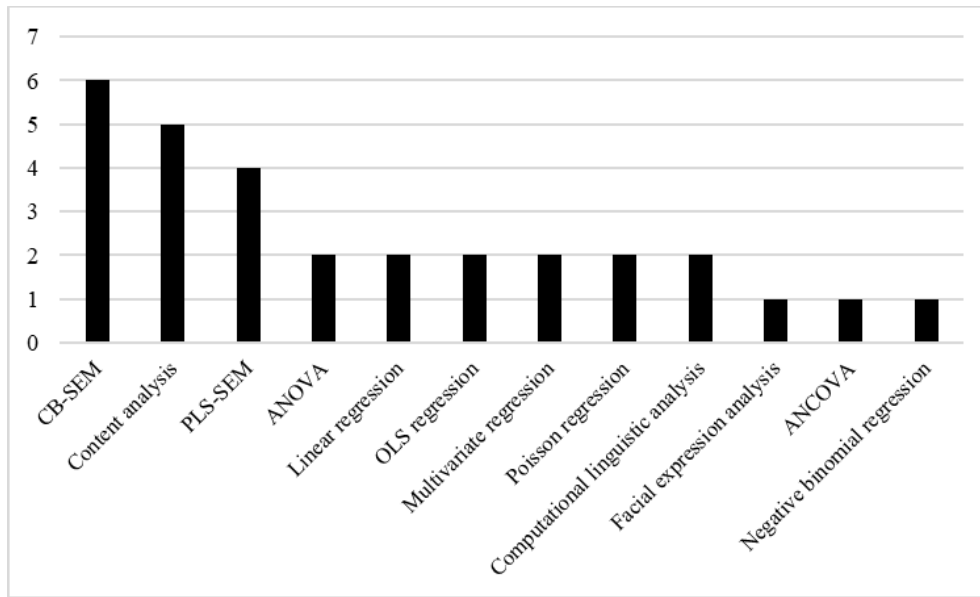
online sources using automated web-scraping tools or scripts. This data collection technique is secondary rather than primary. On the other hand, the survey method also features prominently, with (n= 10) studies, followed by experiments (n= 3). It was also noted that (n= 5) studies used mixed web-scraped data and experimental methods. Notably, none of the studies opted for qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews, to understand the determinates of engagement with SMIs.

Figure 2.7: Methodological approaches



The data analysis techniques employed across the 30 articles in the SLR exhibit a diverse range of statistical methods. As shown in Figure 2.8, Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling (CB-SEM) emerged as the most frequently utilized technique, appearing in six articles. Content analysis follows closely, featured in five articles, providing a qualitative means to systematically analyse textual, visual, or audio content. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) is found in four articles, offering an alternative structural equation modelling approach suitable for smaller sample sizes or non-normal data. Moreover, linear regression, Ordinary Least Squares regression (OLS), multivariate regression, and Poisson regression each appeared in two articles. Additional techniques, such as Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), computational linguistic analysis, facial expression analysis, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), and negative binomial regression, were each featured in one article.

Figure 2.8: Data analysis techniques



2.2.6 Research Gaps: Impact of SLR on the Current Study

Building upon the insights gathered from the findings, a range of research gaps has been identified, which are briefly summarized in Table 2.4. This study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on engagement in the influencer marketing context by addressing the following gaps:

Table 2.4: How the current study advances prior research on engagement with SMIs

Authors, Year	Focus on Saudi Arabia as a research setting	Source factors	Content factors	Audience factors	Includes PSR as a mediator	Includes verification behaviour as a moderator	Focus on sharing behaviour as an output variable
Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks (2019)		✓	✓				
Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019)		✓					
Lou, Tan and Chen (2019)		✓	✓				
Argyris et al. (2020)			✓				
Valsesia, Proserpio and Nunes (2020)		✓					
AlFarraj et al. (2021)		✓					
Chen, Lin and Shan (2021)				✓			
Hudders and De Jans (2021)				✓	✓		
Tafesse and Wood (2021)		✓	✓				

Duh and Thabethe (2021)		✓					
Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021)		✓		✓			
Shen (2021)		✓	✓				
Buvár et al. (2022)		✓		✓			
Cheung et al. (2022b)			✓	✓			
Cheung et al. (2022a)				✓	✓		
Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy (2022)		✓	✓				
Leung et al. (2022)		✓					✓
Tafesse and Wood (2023)		✓	✓				
Zhao et al. (2023)			✓				
Beheshti et al. (2023)		✓					
Cascio Rizzo et al. (2023)		✓	✓				
Fan et al. (2023)			✓				
Shuqair et al. (2023)			✓	✓			
Holiday et al. (2023)			✓				
Syrdal et al. (2023)			✓				
Borges-Tiago, Santiago and Tiago (2023)		✓		✓			
Gupta, Mahajan and Dash (2023)		✓	✓				
Wies, Bleier and Edeling (2023)		✓					
Ren et al. (2023)		✓					
Chen, Yan and Smith (2023)			✓				
Current study	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

- In our review, a prevalent pattern emerged where the antecedents of engagement—namely, *source*, *content*, and *audience* factors—have frequently been examined in isolation. Studies rarely attempted to mix two factors, and none attempted to encompass all three simultaneously. The integration of source, content, and audience factors allows us to potentially uncover situations where certain factors might hold more significance than others. This integration also grants us insights into the attributes of both the SMI and their posted content that stimulate sharing behaviour, along with a comprehension of audience attributes driving their sharing behaviour. While acknowledging a single instance where a study explored the moderating roles of source, content, and audience factors in a theoretical model, (e.g., Leung *et al.*, 2022), this primarily focused on moderation rather than considering them as antecedents to followers' engagement with SMIs. Therefore, previous studies fail to provide a holistic view of the key source, content, and audience factors that stimulate high levels of engagement.

- Based on McGuire's (2001) Communication-Persuasion-Matrix model (see Section 2.6), our perspective aligns with research by Lou, Taylor and Zhou (2023) and Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman (2021), emphasizing that these factors collectively carry significant influence over the effectiveness of SMI campaigns. Viewing them in isolation may mistakenly convey a sense of separateness and mutual exclusivity, potentially misleading our understanding of the engagement mechanism. For instance, consider a scenario where a follower is inclined to share creative and high-quality content. Attributing heightened engagement solely to content-related factors risks overlooking the critical influence of other variables, such as the SMI's impact or follower-specific characteristics, which may be the actual drivers behind increased engagement behaviour. Therefore, without a comprehensive grasp of these factors, challenges arise in pinpointing the specific elements that contribute to maximizing engagement with SMIs.
- While source and content factors have garnered some attention in previous research, the role of audience-specific factors remains relatively understudied. Content posted by SMIs should resonate well with their followers' characteristics (Syrdal *et al.*, 2023; Ren *et al.*, 2023). Understanding these characteristics that drive followers' engagement is crucial for unravelling the complex dynamics of engagement. As the audience of SMIs' is an integral part of influencer marketing (Leung *et al.*, 2022), more research is needed to understand the role that audiences play in the persuasion process (Lou and Yuan, 2019). To address this gap, it is proposed to conduct semi-structured interviews with followers of SMIs to gain deeper insights into the audience-specific factors that influence engagement. Through this method, it is anticipated that previously unexplored factors contributing to the engagement process will be identified, while also extending previous studies by incorporating audience factors (see Chapter 5 for qualitative data findings).
- A notable gap exists where studies often fail to differentiate between the various types of engagement behaviours available on social media platforms, such as likes, comments, and shares. Using a single scale for all three behaviours may provide a simplistic view of engagement and overlook the fact that followers might like something without necessarily commenting on it or sharing it, or vice versa. Research underscores the distinctive roles and purposes served by each of these engagement behaviours, and each of these actions represents a different level of engagement (Li and Xie, 2020). Notably, Kim and Yang (2017) and Silva *et al.* (2020) have emphasized that sharing, in particular, represents the

highest level of engagement, combining affective approval (likes) and cognitively driven actions (comments). Moreover, sharing is a deeper method of engagement (Chan, Hung, and Tse, 2023) because it implies followers self-selecting to reproduce the SMIs' content to their own social networks (Leung *et al.*, 2022). With this in mind, the ultimate goal of SMIs is to provide maximum engagement for followers to enable sharing of content with other users and other social platforms, leading to content virality (Hazari, Talpade and Brown, 2023).

-Despite its significance, the focus on engagement in the form of sharing SMIs' posts has remained somewhat overlooked in prior research. This oversight presents a compelling opportunity for future investigations. By understanding the drivers of sharing behaviour, marketers could control their SMI campaigns more efficiently, minimize marketing costs, acquire free online exposure, and evaluate the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns (Ren *et al.*, 2023). If sharing behaviour is the primary interest of a study, it should be measured as such. Combining it with other behaviours in a single scale might result in an inadequate research design that fails to address the specific research questions related to sharing. Consequently, researchers and practitioners may struggle to uncover the factors that drive followers to share content without separate examination for sharing behaviour.

- Our review also underscores another crucial gap—a limited exploration of mediators and moderators in the engagement process. Research in this field need not be confined to a straightforward antecedent-consequence relationship. Instead, it can benefit from examining the mediating and moderating effects of various factors. Delving into these mediating and moderating variables holds three advantages. Firstly, it enables a deeper comprehension of the complex mechanisms underpinning engagement dynamics. Secondly, it provides a more nuanced understanding of the 'how' and 'why' behind follower-influencer interactions. Thirdly, it allows for developing targeted strategies to enhance engagement with SMIs. Despite their benefits, half of the studies in our analysis did not include mediators and moderators. Specifically, no study explored the mediating role of parasocial relationships between *source*, *content*, and *audience* factors and engagement. Furthermore, none of the reviewed studies examined the moderating role of verification behaviour. To fill this gap, our study incorporates parasocial relationships as a mediator (see section 2.7) and verification behaviour as a moderator (see section 2.8).

- In terms of methodology, the majority of studies depend on secondary data, such as web-scraped data that are readily accessible to evaluate different engagement behaviours, such as the number of like the number of likes, comments, and shares. However, it is important to recognize that these metrics primarily reflect the extent of engagement itself and may not necessarily reveal the underlying factors that motivate followers to engage with the posted content or ‘why’ followers engage. In other words, they do not provide insights into the drivers behind follower engagement. Moreover, there is an increased risk that some SMIs might tend to unethically fabricate their engagement metrics to create a fake perception of good performance (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, relying solely on platform-generated engagement indicators may not suffice. It is crucial to delve into the antecedents of followers’ engagement decisions to gain deeper insights. Additionally, the lack of control over the data collection process in web scraping raises concerns about data quality and accuracy. It is proposed that primary collection methods such as surveys allow for more direct and controlled data collection, enabling researchers to gather specific information from participants and gain insights that may be missed when relying solely on web-scraped data. Surveys also provide the opportunity to tailor questions to the research objectives, ensuring that relevant factors are explored. Furthermore, surveys can incorporate validated scales and measures, enhancing the reliability and validity of the data collected (Hair *et al.*, 2019).
- It was also observed that none of the included studies utilized qualitative methods, such as interviews, to explore and uncover the factors that could potentially influence followers’ engagement with SMIs. Qualitative methods, like interviews, can offer a deeper and richer understanding of followers' subjective experiences, motivations, and perceptions (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). They allow researchers to delve into the nuances of engagement that quantitative methods alone may not capture. By embracing qualitative techniques, researchers can acquire valuable insights into the follower-related factors that might influence engagement with SMIs.
- The review indicates that most previous studies were conducted in a Western and East Asian context and that very few studies have been conducted in an Arabic context. Scholars have advised expanding studies to new geographic regions (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the aim was to fill the gap by investigating how influencer marketing shapes Saudi Arabians’ engagement behaviour with SMIs.

In conclusion, while the studies mentioned above have contributed significantly to our understanding of engagement behaviour, they often remain fragmented and lack integration. Our study aims to bridge these gaps by proposing a comprehensive model of followers' sharing behaviour. Within a unified framework, the aim is to synthesize the factors influencing sharing behaviour, including source, content, and audience factors. By doing so, the relative impact of each factor is assessed while considering the mediating role of parasocial relationships and the moderating role of verification behaviour. This integrated approach will allow for a holistic understanding of engagement dynamics in the context of SMIs. Key factors are derived from the existing literature in influencer marketing (Section 2.6), supplemented by insights from literature beyond this field (Section 2.5). Additionally, novel factors like collectivism and self-efficacy, obtained through semi-structured interviews with followers of SMIs, are introduced (see Chapters 3 and 5 for more detail).

The following section introduces SMIs, explores how they differ from traditional celebrities, provides a general overview of studies on SMIs, and examines influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia.

2.3 Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

Certain individuals are more influential than others. This influence stems from their social status or personal attributes, potentially impacting the behaviour of others (Zhang, Moe and Schweidel, 2017). The term 'Influencer' originated from the concept of 'personal influence' coined by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). The widespread adoption of social media in contemporary times has amplified the impact of ordinary individual's thoughts, enabling them to connect with a much larger audience than in the past (Hu *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, this phenomenon has motivated certain users to commit themselves to express their viewpoints via social media platforms (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry, 2018). Those users are known as SMIs.

SMIs emerged throughout the 2010s alongside the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (Gurrieri, Drenten and Abidin, 2023). While the term SMI is widely used in practice, there remains no universally accepted academic definition (Lee *et al.*, 2021; Gamage and Ashill, 2023). Nevertheless, the most frequently referenced definition characterizes SMIs as "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg *et al.*, 2011, p. 90).

This definition implies that SMIs need the exposure provided by social media platforms to gain popularity and notoriety, and those platforms achieve their appeal through the content posted by SMIs (Gamage and Ashill, 2023). Building upon a comprehensive compilation of definitions for SMIs in both theoretical and practical contexts presented in Appendix 1, the following definition is proposed for this study: SMIs are ordinary content generators, typically experts in certain subjects, with at least a thousand followers, sharing details about their daily lives along with tips and tricks on social media.

SMIs vary in their focus, social media platform selections, and number of followers. Moreover, SMIs wear many hats; they are content creators, opinion leaders, persuasive agents, and entrepreneurs (Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019). SMIs usually share stories about their personal life (Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Giordano *et al.*, 2020), generate high perceived credibility (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017), perceived authenticity (Lee and Eastin, 2021), post creative content (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021), amass a large number of followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017), and become a source of advice (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Thus, they can greatly influence their followers' attitudes and behaviours (Godey *et al.*, 2016).

Finally, during the literature review, it became evident that SMIs are referred to by various names. For instance, SMIs (Freberg *et al.*, 2011), digital SMIs (Torres, Augusto and Matos, 2019), micro-influencers (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017), and vloggers (Munnukka *et al.*, 2019). It is also worth mentioning that SMIs might be referred to according to the platform used. For example, YouTubers, Facebookers, Instagramers, Twitterers, Snapchatters or TikTokkers (Wielki, 2020). Together, recent research often uses the overarching term 'SMIs' to describe influencers (Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023).

2.3.1 Traditional Celebrities VS SMIs

In traditional media, famous mainstream celebrities were the major influencers of consumer behaviour long before social media (Erdogan, 1999). 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). Celebrities as endorsers are well-documented and extensively studied in the literature (Bergkvist and Zhou, 2016).

Some differences exist between celebrities and SMIs. First, there are differences in their patterns of emergence; in contrast to celebrities, who gain their popularity through non-social

media activities (e.g., cinema, sports, music), SMIs' fame accumulates from their social media efforts (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019) by having expertise in specific areas (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017). Second, since celebrities are only actors following a scripted advertisement, the advertisement becomes less persuasive (Li and Peng, 2021). On the contrary, SMIs are easy to relate to since they share parts of their daily lives (Torres, Augusto and Matos, 2019). In particular, posting their daily activities helps create a sense of authenticity and social presence (Kim, 2021), making SMIs seem more approachable than mainstream celebrities. This is especially true because followers follow SMIs of their own free will (Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019); hence, they often associate with their preferred SMI (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). Lastly, social media allows two-way engagement between SMIs and their followers, which is very different from one-way communication in classic celebrity endorsement (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). This makes their impact more credible, relatable, and authentic than traditional celebrities (Breves *et al.*, 2019; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

Thus, it is no surprise that traditional advertising is losing effectiveness (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Studies comparing traditional celebrities to SMIs found that SMIs are more influential (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017), credible (Al-Emadi and Ben Yahia, 2020), trustworthy (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020), authentic (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016), relevant (Pöyry *et al.*, 2019) and provide in-depth elaborations (Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2021). However, while those studies argued that SMIs are different from celebrities, they build a fanbase of followers, and thus, the concepts of celebrity endorsement still apply to them (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017). Prior research has treated SMIs similarly to traditional celebrities who count on their characteristics, such as credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, to stimulate their followers' responses (Shan, Chen and Lin, 2020). It is important to notice that some SMIs may become celebrities; however, not all celebrities are SMIs (Taillon *et al.*, 2020).

2.3.2 Previous Studies

Extant research has generally focused on well-established concepts of social influence, such as celebrity endorsement (Gross and Wangenheim, 2018; Harrigan *et al.*, 2021; Lin, Bruning and Swarna, 2018). In addition, various theoretical perspectives underpinned previous studies. For example, the source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990) has been widely applied in influencer marketing research (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021), which refers to “a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message” (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41) and

includes attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. Moreover, Persuasion Knowledge Theory (PKM) (Friestad and Wright, 1994) has been employed in a variety of studies (e.g., Lou, Tan and Chen, 2019; Breves *et al.*, 2019) referring to followers' knowledge that the endorsement is paid. Other studies applied the PSR Theory (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956), which assumes that followers develop a one-sided friendship with the SMI (e.g., Lee and Watkins, 2016; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a; Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023). Lastly, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Blumler and Katz, 1974) was applied to various studies to understand the needs, motives, and gratifications of followers (e.g., Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023; Sokolova and Perez, 2021). Authors such as Joshi *et al.* (2023) recommend enhancing future influencer marketing studies by employing theoretical integration, utilizing two or more theories in a single investigation for deeper insights.

Research on influencer marketing has flourished over the past few years (Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023). The abundance of scholarly work to date centres on practical aspects of influencer marketing. For example, how brands can profit from SMIs (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019; Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Esteban-Millat *et al.*, 2020; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Leung *et al.*, 2022; Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020), the functional components of influencer marketing (Campbell and Farrell, 2020), and disclosure implications in influencer marketing (Kay, Mulcahy and Parkinson, 2020; Karagür *et al.*, 2022). In addition, some systematic literature reviews have been published (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023; Fowler and Thomas, 2023).

Recent studies on influencer marketing have suggested and examined factors that explain its impact on SMIs' followers' behaviours. For example, research has highlighted that followers focus on the SMI's personal attributes (Torres, Augusto and Matos, 2019; Borges-Tiago, Santiago and Tiago, 2023), another line of research has emphasized that followers focus on SMIs' content (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a), whereas other researchers highlighted the importance of followers' personal attributes and motivations (Chen, Lin and Shan, 2021; Hwang and Zhang, 2018). Another line of research was influenced by the assumption that SMIs serve as brand endorsers and studied several factors that predict their endorsements' effectiveness, such as sponsorship disclosure (Evans *et al.*, 2017), followers' awareness of a paid endorsement (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019), the congruence between the SMI and the product being endorsed (Kim and Kim, 2021), the congruence between the SMI and the follower's ideal self-image (Shan, Chen and Lin, 2020), number of

followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017), PSR between SMIs and followers (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a), and among others. Other researchers focused on comparing the effectiveness of SMIs and celebrities (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020).

In addition, emerging research indicates that influencer marketing plays a significant role in affecting outcomes such as greater reach (Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2021), increasing consumers' purchase intention (Lou and Yuan, 2019), positive brand attitude (Munnukka *et al.*, 2019), brand trust (Leite and Baptista, 2022), brand identification (Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2022), SMI compliance intention (Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023), and increasing followers' engagement with SMI (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). However, much of the existing literature has primarily focused on purchase intention and outcomes related to the brand as the results of SMI endorsement (e.g., Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Zogaj, Tscheulin and Olk, 2021; Saima and Khan, 2020; Tiwari *et al.*, 2023; Kim and Park, 2023; Leite and Baptista, 2022; Chidiac and Bowden, 2022; Bhattacharya, 2022). That is, most research in influencer marketing takes a brand perspective (De Veirman, Hudders and Nelson, 2019). Researchers such as Sokolova and Perez (2021) and Bailey, Mishra, and Vaishnav (2023) have suggested moving beyond commonly investigated outcomes such as purchase intentions. Therefore, to enhance our understanding of SMI effects, other perspectives, constructs, and outcomes may need to be explored (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023). Specifically, a limited body of research sought to explore outcomes such as engagement within the context of influencer marketing, especially in emerging countries (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Fowler and Thomas, 2023). Hence, our focus is on examining followers' engagement with SMIs within the context of Saudi Arabia. Before delving into the concept of engagement, it is essential to provide an overview of the influencer marketing landscape in Saudi Arabia.

2.3.3 Influencer Marketing in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government announced the 'Saudi Vision 2030' to transform the country into a global investment powerhouse (Saudi Vision, 2023). Aligned with this vision, Saudi Arabia is poised to become the largest MENA (Middle East and North Africa) market. In fact, many brands and businesses have set up regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia (Chesalina, 2023). Consequently, Saudi Arabia has witnessed a remarkable surge in the growth of its hospitality sector, entertainment venues, and a thriving community of Saudi SMIs who aspire to reshape the global perception of the kingdom. These SMIs have effectively conveyed culturally

relevant messages and relatable content to a diverse audience, transforming Saudi Arabia's image on the global stage. Therefore, it is no surprise that influencer marketing has gained significant power in Saudi Arabia, mirroring a global trend where SMIs have become influential figures (Fowler and Thomas, 2023).

Moreover, the expansion of the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia aligns perfectly with the growing influence of SMIs, who are pivotal in promoting tourist destinations, experiences, and events. By sharing these attractions with their followers, SMIs generate interest and engagement, thereby driving tourism. Additionally, major events like the Riyadh Season, which feature a wide array of cultural, entertainment, and sports activities, further boost the nation's appeal (Visit Saudi, 2024). These events offer SMIs rich content creation opportunities, allowing them to craft engaging narratives and visually appealing stories that captivate a global audience. SMIs can share behind-the-scenes glimpses, exclusive interviews, and real-time updates that create a sense of immediacy and excitement among their followers. By leveraging their unique perspectives and creative skills, SMIs can effectively highlight the vibrant and dynamic nature of Saudi Arabia's tourism offerings, thus playing a crucial role in the country's marketing strategy and helping to establish it as a premier global tourist destination.

The popularity of influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia is driven by the country's high social media penetration rates. For example, Saudi Arabia was home to 29.10 million social media users in January 2023, equating to 79.3% of the total population (GMI, 2023). Certain social media platforms enjoy greater popularity than others. For instance, in 2021, Saudi Arabia had the biggest Snapchat audience reach in the world, reaching 71.4% of the population (Statista, 2021b), while the US and UK were 38.6% and 36.6%, respectively. Moreover, data collected from 915 Saudi respondents found that 89% of the respondents have accounts on Snapchat compared to 66% with accounts on Facebook (Alghamdi, 2021). In addition, 83% of respondents identified as very active users of Snapchat.

To shed light on the remarkable growth of influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia, spending in the influencer market in Saudi Arabia is projected to reach \$74.81 million in 2023 and is expected to reach \$117.50 million by 2027 (Statistia, 2023). According to Star Ngage (2023), there are 39,796 SMIs in Saudi Arabia. The BPG Group indicates that 85% of Saudi Arabians follow at least one SMI, and 73% have purchased a product or tried a service recommended by an SMI (BPG, 2019). Furthermore, it is worth noting that influencer marketing has garnered

interest not only from brands but also from various Saudi government agencies and departments. According to the Digital Research Company (DRC), government agencies and departments stand out as some of the most significant sponsors of influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia (DRC, 2023). This suggests that the Saudi government places faith in the efficacy of influencer marketing and leverages SMIs to promote Vision 2030. Hence, the future of influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia is promising (Leung, Sun and Asswailem, 2022).

On a global scale, one of the major challenges with influencer marketing is identifying a suitable SMI who can effectively reach the target audience through social media platforms (Valesia, Proserpio and Nunes, 2020; Chetioui *et al.*, 2023; Ren *et al.*, 2023). Echoing this, DRC (2023) indicates that selecting SMIs in a Saudi context is difficult due to the country's conservative cultural norms. Therefore, collaborating with the right SMIs who resonate with the target audience remains key to a successful influencer marketing campaign in the Kingdom. Practitioners need an additional understanding of the role of SMIs in developing positive behavioural intentions while identifying SMIs who respect the local culture and understand their preferences. Despite the increasing prominence of SMIs in Saudi Arabia, there is a noticeable dearth of academic research conducted within the Saudi context. To our knowledge, the sole existing study within this context centres on the determinants of intention to visit Saudi restaurants, as investigated by Leung, Sun, and Asswailem (2022). With this in mind, scholars have advised expanding studies on influencer marketing to new geographic regions beyond Western and East Asian contexts (e.g., Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Fowler and Thomas, 2023). Therefore, this study is focused on the Saudi Arabian context, which strongly relies on SMIs.

2.4 Engagement with SMIs

SMIs' ability to target and affect a large number of followers has attracted marketers (Hu and Yao, 2021). SMIs substantially influence the spread of information and the formation of attitudes and behaviours among their followers (Gamage and Ashill, 2023). Followers are motivated to engage with SMIs to obtain and share information, learn about the latest trends, and keep themselves entertained (Cao *et al.*, 2021). Engagement on social media refers to using platform tools to engage in various activities to interact and react to content posted by other users (Hazari, Talpade and Brown, 2023). Existing research has proposed several active engagement tools, such as liking, commenting, or sharing (Zhao *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, 'likes' gauge a follower's positive reception of content, 'comments' signify active discussions and conversations surrounding the content, and 'shares' demonstrate followers actively

endorsing and disseminating the content within their social networks (Chen, Yan and Smith, 2023). Content receiving more interaction and engagement (e.g., likes, comments, shares) will be distributed into more users' feeds than content receiving less engagement (Syrdal *et al.*, 2023). Some scholars refer to likes, comments, and shares as 'social currencies', underscoring their importance in social media engagement (Cotter, 2019).

Social media algorithms prioritize engaging content (Hazari, Talpade and Brown, 2023; Feng and Xie, 2023), promoting SMIs to increase their visibility on social media platforms by intentionally using social media algorithms (Cotter, 2019). SMIs' effectiveness is based on the engagement rate generated by their posted content on social media, as a high engagement rate indicates a broader audience reach, trust, closeness, and loyalty, reflecting a strong influencer-follower relationship (Tian *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, one of the reasons why influencer marketing is so attractive to marketers is because SMIs can promote engagement (Boerman, 2020). As a result, engagement is a desirable criterion for gauging the effectiveness of SMIs (Gross and Wangenheim, 2022; Tian *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, scholars and marketers increasingly acknowledge the potential of SMIs in influencing follower engagement (Holiday *et al.*, 2023), as the success of influencer marketing remains in strong influencer-follower engagement (Campbell and Farrell, 2020).

While there is no agreement on the definition and operationalization of such a term (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015), most scholars in consumer behaviour studies conceptualize engagement into three distinctive aspects: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects (e.g., Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014). Cognitive engagement refers to the degree to which followers engage in intense thinking, focusing on intense attention and absorption. Emotional engagement revolves around emotional reactions, such as enthusiasm, enjoyment, and cultivating a positive emotional bond. Behavioural engagement is the active manifestation of the engagement concept, relating to the extent of followers' dedication, energy, and time they invest in their interactions, which includes viewing, following, liking, commenting, and sharing (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014; Argyris *et al.*, 2020). In the SMI literature, Silva *et al.* (2020) contributed to the discussion by arguing that behavioural engagement can occur at three levels: consuming, contributing, and creating. Consuming is the lowest level of engagement, which occurs when followers view the SMI's content, follow, and like the post. Contributing is the second level of behavioural engagement, which occurs when followers comment on the SMI's content.

Creating is the highest level of behavioural engagement, where the follower decides to share the SMI's content with their contacts (Silva *et al.*, 2020).

Although it is acknowledged that the cognitive, affective and behavioural components are important aspects of online engagement (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014), this study adopts the behavioural perspective with a focus on followers' engagement rather than brand engagement for the following reasons. First, it is argued that engagement is more about the active role of the follower than about their thoughts and feelings (Triantafyllidou and Siomkos, 2018; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Schreiner, Fischer and Riedl, 2021). Second, several researchers have viewed engagement in the SMI context as a 'behavioural manifestation' (e.g., Tafesse and Wood, 2023; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Syrdal *et al.*, 2023; Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022; Argyris *et al.*, 2020). Third, behavioural engagement includes active behaviours such as liking, commenting, and sharing (Cao *et al.*, 2021), which is thought to be in line with the SMI context and can offer marketers a more concrete understanding of a campaign's success (Chen, Yan and Smith, 2023).

Behavioural engagement fits well from the followers' perspective because they usually follow SMIs for entertaining and informing content rather than watching advertisements (Tabor, 2020). Branded content posted by SMIs is less likely to engage followers (Fan *et al.*, 2023; Shuqair *et al.*, 2023; Holiday *et al.*, 2023), while organic posts are generally more memorable and trustworthy (Tafesse and Wien, 2018). Actually, in the present-day context, the prevailing trend is that the majority of content shared by SMIs is organic and non-commercial (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry, 2018; Filieri *et al.*, 2023; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Ahmadi and Ieamsom, 2022). It should be noted that follower–influencer relationships behave much like consumer–brand relationships built through engagement (Holiday *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, understanding the drive that motivates followers to engage with SMIs consistently is as important as comprehending the engagement between brands and followers.

Given its importance, research has begun to examine drivers of behavioural engagement (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Holiday *et al.*, 2023; Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022). For example, disclosing a post as advertising increases engagement (Shuqair *et al.*, 2023). SMIs with a high number of followers are linked to lower engagement (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023; Tafesse and Wood, 2021), while following fewer people is linked to higher engagement (Valsesia, Proserpio and Nunes, 2020). Moreover, SMIs' attributes, such as credibility (Buvár *et al.*, 2022) and authenticity (Cascio Rizzo *et al.*, 2023),

were also positive drivers of engagement. Other scholars identified attributes related to the content of SMIs' such as post length (Fan *et al.*, 2023) and post creativity (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021). Research has also underscored the significance of follower-related attributes in enhancing engagement, including involvement (Borges-Tiago, Santiago and Tiago, 2023) and wishful identification (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). In addition, engagement has been studied in relation to the platform (Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019), SMIs (Tafesse and Wood, 2021), consumers (Holiday *et al.*, 2023), and brands (Argyris *et al.*, 2020).

The following section discusses the outcome variable of this study, namely, sharing behaviour, and explores the relevant literature relating to it.

2.5 Sharing Behaviour

Online sharing activities are thriving with the advent of social media and digital life (Charband and Jafari Navimipour, 2016). The emergence of social media platforms has empowered individuals to exchange and share content with greater efficiency. These platforms are integrated with social sharing components that facilitate recommending and passing content along to friends (Gvili and Levy, 2021). Every day, social media users share an astonishing number of images across various platforms. Specifically, there are 6.9 billion images shared on WhatsApp, 3.8 billion on Snapchat, 2.1 billion on Facebook, and 1.3 billion on Instagram (Broz, 2022). These staggering figures demonstrate the immense scale and impact of sharing behaviour in today's digital landscape. Scholars referred to this sharing behaviour as the "lifeblood" of social media (Ham *et al.*, 2019, p. 158). In other words, social media platforms cannot survive without sharing content between their users.

By utilizing the Share button, users can disseminate the content originally shared by the sender or enhance it with a personal message before sharing it on their own timeline. Depending on the platform being used, content can be shared with selective people or pushed to all followers of the sharer without addressing anyone in particular. This functionality increases visibility and wider content reach (Swani and Labrecque, 2020). In addition, content shared on a single social media platform quickly spreads to other social networks, facilitated by cross-platform sharing features (Ham *et al.*, 2019). In other words, sharing online content creates new exposures as the content reaches new users across multiple social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat (Tellis *et al.*, 2019). The algorithms of these platforms prioritize posts with a high number of shares, offering followers and non-followers a diverse

range of content from SMIs (Feng and Xie, 2023). With users becoming ever more active in sharing content, it is not surprising that marketers and researchers have taken notice.

Scholars argue that sharing holds utmost importance because without users generating and sharing content, social media platforms cannot survive (Khan and Idris, 2019). The shared content on social media is passed along through numerous connected users within and between social networks, eventually leading to critical mass (Evans *et al.*, 2017). In other words, if each user sends content to more than one person, the repeated procedure creates exponential growth and reach. Moreover, sharing can also help marketers by earning free online exposure (Yang and Wang, 2015), meaning that followers and non-followers will have increased awareness of the post (Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon, 2022). The number of online shares can also be considered a key performance indicator (KPI) of the success of a marketing campaign (Yang and Wang, 2015) and can provide insight into what content the audience prefers. SMIs can also benefit from sharing. For example, sharing facilitates the expansion of an SMI's follower base, thereby enhancing the SMI's impact and increasing financial rewards (Chan, Hung, and Tse, 2023). Therefore, followers' willingness to share an SMI post can lead to the success of such a post (Ahmadi and Ieamsom, 2022) and help SMIs build their fame (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014).

One way to stimulate sharing behaviour among social media users is using SMIs (Santora, 2022). Sharing behaviour is an act of behavioural engagement in which the follower shares content created by SMIs with one's own network of followers (Ham *et al.*, 2019; Leung *et al.*, 2022). When followers share an SMI's post, it appears on their own timeline, and their friends and followers can see it. This behaviour can generate awareness and encourage existing followers to share content. Sharing an SMI's message within one's social network serves as an endorsement of that SMI, thereby increasing the SMI's credibility in the eyes of the recipient (Eckler and Bolls, 2011). This serves as a powerful demonstration of social proof, as it implies that when a follower shares a post, they make a deliberate choice and consider the content valuable enough to recommend it to their own social network (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, sharing a post with one's followers or friends is a strong form of commitment to the SMI (Beichert *et al.*, 2023). However, if the post does not persuade followers to forward it, the sharing process halts and the post becomes less visible. Thus, it is essential to investigate different factors that influence -whether positively or negatively- followers' decision to share an SMI's content.

Some scholars refer to sharing behaviour as information pass-along (Kim and Johnson, 2016) or recommendation behaviour (Ananda *et al.*, 2019). More often, sharing content on social media has been discussed interchangeably with other terms in the literature, such as eWOM, referrals, and viral marketing (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017). Specifically, eWOM is a broad concept that includes a positive or negative statement made by potential or existing customers (Zhou *et al.*, 2021), and online sharing is often viewed as a form of positive eWOM (Kapoor and Munjal, 2019). Referrals, whether incentivized or not, occur when a current customer or user recommends a brand, product, or service to others (Pansari and Kumar, 2017). Viral marketing, on the other hand, is described as encouraging customers to share a company's marketing message with their friends, family, and colleagues (Dobele *et al.*, 2007). However, it is important to recognize that sharing content online may not strictly involve explicit branded recommendations (Taillon *et al.*, 2020). In fact, the majority of shared SMIs' content is organic and non-commercial (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry, 2018; Filieri *et al.*, 2023; Tafesse and Wood, 2021) and does not usually include incentives (Leung, Gu and Palmatier, 2022). Research argues that followers are more likely to engage and share organic and non-commercial posts (Fan *et al.*, 2023; Shuqair *et al.*, 2023).

2.5.1 Sharing Behaviour in Non-Influencer Marketing Literature

Determinants of sharing content online have been studied in various digital domains, such as forwarding content on the Internet in general (Ho and Dempsey, 2010), passing along emails (Phelps *et al.*, 2004), news sharing (Lee and Ma, 2012; Kümpel, Karnowski and Keyling, 2015), and retweeting on Twitter (Suh *et al.*, 2010). Previous studies confirmed that predicting sharing behaviour is more complex than it seems, and the behaviour is best predicted by various factors most likely operating simultaneously (e.g., Boehmer and Tandoc, 2015). Past research signified multiple factors related to the source, content, and audience driving content sharing. For example, in the context of Twitter (now known as X), Suh *et al.* (2010) demonstrated that many followers positively affected the likelihood of a tweet being shared, while Boehmer and Tandoc (2015) found that the characteristics of the source (i.e., credibility and prominence), message (informativeness and originality), and the user (interest and relevance) influence content sharing and retweeting decisions. Also related to Twitter, Zhang, Moe and Schweidel (2017) showed that content factors exhibit the highest impact on retweeting (sharing) activity. In the context of YouTube, several other factors were identified as significant determinants of sharing behaviour, including reputation, self-expression, social norms, perceived video

creation ability, and sharing self-efficacy (Chiang and Hsiao, 2015), while Tellis et al. (2019) and Dobeles et al. (2007) suggested that surprising and original posts drive sharing of online digital content.

Scholars have also examined several factors related to the audience that influence sharing behaviour, such as social-interaction ties, trust, the norm of reciprocity, identification, shared vision, and shared language (Chiu, Hsu and Wang, 2006). Moreover, sharing behaviour has also been linked to desires for enjoyment, entertainment, and social connection (Phelps *et al.*, 2004). Other audience factors, such as socialization, were found to be the most powerful drivers of sharing behaviour (Ham *et al.*, 2019). In their systematic review, Charband and Jafari Navimipour (2016) show that self-efficacy influences knowledge sharing. Similarly, Lee and Ma (2012) found that self-efficacy was a significant factor in news-sharing intention. Lastly, Ho and Dempsey (2010) found that individualistic (developing one's distinct identity) individuals are more likely to forward online content. Although sharing behaviour is “among the most important and widely studied phenomena in social media research” (Torres, Gerhart and Negahban, 2018, p. 86), this phenomenon is overlooked in influencer marketing research, with most existing studies failing to account for the unique characteristics of the SMI context. That it is, many existing sharing models were developed prior to the advancements in influencer marketing. Consequently, there is a need to incorporate additional variables to gain a deeper understanding of SMIs' followers' sharing behaviour.

2.5.2 Sharing Behaviour in Influencer Marketing Literature

Based on the SLR conducted in Section 2.4, one study was found emphasising sharing behaviour as a form of engagement (Leung et al., 2022). In their study, Leung et al. (2022) attempted to understand the impact of increased influencer marketing spending on consumers' engagement manifested in sharing. Drawing upon Lasswell's (1948) communication model, Leung et al. (2022) proposed that certain factors—source (SMI activity, SMI originality, follower size), content (post positivity, sponsor salience, new product launch), and audience (follower-brand fit)—function as moderators in shaping the connection between influencer marketing spending and engagement. The outcomes of Leung et al. (2022) revealed that SMI originality, follower size, and sponsor salience enhance effectiveness, while posts announcing new product launches diminish engagement. While acknowledging the significance of this

study, it primarily focused on the moderation impact of source, content, and audience factors rather than considering them as antecedents to followers' sharing behaviour.

However, after conducting the SLR, another important study emerged in the same context of our study. Chan, Hung, and Tse (2023) examined the effect of source (i.e., charisma) and content (i.e., message content) factors on audience shares for both macro- and micro-influencers. The authors also postulated that bonding (i.e., PSR) is an antecedent to shares. Their findings reveal that source and content factors for micro-influencers do not predict audience shares. For macro-influencers, only source factors predict audience shares. Moreover, bonding positively affected audience shares for both types of SMIs. While this study shares similarities with ours, notable distinctions exist. Unlike our approach, it neglected to investigate the influence of audience factors and omitted considering the mediating role of PSR. Moreover, it failed to delve into the moderating role of verification behaviour, leaving this aspect unexplored. Moreover, our study stands out by exploring different source factors (e.g., popularity and authenticity) and content factors (e.g., creativity and quality).

In summary, previous literature outside the domain of influencer marketing fails to account for the unique characteristics of the SMI context (e.g., Phelps *et al.*, 2004; Suh *et al.*, 2010; Chiang and Hsiao, 2015; Tellis *et al.*, 2019), while literature in the domain of influencer marketing examined sharing behaviour as part of engagement (i.e., liking, commenting, and sharing), rather than explicitly exploring the factors promoting and facilitating sharing behaviour (e.g., Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a; Fan *et al.*, 2023; Chen, Yan and Smith, 2023). Specifically, Chan, Hung, and Tse (2023) confirm “the need to analyze likes and shares separately.” (p. 318). Although extant research provides valuable insights into the determinates of engagement in general and sharing behaviour in particular, a comprehensive examination looking particularly at the context of SMIs is needed. Specifically, a comprehensive framework containing all three pillars of influencer marketing (i.e., source, content, and audience factors) is rarely referred to. The following section discusses these factors in greater detail.

2.6 Source, Content, and Audience Factors: The Communication Persuasion Matrix

Arguably, social media engagement is essentially about communication (Xie-Carson, Benckendorff and Hughes, 2023). Specifically, McGuire's (2001) Communication-

Persuasion-Matrix (CPM) model of communication posits that antecedents of persuasive communication include five classes of input variables, described as “the independent variables and persuasive messages that can be manipulated” (McGuire, 1989, p. 45): (1) *the source*, (2) *the message*, (3) *the receiver*, (4) *the channel*, and (5) *the destination* (McGuire, 2001). Source factors relate to the sender’s characteristics; message factors encompass the type of arguments and appeals in the content; audiences’ characteristics are often labelled as receiver factors, whereas channel factors are associated with the transmitted media. Finally, destination factors are the desired outcomes of the communication.

Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman (2021) conducted a systematic literature review of influencer marketing and divided the SMI antecedents into source, content, and audience characteristics. This classification has been adopted by recent studies (e.g., Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023; Xie-Carson, Benckendorff and Hughes, 2023). The scope of this study is limited to source, content, and audience factors, as previous studies have identified these as being influential in driving user engagement with SMIs (Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023; Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021; Leung *et al.*, 2022). These factors function in the influencer marketing context in the following ways: SMIs are the *source* of persuasive communication, characteristics of persuasive *content* include the SMI’s message persuasion tactics, and followers of SMIs are the *audience*. Because sharing SMIs’ content on social media occurs when one follower shares content with others, it is reasonable to consider that the characteristics of the SMI, content, and follower are all core of the sharing process (Hsieh, Hsieh and Tang, 2012; Boehmer and Tandoc, 2015; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a; Chan, Hung, and Tse, 2023).

The recent application of the CPM within the context of SMIs has demonstrated its relevance and effectiveness in analysing the efficacy of influencer marketing strategies (see Table 2.6). For example, Lou and Yuan (2019) focused on source and content factors. However, the authors acknowledged some limitations in their model and urged researchers to include other factors related to the audience. Lou, Tan and Chen (2019) compared SMIs’ advertisements to brand advertisements and found that SMI advertisements exhibit significantly higher engagement. Moreover, Li and Peng (2021) explored the influence of the source on the purchase intention of SMIs’ followers. Nevertheless, since they incorporated only one factor from the CPM, they encouraged future research to incorporate additional factors such as content and audience. Utilizing an experiment, Kapoor, Balaji and Jiang (2021) examined the

impact of source and message on the intention to stay at a sustainable hotel. Lastly, Shamim and Islam (2022) examined the effects of channel and message factors and suggested that “future studies may investigate other persuasion matrix factors, including receiver” (p. 618). Thus, previous studies are extended to include source, content, and audience factors.

Table 2.5: Studies adopting CPM in the influencer marketing literature.

Authors	Factors examined based on the <i>CPM</i>	Outcome	Methodology	Findings
Lou and Yuan (2019)	<i>Source:</i> Trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and similarity <i>Content:</i> Informative value and entertainment value	Brand awareness and purchase intention	Survey (N= 538)	Trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness positively impact brand awareness. Trustworthiness, similarity, informative value, and entertainment value positively impact purchase intention.
Lou, Tan and Chen (2019)	<i>Source:</i> SMI vs. brand-promoted ads	Followers' engagement with ads	Web scraped data	SMI advertisements exhibit significantly higher engagement levels in consumer likes and comments compared to brand-promoted ads within the domain of apparel brands on Instagram.
Li and Peng (2021)	<i>Source:</i> Attractiveness, expertise, originality, homophily and interaction	Image satisfaction and advertising trust	Survey (N= 510)	Attractiveness, expertise, originality, and homophily positively impact image satisfaction. Expertise, originality, homophily, and interaction positively impact advertising trust.
Kapoor, Balaji and Jiang (2021)	<i>Source:</i> SMI vs hotel <i>Message:</i> sensual vs guilt	Intention to stay at the hotel and travellers' perceptions	Experiment (N1= 96, N2= 125, N3= 233)	The message with the sensual appeal is more persuasive when the hotel posts it on social media. The message with the guilt appeal is more effective when the SMI posts it on behalf of the hotel on social media.

Shamim and Islam (2022)	<i>Source:</i> Informational value and vicarious expression, <i>Channel:</i> Perceived transparency and perceived interactivity	Trust in influencer posts and the urge to buy	Survey (N= 251)	Informational value, vicarious expression, and perceived transparency positively impact trust in influencer posts. Informational value and perceived interactivity positively impact the urge to buy.
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Therefore, it is believed that the CPM holds relevance to this research and serves as a valuable framework for highlighting the significance of source, content, and audience factors in influencing followers' sharing behaviour. Additionally, the CPM aids in pinpointing the stimulus (S) within the S-O-R framework, a topic that will be further explored in Chapter 3. Despite criticisms that the CPM lacks a comprehensive explanation of the underlying intention and behaviour mechanisms (Corcoran, 2007), the S-O-R framework has been implemented into the present study to supplement the CPM, address its shortcomings, fulfil our research objectives, and ultimately present the finalized conceptual framework. According to Joshi et al. (2023), "Future studies can consider theoretical integration by using two or more theories in a single investigation, which can reveal richer insights on the phenomenon" (p. 45).

The following sections review the literature on source, content, and audience factors. Additionally, the specific factors identified and categorized as source, content, and audience-related factors will be briefly discussed.

2.6.1 Source Factors

Source refers to the person, group, or organization from whom a message is perceived to have come (Ohanian, 1990). Within the broader context of communication and persuasion, source factors refer to the attributes or characteristics of the message originator that influence how the message is received and processed by the audience (McGuire, 1989). These factors have been extensively studied in various communication contexts, shedding light on their significance in shaping audience perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken, 1980). In the current study, source factors are the SMI's characteristics, which can increase the level of acceptance in the process of persuasion and impact followers' perceptions, behaviours, and engagement (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Characteristics unique to the SMI (source) need to be considered as a factor that affects the diffusion of SMIs' posts. In this sense, the SMI's source factors are, to a large extent, categorized according to celebrity endorsement literature (Morales

et al., 2019). Hence, factors unique to the influencer marketing environment need to be considered.

Generally, source factors have been widely researched in the SMI literature (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, the influence of source factors on purchase intention has been extensively examined and validated by various scholars (e.g., Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Zogaj, Tscheulin and Olk, 2021; Saima and Khan, 2020; Kim and Park, 2023). However, limited attention has been given to source factors influencing followers' engagement behaviour (e.g., Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022). Nonetheless, their unique qualities need to be explored and expanded further to explain the impact of SMIs more fully on followers' engagement. In this regard, factors like popularity and authenticity remain relatively underexplored, raising the need for further investigation to determine their significance as influential source factors. Therefore, these two factors are briefly explained.

2.6.1.1 Popularity

The treatment of popularity as a source factor in the study by Yuan *et al.* (2021) and Karagür *et al.* (2022) provides evidence that popularity is most appropriately categorized within the framework of source factors. This study defines popularity as the phenomenon where a higher number of followers corresponds to an increased perception of popularity (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). This has become accepted knowledge for scholars to argue that the higher the number of followers an SMI has, the higher their level of popularity (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Conde and Casais, 2023). Thus, it is reasonable to infer that the size of an SMI's following can serve as a cue to signify their popularity, subsequently influencing their followers' engagement and sharing decisions. Following prior studies (Weismueller *et al.*, 2020; Boerman, 2020; Kay, Mulcahy and Parkinson, 2020), the terms mega-, macro-, and micro-influencers are adopted here to categorize SMIs based on the number of followers. Specifically, mega-influencers (+1million followers), macro-influencers (100k-1million), and micro-influencers (10-100k) (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). According to the authors, each category has its unique skill and thus requires a unique marketing strategy. See Appendix 3 for differences between micro-, macro-, and mega-influencers among different studies.

The traditional approach has been to hire the more expensive macro- and mega-influencers because of the reach of their network, with higher numbers of followers serving as a positive cue for greater trust (De Vries, 2019). However, relying only on the follower count is

misleading because it only represents the extent of an SMI's reach (Ren *et al.*, 2023). The current reality is that some SMIs can be influential without having millions of followers (Hugh *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, marketers and brands are gradually turning to micro-influencers as they account for 60% higher engagement rates (Childers and Boatwright, 2021). In addition, smaller SMIs engage followers better than celebrities, thus suggesting the phrase “less is more” (Borges-Tiago, Santiago and Tiago, 2023, p. 1). More recent evidence supports this assumption. For example, Wies, Bleier and Edeling (2023) found that a high number of followers certainly implies higher reach but also a weak influencer-follower relationship that reduces followers' engagement likelihood. In addition, Tafesse and Wood (2021) found a negative relationship between the number of followers and engagement, indicating that a lower number of followers results in higher engagement.

On the contrary, other recent studies offered conflicting results. For example, Leung *et al.* (2022) showed that more followers foster more engagement, while Conde and Casais (2023) found that popular SMIs have a greater impact on followers' intention to adopt their recommendations. Therefore, the question still remains open on whether popular or less popular SMIs are more effective in generating engagement, specifically, sharing behaviour (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023).

2.6.1.2 Perceived SMI Authenticity

Much literature in marketing centres on brand authenticity and celebrity authenticity (e.g., Moulard, Garrity and Rice, 2015; Ilicic and Webster, 2016), with more recent research starting to explore SMI authenticity (e.g., Rao Hill and Qesja, 2023; Lee and Eastin, 2021; Cascio Rizzo *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Brand authenticity is defined as a brand's ability to match consumers' expectations (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009). In celebrity endorsement literature, Moulard, Garrity and Rice (2015) define celebrity authenticity as the perception that a celebrity behaves according to his or her true self. Influencer marketing literature defines authenticity as the degree to which SMIs are viewed as being true to oneself, sincere, consistent, or real (Rao Hill and Qesja, 2023; Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry, 2018; Shoenberger, Kim and Johnson, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). This study conceptualises perceived authenticity as whether the SMI acts genuinely and according to their true self (Moulard, Garrity and Rice, 2015; Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry, 2018).

The way followers perceive the characteristics of SMIs is crucial in influencing the effectiveness of persuasion, and authenticity is becoming recognized as a highly desirable trait

among SMIs (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry, 2018; Lee and Eastin, 2021; Cascio Rizzo *et al.*, 2023). Authors such as Wellman *et al.* (2020) refer to authenticity as the core of influencer marketing and the driving force for followers' decision-making. SMIs perform authenticity in numerous ways, including sharing details of their personal lives (Wellman *et al.*, 2020), acting true to themselves (Lee and Eastin, 2021), and maintaining consistency with their values (Pöyry *et al.*, 2019). Concerning the topic of engagement with SMIs, several studies have delved into the concept of authenticity and its profound connection to the effectiveness of SMIs. For instance, when SMIs are perceived to be more authentic, followers tend to show higher degrees of engagement with the content (Cascio Rizzo *et al.*, 2023), while Chen, Yan and Smith (2023) found that authentic SMIs who are transparent about their sponsorships, generate more engagement with their content. Thus, marketers can leverage SMIs' authenticity to increase engagement between SMIs and their followers.

To justify the need to include authenticity in our study and provide a more robust understanding of the effects of SMI authenticity in influencer marketing, Lee and Eastin (2021) urged researchers to examine the consequences of authenticity on outcome variables such as engagement (i.e., shares). The same authors indicate that authenticity is an attribute that has not been captured comprehensively as other factors, such as credibility. With this in mind, Leung, Gu and Palmatier (2022) and Ye *et al.* (2021) indicate that future research on influencer marketing should include authenticity as an important factor driving SMIs' effectiveness. In particular, Leung *et al.* (2022) call to study the effect of SMIs' authenticity on fostering engagement behaviour.

2.6.2 Content Factors

Content is "a message that the sender directs towards potential receivers" (Schreiner, Fischer and Riedl, 2021, p. 332). Content factors include the various techniques, tactics, attributes, and qualities of the content that an SMI uses in persuasive communication to influence the audience (Lou and Yuan, 2019). SMIs are essentially content generators (Lou and Yuan, 2019) that create more organic and authentic content than traditional marketing. Followers of SMIs rely on their content, which influences their behavioural engagement (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). Thus, every post matters because it allows the development of a community in which appealing and relevant content is discussed (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018).

The engagement of SMIs' followers is significantly influenced by the nature and quality of the content they share (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). Engaging and valuable content that is informative,

creative, unique, and relevant to the audience's interests is more likely to elicit positive engagement and sharing behaviour (Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021). The content should provide value and offer a unique perspective or insight that captures their attention and compels them to share it with others. In their systematic review of content's impact on behavioural engagement, Schreiner, Fischer and Riedl (2021) advocate broadening content characteristics across different contexts. Specific to the context of influencer marketing, Abhishek and Srivastava (2021) encouraged researchers to uncover followers' responses to messages sent by SMIs. Likewise, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) stressed the importance of investigating content-related persuasion attributes.

Factors that influence the sharing of SMIs' posts cannot be fully understood without considering content factors and their specific features. Previous studies have suggested several content factors that influence followers' engagement behaviour. For example, video customization (Chen, Yan and Smith, 2023), language and post length (Syrdal *et al.*, 2023), post positivity (Leung *et al.*, 2022), and informative/entertaining content (Gupta, Mahajan and Dash, 2023). While the aforementioned studies have examined how different types of content are more or less likely to affect engagement and be shared, few have examined how creative and quality content affects followers' sharing behaviour. Thus, drawing from existing research (e.g., Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a), content creativity and content quality were identified as potential variables influencing sharing behaviour.

2.6.2.1 Creativity

With the ample number of SMIs on social platforms, SMIs' tactics and content ideas often get copied by other SMIs (Ozcelik and Levi, 2020). Followers tend to unfollow SMIs who do not make an effort to their content (Närvänen, Kirvesmies and Kahri, 2020). Thus, SMIs should design creative content to attract the attention of their followers and sustain competitive advantage (Uzunoglu and Kip, 2014; Ozcelik and Levi, 2020). The importance of creativity is associated with the fundamental human need to consume something surprising, out of the ordinary, and imaginative (Haberland and Dacin, 1992). Creativity can be used to describe individuals (e.g., an SMI) or the content (e.g., creative content posted by SMIs). In this study, the content perspective is adopted. Lee and Hong's (2016) definition is accepted to define creativity as the extent to which content is original, surprising, and expresses a great amount of uniqueness in a simple message.

In the marketing context, creativity is a well-established topic and is often considered to be at the heart of the advertising industry (Rosengren *et al.*, 2020). For example, creative messages grab more attention, last longer, and build a fan community (Reinartz and Saffert, 2013). Creative advertisements increase motivation to process the advertisement and improve the attitude toward the advertisement (Smith *et al.*, 2007). In an online context, Lee and Hong (2016) found that advertising creativity was a key driver of favourable behavioural responses. Creative content promotes consumers to follow and imitate and consequently strengthens the consumers' intention to engage with the posted content (Smith and Yang, 2004).

Moreover, followers like to discuss or read about topics they find interesting or surprising. Studies in social psychology found that participants were more willing to share social stories that aroused interest and surprise (Peters, Kashima and Clark, 2009). Specifically, Dobeles *et al.* (2007) and Tellis *et al.* (2019) emphasized that viral messages tend to be shared when they incorporate an element of surprise, a crucial component of creativity. Additionally, their research revealed that uncreative content tends to generate lower levels of engagement. Thereby, SMIs with higher content creativity should attract more attention than those with low creativity.

In the context of Instagram, creativity was found to be one of the main motivations for using Instagram (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). Similarly, grounded in the S-O-R framework, Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021) found that creative content posted by Instagram SMIs is essential to enhance interaction intentions. Similarly, creative content encourages followers to follow and emulate SMIs', which eventually strengthens their intention to engage with the posted content (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). Moreover, creativity strongly predicts consumers' intention to consume, contribute, and create content on the endorsed brand's social media (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). While creativity in influencer marketing is recognized as an important content factor, the link between creativity and sharing behaviour is still missing.

2.6.2.2 Content Quality

Content quality refers to the perceived quality of an SMI's posts. Content quality extends beyond mere informativeness; it encompasses additional attributes such as updated information, accuracy, and reliability (Gomes, Marques and Dias, 2022; Magno, 2017). The quality of SMIs' content is demonstrated through their presence on social media platforms and

their creation of posts that incorporate text, images, and videos designed to engage their followers (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). High content quality is assumed to be more powerful and appealing to followers (Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021) and implies that followers find the content persuasive and convincing (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Previous studies in influencer marketing have acknowledged the significance of content quality. For instance, Balaban *et al.* (2020) found that content quality significantly affects trustworthiness and attitudes towards following the SMI. Magno's (2017) research findings indicate that the perception of high content quality tends to increase engagement with blogs and a heightened intention to purchase the recommended products. Gomes, Marques and Dias (2022) found that if followers believe that the content provided by SMIs is accurate, reliable, and updated, it can generate purchase intention for a recommended fashion product. Additionally, Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018) identified that the quality of posts is a pivotal factor in the development of opinion leadership. Moreover, previous studies have shown that the content's quality was positively correlated with perceived SMI's credibility (Saima and Khan, 2020) and information credibility (Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmsted, 2018).

Turning our attention to studies centred on the impact of content quality on increasing engagement, it is found that scholars reveal content quality can increase the motivation to share (Rohm, Kaltcheva and Milne, 2013) and is likely to go viral if it is of higher quality (Berger and Milkman, 2012). More recent studies continue to shed light on the relationship between content quality and engagement in the SMI domain. For instance, Syrdal *et al.* (2023) discovered that SMIs enhance engagement with simple words and phrases. Additionally, Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy (2022) reported that content quality positively and significantly influences engagement. Moreover, Tafesse and Wood (2021) found that consistent sharing of a large volume of content by SMIs is associated with lower perceived quality, resulting in decreased engagement from followers.

This study regards content quality as one of the factors that might affect followers' sharing behaviour. Yet, there is still a gap in research where studies explicitly examining how the content quality of SMIs influences followers' sharing behaviour are lacking. Therefore, there is a need for further research in this area to understand the relationship between content quality and its impact on followers' sharing behaviour. Exploring this aspect can provide valuable

insights into the mechanisms that drive social media engagement and content sharing in the context of influencer marketing.

2.6.3 Audience Factors

Research has confirmed that audience characteristics influence social media behaviour (e.g., Marshall, Lefringhausen and Ferenczi, 2015; Haikel-Elsabeh *et al.*, 2019). Since followers actively interact and communicate with SMIs, they influence the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns (Sun, Leung and Bai, 2021). Marketers select SMIs based on their followers' characteristics, according to whether those followers are likely to find the content valuable and demonstrate greater capacity for engagement (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, content posted by SMIs should resonate well with their followers' characteristics (Syrdal *et al.*, 2023; Ren *et al.*, 2023). Understanding these characteristics that drive followers' engagement is crucial for unravelling the complex dynamics of influencer marketing.

Audience factors are followers' personal characteristics that influence how they cope with persuasive communication, including factors related to their ability, values, culture, and personality (McGuire, 1989). Understanding followers' characteristics is vital since deciding to engage and share SMIs' content is entirely voluntary (Ho and Dempsey, 2010). In other words, marketers do not pay followers to engage with SMIs. Drawing on McGuire's (2001) CPM, it is proposed that individual characteristics influence how individuals cope with persuasive communication, including factors related to their demographics, ability, values, and personality. Although it is not easy for SMIs to control their followers' individual characteristics, the content can be created to be attractive, persuasive, and fit their culture (Hsieh, Hsieh and Tang, 2012).

Previous studies have suggested a number of audience factors that influence followers' engagement behaviour. For example, perceived autonomy (Valesia, Proserpio and Nunes, 2020), follower-brand fit (Leung *et al.*, 2022), escapism and inspiration (Cheng, Wei and Zhang, 2020), and involvement with the SMI (Borges-Tiago, Santiago and Tiago, 2023). However, audience factors remain understudied (Leung *et al.*, 2022), especially when compared with other factors such as the source and content. Researchers have called to pay special attention to follower-specific characteristics that might influence the effectiveness of SMIs (Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2022; Yousaf, 2022; Ye *et al.*, 2021; Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023). Specifically, Marbach *et al.* (2019) identified the lack of studies on audience factors as an important gap for research into online engagement. Thus, this study enhances the

understanding of followers' engagement behaviour by broadening its scope to incorporate the influence of audience factors. Since Arab and Islamic cultures (i.e., Saudi Arabia) are different from Western and Asian cultures (Leung, Sun and Asswailem, 2022), it is possible that there might be audience factors unique to this specific culture. In order to select and study a set of audience factors for our study on sharing behaviour, a qualitative study was conducted to collect followers' opinions on the important factors that represent audience-specific factors (see Chapter 5 for qualitative data findings). Accordingly, this study identified self-efficacy and collectivism as two audience factors.

2.6.3.1 Self-efficacy

An individual's behaviour is strongly affected by their appraisal of their own capabilities (Bandura, 1977). Conversely, doubts about one's capabilities deter one from engaging in an action. Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as: "People's judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of actions required to attain designated types of performances. It is concerned not with the skills one has but with judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses" (p. 391). Self-efficacy has been applied to various adaptations, such as computer self-efficacy (Compeau and Higgins, 1995), Internet self-efficacy (Kim and Glassman, 2013), smartphone self-efficacy (Okumus and Bilgihan, 2014), social media self-efficacy (Hocevar, Flanagan and Metzger, 2014), news sharing self-efficacy (Lee and Ma, 2012), knowledge sharing self-efficacy (Papadopoulos, Stamati and Nopparuch, 2013; Hsu *et al.*, 2007), tourists' experiences sharing self-efficacy (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014) and among others depending on the context of the study. In this study, self-efficacy is defined as the level of confidence and belief in one's ability to use social media platforms, navigate their features, and engage in various online activities.

Social Cognitive Theory posits that self-efficacy directly impacts outcome expectations (Bandura, 1986). The positive expectations will be meaningless if one doubts his/her capability to successfully execute the behaviour in the first place. Past studies suggest that self-efficacy is a good predictor of online consumer behaviour (Pavlou and Fygenon, 2006) and one of the variables related to engagement behaviours. For example, Huang, Lin and Lin (2009) found that people with confidence in the content of the message they intend to pass along often have higher pass-along intentions. Okumus and Bilgihan (2014) revealed that smartphone self-efficacy was an immediate antecedent of the intention to use restaurant apps to order food. Papadopoulos, Stamati and Nopparuch (2013) found that self-efficacy is positively related to

the intention of knowledge sharing in employee weblogs. Moreover, self-efficacy significantly influences knowledge-sharing behaviour in virtual communities (Hsu *et al.*, 2007). Specifically, in the context of YouTube, users' video-sharing self-efficacy significantly influences sharing behaviour (Chiang and Hsiao, 2015). In the context of tourism, Munar and Jacobsen (2014) found that tourists with a high level of self-efficacy are more likely to share their tourism experiences on Facebook.

Drawing from the array of studies indicating that self-efficacy contributes to heightened sharing behaviour across diverse contexts, it is reasonable to infer that a similar pattern will likely emerge in the domain of SMIs. Using different social media platforms demands the acquisition of new skills for every platform (Aw and Agnihotri, 2023). For instance, mastering the various functions of social media platforms (e.g., face filters, stories, live streaming, and interactive polls) might not be easy for the novice user. Specifically, suppose a follower lacks competency, skilfulness, and knowledge of using a particular platform. In that case, they may be reluctant to engage with the SMI's content or form emotional connections stemming from an unfamiliarity or inability to navigate the platform effectively. This potential lack of engagement could subsequently hinder their willingness to share content (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Thus, it has been decided to include self-efficacy in the conceptual framework of this research, and it has been emphasised by some of the participants in the conducted exploratory study in Chapter 5. Moreover, while the literature on influencer marketing has grown substantially (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Fowler and Thomas, 2023), a notable void exists in exploring the link between followers' self-efficacy and their sharing behaviour within this context.

2.6.3.2 *Collectivism*

SMIs' followers usually form communities. A community has shared norms, beliefs, and cultures (Haikel-Elsabeh *et al.*, 2019). Generally, followers do not follow SMIs randomly but of their own free will (Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019); hence, they often associate with their preferred SMIs (Campbell and Farrell, 2020). This leads us to understand that certain followers have certain cultural factors that can shape online social engagement. Culture is the rich complex of beliefs, practices, norms, and values common in a society (Schwartz, 1992). These values represent the cultural aspirations of a specific society and often stand as its core essence (Hofstede, 1984). Cultural values are at the core of an individual's self-concept and identity. They define who the individual is and determine how they interact with the world (Hitlin and

Piliavin, 2004). In the marketing literature, culture has been widely recognized as a key factor that shapes consumers' inclinations towards communication preference and subsequently influences their patterns of sharing behaviour (Tsai and Men, 2017; Gvili and Levy, 2021).

Previous marketing studies indicate that one's intention to engage and share information with others relates to one's cultural characteristics (Goodrich and de Mooij, 2014). Specifically, collectivist cultures are more prone to engage with brand pages on social media than individualistic cultures (Tsai and Men, 2017; Gvili and Levy, 2021). Moreover, collectivist individuals respond favourably to traditional celebrity endorsement (Choi, Lee and Kim, 2005; Choi and Lewis, 2017). To the best of our knowledge, the sole existing study investigating the impact of culture in the context of influencer marketing is attributed to the work of Silva, Farias and Silva (2023). The authors conducted a cross-cultural qualitative investigation by gathering endorsement posts shared by six fitness mega-influencers from Brazil and the USA. The authors found that within collectivist cultures, endorsements centre around emotionally appealing messages from SMIs. Conversely, in individualistic cultures, posts underline the SMI's self-promotion and success (Silva, Farias and Silva, 2023). Nevertheless, the authors emphasized the need to integrate culture into forthcoming influencer marketing studies.

Additionally, the mechanism through which culture, such as collectivism, develops PSR and sharing behaviour remains unexplored. In their systematic literature review, Fowler and Thomas (2023) urged future research to examine whether the effectiveness of influencer marketing is culturally dependent. Concurrently, Aw and Agnihotri (2023) emphasized the importance of examining the efficacy of influencer marketing across different cultural orientations. Moreover, Cheung and Song (2023) highlighted the need for future studies adopting the CPM to incorporate cultural variation, precisely the distinction between individualist and collectivist cultural orientations, as an important audience factor. Specifically, in their systematic review, Vrontis et al. (2021) indicated the need to use Hofstede's cultural dimensions to examine whether followers respond differently according to their cultural variations. Therefore, to advance the theoretical understanding of followers' engagement with SMI, this study evaluates how collectivist culture (as an audience factor) influences followers' engagement levels towards SMI posts, precisely, their sharing behaviour.

2.7 Parasocial-Relationships (PSR)

Social media platforms represent powerful tools for building relationships and facilitating user engagement (Tsai and Men, 2017). The primary distinction between influencer marketing and traditional marketing lies in the emotional and personal connection that can be established between SMIs and followers. People follow SMIs not solely for information-seeking purposes but also to foster interpersonal relationships and emotional bonds that have the potential to influence individuals on emotional, behavioural, and cognitive levels (Zhang and Mac, 2023). The most crucial aspect of SMIs' success lies in the influencer-follower relationship, upon which future follower behaviour (e.g., engagement) heavily relies (Joshi *et al.*, 2023; Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). Similar to normal relationships established through different touchpoints between the parties, SMIs try to make their followers perceive them as friends with whom they share common interests (Sokolova and Perez, 2021). One way to achieve this illusory friendship is through PSR.

PSR is an imaginary relationship developed by an audience (followers) with a media character (SMI) (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956). PSR in the marketing context is defined as “an illusory experience, such that consumers interact with personas (i.e., mediated representations of presenters, celebrities, or characters) as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship” (Labrecque, 2014, p. 135). In other words, the perceived intimacy between followers and SMIs is not real but rather constructed through the imagination of the followers (Yang and Ha, 2021). PSR was originally used to explain individuals' attachment to TV characters, but it can also explain the relationships between SMIs and followers (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). Prior literature examined PSR across different settings, including political voting (e.g., Thorson and Rodgers, 2006), celebrity endorsement (e.g., Escalas and Bettman, 2017), brand page interactions (e.g., Tsai and Men, 2013) and more recently, influencer marketing (e.g., Sokolova and Perez, 2021).

Research indicates that PSR has a long-term impact that can last beyond media exposure (Leite and Baptista, 2022) and creates positive connections between audience members and media figures (Rubin and Perse, 1987). As followers form PSR with SMIs, they may ultimately regard the opinions of these SMIs with great seriousness and importance (Yang and Ha, 2021). PSR could be built by giving followers a glimpse into their personal lives (Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021), which makes users feel like the SMI is talking directly to them (Burnasheva and Suh, 2020). Moreover, greeting the audience and making eye contact with the camera are

ways SMIs can build PSR with their followers (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020). In Addition, repeated exposure to an SMI can stimulate similar feelings of PSR (Lee and Watkins, 2016) and strengthen feelings of closeness (Jin and Phua, 2014). Such ways make followers feel as if they have acquired intimate information, know the SMI personally, and experience increased feelings of intimacy (Rubin and Perse, 1987). The following section will further explore the concept of PSR in the influencer marketing literature.

2.7.1 Parasocial-Relationships in the Influencer Marketing Literature

Research has provided evidence that followers' relationship to an SMI, such as PSR, is the key to the effectiveness of influencer marketing (e.g., Farivar, Wang and Yuan, 2021; Sokolova and Perez, 2021; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). However, it should be noted that the literature on influencer marketing also indicates another related term known as parasocial interaction (PSI) (Lee and Lee, 2021; Jin, Ryu and Muqaddam, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between both concepts. PSR and PSI are differentiated in media psychology research through their durations. Specifically, PSI occurs during media exposure and is limited to that time, with a single viewing experience (Hsu, 2020; Bi and Zhang, 2022). Meanwhile, PSR is a lasting and enduring relationship with specific cognitive and affective components (Dibble, Hartmann and Rosaen, 2016; Madison and Porter, 2016). Moreover, Buvár *et al.* (2022) considered PSI a weaker version of PSR. Hence, following previous influencer marketing research (e.g., Lee and Watkins, 2016; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a; Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023), this study focuses on PSRs, as the concept is related to longer-lasting relationships that look like real social ones (Leite and Baptista, 2022).

In the domain of SMIs-follower interactions, PSR has garnered significant attention from academics and practitioners alike (Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023). To demonstrate the power of PSR, past studies revealed that PSR has a stronger effect on followers' behavioural intentions compared to even source credibility (Ohanian, 1990), marking a departure from traditional marketing literature conventions (Leite and Baptista, 2022). Furthermore, PSR has demonstrated its ability to surpass and override the effects of many other influential constructs, such as entertainment gratification (Yang and Ha, 2021) or opinion leadership (Farivar, Wang and Yuan, 2021), which were previously believed to be the primary drivers of followers' behavioural intentions.

Some previous research examined PSR through the lens of the source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990). These studies have identified SMIs' attributes, such as expertise,

attractiveness, and trustworthiness, as antecedents of PSR (e.g., Sakib, Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2020; Gong and Li, 2017; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Yılmazdoğan, Doğan and Altıntaş, 2021; Lou and Kim, 2019; Manchanda, Arora and Sethi, 2021; Melnychuk, Arasli, and Nevzat, 2024). Other studies examined PSR through the lens of the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) (Blumler and Katz, 1974), identifying gratifications, such as enjoyment and passing time, as antecedents of PSR (e.g., Kim, 2020; Zafar, Qiu and Shahzad, 2020). Another strand of research relates to the impacts of PSR on SMI and brand-related outcomes. For example, PSR has been found to increase brand affection (Liu, Liu and Zhang, 2019), brand value (Lee and Watkins, 2016), and stickiness to the SMI (Hu *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, PSR has also been recognized as a significant factor influencing engagement with SMIs (e.g., Chen, Lin and Shan, 2021; Hudders and De Jans, 2021; Melnychuk, Arasli, and Nevzat, 2024).

Studies have also empirically tested models proposing PSR as a mediator with different antecedents and consequences. Specifically, the literature has shown the mediation influence of PSR on various behavioural outcomes such as purchase intention (Chung and Cho, 2017; Colliander and Dahlén, 2011), credibility (Breves *et al.*, 2021), repeated viewing (Lim *et al.*, 2020), brand equity (Yuan *et al.*, 2021), eWOM intention (Manchanda, Arora and Sethi, 2021), behavioural loyalty (Lim *et al.*, 2020), travel intention (Yılmazdoğan, Doğan and Altıntaş, 2021), SMI compliance intentions (Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023), and intention to adopt the SMI's recommendation (Conde and Casais, 2023). Moreover, some previous studies showed that PSR acts as a mediator between various antecedents of influencer marketing on engagement (e.g., Farivar, Wang and Turel, 2022; Shan, Chen and Lin, 2020; Hudders and De Jans, 2021; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). Therefore, the concept of PSR serves as the predominant theoretical underpinning in the body of literature on influencer marketing.

Appendix 4 presents a compilation of studies on PSR involving its antecedents, outcomes, and direct and indirect results. Those studies indicated that PSR had underpinned several influencer marketing studies. Building on these studies, it is proposed that the perceived strength of this relationship not only drives SMI efficacy but also plays a pivotal role in fostering engagement, particularly within the context of sharing behaviour.

2.7.2 Parasocial-Relationships: Current Study

From the literature reviewed, it can be concluded that one intriguing aspect of PSR, particularly relevant to our research, is that it has been identified as being influenced by various factors, including source, content, and audience. It is argued that while existing literature has

established the significance of PSR in influencing responses to persuasive sources, the current research necessitates adapting the PSR concept to reflect the contemporary landscape of influencer marketing. This adaptation must consider the relationship between PSR and other factors that carry significant influence over the effectiveness of SMI campaigns (i.e., source, content, and audience) (Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023; Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021). Although past studies established the importance of various factors in the development of PSR, including source factors (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2022; Manchanda, Arora and Sethi, 2021; Sokolova and Perez, 2021; Melnychuk, Arasli, and Nevzat, 2024), content factors (e.g., Ledbetter and Redd, 2016; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a), and audience factors (e.g., Zafar, Qiu and Shahzad, 2020), there is a lack of understanding of the role of source, content, and audience factors in one holistic model.

This study not only emphasizes the factors that contribute to the formation of PSR but also investigates its impact on sharing behaviour. Extant literature has primarily focused on investigating the impact of PSR on purchase behaviour and other brand-related outcomes (e.g., Masuda, Han and Lee, 2022; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020), while less attention was given to other outcomes. Moraes *et al.* (2019) indicated that the outcomes of PSR are under-researched, while Ye *et al.* (2021) and Joshi *et al.* (2023) encouraged further research on PSR to uncover additional antecedents and consequences. Lastly, although previous research has explored the mediated role of PSR between various constructs, to the best of our knowledge, no study has examined the mediated role of PSR between source, content, audience factors and sharing behaviour. With this in mind, Silva *et al.* (2020) argue that in online engagement between SMIs and their followers, a key element that can facilitate and mediate this process is the relationship they established, presented in the form of PSR.

While previous research has unveiled that PSR is a crucial variable in shaping followers' attitudinal and behavioural changes, there is a need for additional research to expand our understanding of PSR and to gain further insights into the role that PSR plays in shaping followers' engagement and decision-making regarding sharing. Notably, there remains a lack of clarity regarding the specific characteristics of the SMI, the content they produce, and the audience that contributes to the formation of this relationship, which makes the findings inconsistent. Specifically, "Because parasocial bonds may trigger more shares than likes, this area calls for more research efforts" (Chan, Hung, and Tse, 2023, p. 318). Therefore, this study

posits that leveraging PSR between SMIs and their followers can serve as a valuable means to enhance engagement, especially sharing behaviour.

2.8 Verification Behaviour

Followers usually rely on SMIs to get information on news, trends, and products, expecting them to provide genuine details (Lou and Kim, 2019). However, the openness of participation in user-generated online information has enhanced the probability of poor-quality content (Lin, Spence and Lachlan, 2016). While social media has become a source of information and entertainment, it has also been criticised for serving as a conduit of misinformation (Khan and Idris, 2019). This is because false information has been known to be shared and spread on social media by individuals without verification of information (Khan and Idris, 2019). Information can become viral within minutes when shared and re-shared on various social media platforms (Alhabash and McAlister, 2015). Consequently, recognizing which information is accurate in an ocean of information is often challenging. Furthermore, whereas printed media undergo certain levels of factual verification, social media information is usually unverified and unaudited (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007). Therefore, the lack of sufficient control mechanisms on social media information has led to concerns about its credibility (Dabbous, Aoun Barakat and de Quero Navarro, 2022). As followers become savvier (Ki *et al.*, 2020), they may exercise caution when sharing content from SMIs. Thus, followers might tend to fact-check what SMIs claim, a behaviour that can increase their uncertainty towards SMIs.

Acknowledging followers' uncertainty toward SMIs, studies such as Ki *et al.* (2020), Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav (2023), and Cabeza-Ramírez *et al.* (2022) motivated future research to explore variables that might adversely impact followers' behaviour towards SMIs. A growing body of research has begun investigating the growing suspicion towards SMIs. For example, Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav (2023) found that SMI scepticism negatively moderates the relationship between PSR and SMI compliance intentions. Cabeza-Ramírez *et al.* (2022) confirmed the negative and statistically significant influence of perceived risk on product attitude and purchase intention. Some scholars argue that followers are highly sceptical of influencer marketing if they see brand endorsements mixed in SMIs' posts (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020; Jamil and Qayyum, 2022). Others claim that SMIs may fabricate their engagement numbers to meet brand requirements because brands usually consider such numbers as signs of good performance (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, Balaban and Mustăţea (2019) indicated

that too many sponsored SMI posts could trigger consumers' suspicion of the SMIs' branded content. Additionally, some SMIs will try to hide their commercial intent as it may provoke resistance among their followers (Boerman, 2020), while Childers and Boatwright (2021) indicated that followers sometimes felt "scammed" by SMIs' efforts, leading to uncertainty towards SMIs' posts. Such practices (or mistakes) can lead to 'cancelling' the SMI, where followers unfollow the SMI and encourage others to do so (Lee and Abidin, 2021). This, eventually, might harm SMIs' reputations and the brands they endorse. The evidence above might strengthen followers' verification behaviour because of the perception that SMI's endorsements are misleading.

Since *sharing* an SMI's post requires more cognitive effort than other engagement activities (*i.e.*, *commenting*, *liking*), it can be assumed that followers are more committed to assessing the post's value before sharing it (Kim and Yang, 2017). Verification behaviour is how a follower confirms the veracity of information posted by SMIs (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000; Majerczak and Strzelecki, 2022). Information literature suggests verification includes whether the information is comprehensive, current, and complete, especially about opinions or facts, and seeking sources to verify the statements (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000). Contemporary studies found that trust in social networks, perceived media credibility, and user intention to share are antecedents of information verification behaviour (Torres, Gerhart and Negahban, 2018). Utilizing a cross-cultural study in Lebanon and Spain, Dabbous, Aoun Barakat and de Quero Navarro (2022) further demonstrated that verification behaviour positively influences fake news detection in both countries. Another study found that fake news awareness and the intention to share are antecedents of verification behaviour (Majerczak and Strzelecki, 2022). Overall, the research studies reviewed thus far suggest a possible link between followers' verification behaviour and engagement with SMIs.

While the influence of verification behaviour on social media users has garnered attention in information technology (e.g., Flanagin and Metzger, 2007) and media studies (e.g., Majerczak and Strzelecki, 2022), the field of influencer marketing has largely overlooked this crucial aspect. This research gap offers an opportunity to investigate a valuable yet underexplored area where followers' verification behaviour may impact the persuasiveness of SMIs and the nature of their engagement. Our SLR in Section 2.4 supports this, revealing that no study in the SMI domain has examined the influence of verification behaviour. This issue is addressed by

investigating its moderating role in the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour (see Chapters 5 and 6 for more detail).

2.9 Summary

The selection of constructs for this study has been made by drawing from a diverse range of studies, both within and outside the realm of influencer marketing, which have shown to play a role in engagement and sharing behaviour. Reviewing the literature has helped to better understand the potential factors contributing to the engagement between SMIs and their followers. The SLR reveals various related research gaps that need to be addressed, detailed in Table 2.6. The literature review has revealed an oversight in the failure to integrate essential factors—namely, source, content, and audience—into a unified framework from the follower’s perspective. Furthermore, given the lack of studies addressing audience factors, particularly within the distinctive cultural context of Saudi Arabia, semi-structured interviews were conducted to uncover these audience variables (see Chapter 5 for more details).

Notably, the existing body of literature predominantly concentrates on engagement in a broad sense, without distinguishing between specific engagement behaviours such as liking, commenting, and sharing. Of these behaviours, sharing has received relatively little examination. While there are studies addressing sharing behaviour, they rarely investigate this phenomenon in the specific context of influencer marketing and the SMI environment. In addition, there have been numerous calls from scholars to uncover additional antecedents, consequences, and the mediating role of PSR in the SMI context. Specifically, no research to date has examined the mediating role of PSR between various factors (i.e., source, content, and audience) and sharing behaviour. Also, despite the need to explore variables that might harmfully impact followers’ engagement behaviour with SMIs, the moderating role of verification behaviour is unknown.

Heavy reliance on web-scraped data, a form of secondary data rather than primary data, in past research methodologies, has its drawbacks, primarily because it may fail to deliver a thorough understanding of the fundamental factors that drive engagement and sharing behaviour. Additionally, the lack of control over the data collection process in web scraping raises concerns about data quality and accuracy. On the other hand, none of the previous engagement studies utilized qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews. Lastly, a study conducted in the context of Saudi Arabia discussing the factors leading to engagement with SMIs could

not be identified. The following chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for this study by introducing the S-O-R framework, developing a conceptual model for the study, and setting out the research hypotheses.

Table 2.6: Summary of research gaps

Gap	Reference
The antecedents of engagement—source, content, and audience factors—have frequently been examined in isolation. Rarely did studies attempt to mix two factors, and none attempted to encompass all three simultaneously.	(Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023; Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021; Leung <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
While source and content factors have garnered some attention in previous research, the role of audience-specific factors remains relatively understudied. Researchers have called to pay special attention to follower-specific factors.	(Fazli-Salehi <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Yousaf, 2022; Ye <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023)
Previous studies often fail to differentiate between the various types of engagement behaviours available on social media platforms, such as likes, comments, and shares. Researchers and practitioners may struggle to uncover the factors that drive followers to share content without separate examination for sharing behaviour.	(Leung <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Silva <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Kim and Yang, 2017; Li and Xie, 2020)
More research on PSR is required to uncover additional antecedents, consequences, and its' mediating role. Specifically, no research to date has examined the mediating role of PSR between various factors (i.e., source, content, and audience) and sharing behaviour.	(Ye <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Moraes <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Joshi <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Vrontis <i>et al.</i> , 2021)
There is a need to explore variables that might adversely impact followers' engagement behaviour with SMIs. Precisely, the moderating role of verification behaviour is absent.	(Ki <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023; Cabeza-Ramírez <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
Relying heavily on web-scraped data (a form of secondary rather than primary data) as a methodological approach in previous studies has limitations, as it may not offer comprehensive insights into the underlying factors influencing engagement and sharing behaviour. In addition, qualitative methods, such as interviews, are needed to explore and uncover audience variables affecting followers' sharing behaviour. Therefore, mixed methods incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data are needed.	(Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019; Vrontis <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023).

The majority of previous studies were conducted in Western and East Asian contexts. Cultural differences impact behavioural studies, underscoring the importance of conducting more research in Arab and Eastern countries.	(Aw and Agnihotri, 2023; Vrontis <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Fowler and Thomas, 2023)
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3 Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the conceptual framework and the development of the hypotheses are discussed. The chapter begins by explaining related theories of consumer behaviour and their

shortcomings. Afterwards, the application of S-O-R as an umbrella framework is explained and justified. Then, hypotheses are developed and produced. Lastly, the final conceptual framework is presented.

3.2 Theories of Consumer Behaviour

Various attitudinal/behavioural models, like the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and the Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G), have been extensively used in online consumer behaviour studies. TRA states that consumer behaviour is predicted by consumer intentions, which are functions of the consumer's attitude and subjective norms (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). However, Sun and Morwitz (2010) argue that behavioural intentions are not only influenced by internal factors but also affected by some external factors. To explore engagement with SMIs, both internal (audience) and external (source and content) factors are necessary. This means the TRA model may not be adapted to this study properly. On the other hand, the TPB extends TRA by adding perceived behavioural control as a predictor of intention and behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Similar to TRA, TPB might not fully capture the impact of external factors. Moreover, it mainly emphasises the end behaviour. It was also criticized for being purely rational since it ignores the individual's internal and emotional factors (Hegner, Fenko and Teravest, 2017; Gupta, Mahajan and Dash, 2023). Therefore, both theories may not fully consider the complexities of relationships and social influences essential in understanding why followers share SMIs' content through PSR.

TAM explains that two beliefs (i.e., perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use) about a new technology determine users' attitudes toward using that technology, which will further determine their intention to use it (Davis, 1989). However, TAM mainly focuses on the individual usage and adoption of technology, specifically information systems (Riffai, Grant and Edgar, 2012). In influencer marketing, where information is often collaboratively generated by various individuals, TAM might not offer a comprehensive understanding of users' behaviour. Unlike scenarios where technology adoption is more individually driven, the dynamic nature of influencer marketing involves multiple stakeholders (SMIs, followers, marketers), and TAM may fall short in capturing the complexities of such collaborative interactions. Furthermore, researchers also criticise TAM since it neglects actual behaviour, focusing solely on usage (Bagozzi, 2007).

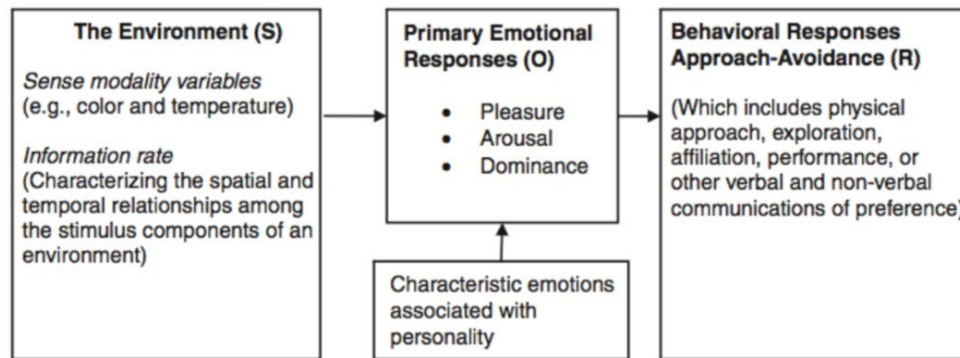
Lastly, the U&G theory is a well-established theoretical framework that focuses on understanding why individuals use specific media and communication channels to fulfil their personal needs and gratifications (Blumler and Katz, 1974). While it is a valuable theory in many contexts, U&G tends to focus more on media preferences and usage patterns, examining how individuals select media channels to satisfy specific needs (Rubin, 2009). In addition, it assumes that users are constantly actively participating in media selection and use (Lee and Ma, 2012), which is not always the case with SMIs' followers. The context of sharing SMIs' content through PSR might require a more tailored framework that incorporates specific factors. Moreover, the U&G theory does not inherently account for mediating factors like PSR, which is crucial in our current study.

In summary, the above models are constrained and insufficient in explaining how a stimulus initiates the behaviour of the users (Dzandu, Pathak and Gulliver, 2020). In contrast, the S-O-R framework offers an alternative perspective, providing additional insights to explain followers' behaviour. Additionally, the S-O-R framework accommodates the mediation of psychological processes like PSR between stimuli and responses, making it the most applicable choice for exploring the specific context of content sharing through PSR in this research. Moreover, its flexibility also allows it to handle moderating variables (Wu, Yang and Liu, 2023). The subsequent section presents a thorough explanation of the S-O-R framework, its key components, and offers a detailed rationale for its adoption in the context of this study.

3.3 The Stimulus-Organism-Response Framework (S-O-R)

The S-O-R is a framework that can be used to understand and predict human behaviour. It was originally developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and was later introduced to the marketing literature by Donovan and Rossiter (1982), as seen in Figure 3.1. In consumer behaviour research, the S-O-R framework presents an opportunity to capture elements of the complex process of consumer response and decision-making (Bagozzi, 1983). In S-O-R, (S) Stimulus refers to factors which impact followers' internal state and arouse interest; (O) Organism refers to the follower's evaluation; and (R) Response represents the outcome of the follower's reaction. The relationship between these constructs is linear, with the organism acting as the mediator between stimulus and response (Kim and Johnson, 2016). Therefore, this model suggests three steps in human reactions to stimuli: stimulus, organism, and response.

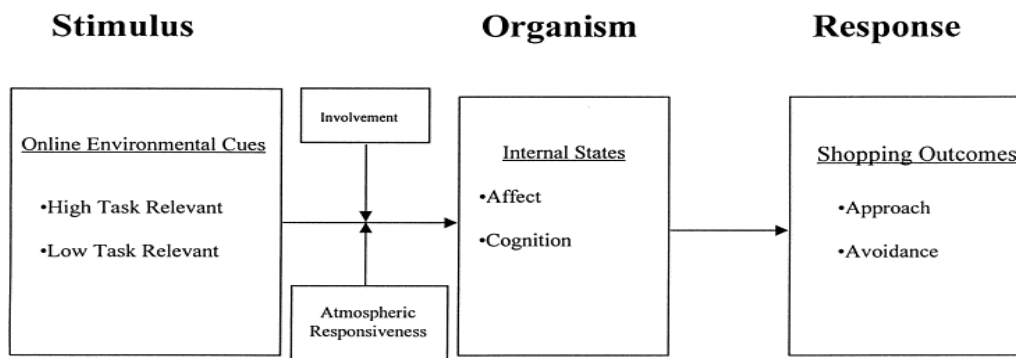
Figure 3.1: The original S-O-R framework



Source: Mehrabian and Russell (1974)

Based on Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) and Donovan and Rossiter's (1982) study of environmental psychology theory, Eroglu, Machleit and Davis (2001) later adapted a developed S-O-R model for the online shopping context, as seen in Figure 3.2. This included the consumer's affective/cognitive internal states when shopping online. Unlike Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) traditional S-O-R paradigm, this framework hypothesizes that "high task-relevant" and "low task-relevant" are two determinants stimulating consumers' internal states.

Figure 3.2: S-O-R model of consumer response to online shopping

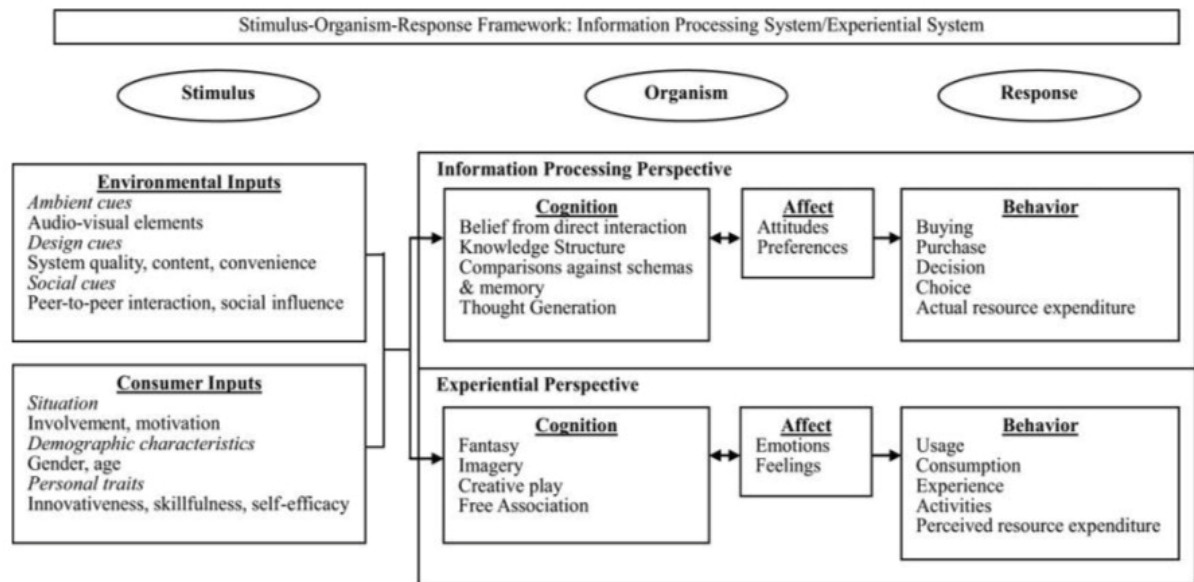


Source: Eroglu, Machleit and Davis (2001)

The S-O-R framework was also gradually applied in research related to social media platforms, as shown in Figure 3.3. Li, Dong and Chen (2012) developed the S-O-R framework adopted in information processing systems and customer experiential contexts. In Li, Dong and Chen's (2012) modified framework, environmental inputs, including ambient, design and social factors, and consumer inputs, including situation, demographic characteristics and personal traits, are aggregately the main parts of the starting point of consumers' media intervening

response system. The organism is principally understood from the perspective of information process and experience, while a series of variables, such as behavioural intention, can reflect the response.

Figure 3.3: S-O-R Framework: Information Processing Systems/ Experiential System



Source: Li, Dong and Chen (2012)

The SOR framework has served as the foundational framework underpinning a diverse range of studies across various disciplines and contexts, as evidenced by the list provided in Appendix 5. The primary strength of the S–O–R framework is its power to represent complex processes of individual response and its ability to be further expanded (Bagozzi, 1983). In addition, S-O-R is flexible (Jacoby, 2002) and includes opportunities to examine numerous internal and external stimuli, tangible and intangible stimuli, experiential and non-experiential organisms, including attitude, emotion, perception/feeling, judgement, belief, motivation, and thinking, and several response factors, including, intention, behaviour, and avoidance (Sultan, Wong and Azam, 2021). The S-O-R framework has been widely adopted for understanding human behaviours, particularly for understanding SMIs’ followers’ intentions and behaviours (Gamage and Ashill, 2023; Barta *et al.*, 2023). A discussion of each component within the S-O-R framework in relevance to the current study follows:

Stimulus (S):

An Individual’s internal state is triggered when exposed to an external cue or stimulus (S). A stimulus is something that arouses and triggers an individual’s behavioural or emotional

response (Zafar, Qiu and Shahzad, 2020) and can be defined as the specific factors that cause organismic reactions in the individual (Eroglu, Machleit and Davis, 2001). Recent studies adopting S-O-R have expanded the definition of stimulus not only to include external stimulus but internal as well. External stimuli refer to sources of information from outside the organism, including verbal or nonverbal communication from other people, visual or auditory environmental cues, or physical sensations (Li, Dong and Chen, 2012). Internal stimuli refer to sources of information from within the organism, such as values, thoughts, emotions, or memories. These internal stimuli can influence the organism's response to external stimuli and significantly shape overall behaviour. In communication and persuasion, it is important to consider both internal and external stimuli as they can both impact the organism's response and contribute to shaping overall behaviour (Zaib Abbasi *et al.*, 2022).

In his seminal work, Jacoby (2002) noted that not only the external environment is considered stimuli, but also regional, ethnic, religious, social class, values reference group, and other social influences operate as internal stimuli. In their systematic review, Chan, Cheung and Lee (2017) argued that external stimuli include marketing, and internal stimuli include consumer characteristics. Similarly, Li, Dong and Chen (2012) suggested that stimulus can be divided into both environmental inputs and consumer inputs. Zaib Abbasi *et al.* (2022) emphasized that the interplay of external and internal stimuli shapes a follower's underlying behavioural motivations.

In the SMI literature, the S-O-R model has been used to explain behavioural differences stemming from different stimuli. For example, source factors (Yousaf, 2022), content factors (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021), and audience factors (Sultan, Wong and Azam, 2021). Thus, our research classifies stimulus into environmental inputs (external) and consumer inputs (internal) by considering the source and content attributes as external inputs and audience attributes as internal inputs. Those three factors are extracted from the CPM model and applied to operationalise the stimuli, namely, source, content, and audience factors. Previous research indicates those three factors are crucial for persuasive SMI campaigns (e.g., Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023; Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021).

Organism (O):

Organism in S-O-R is defined as the psychological processes within an individual while interacting with the stimulus (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In other words, the organism is

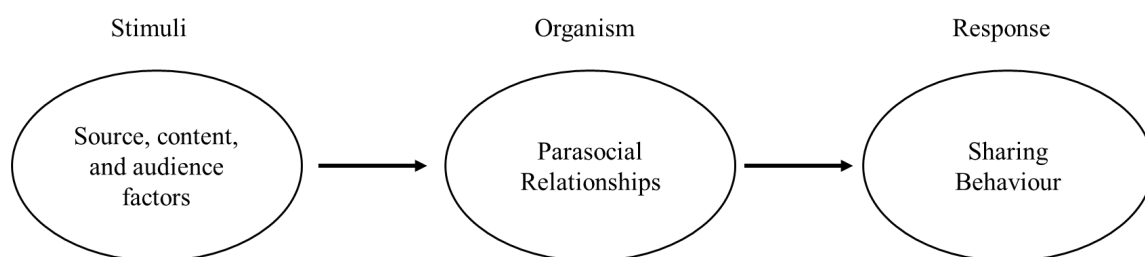
where we process incoming stimuli (Jacoby, 2002). Specifically, it is the internal mechanism and process that links and transmits a stimulus to a response (Fang, 2014). Other scholars such as Chan, Cheung and Lee (2017) refer to it as the internal evaluation of consumers. The organism can be either in an affective or cognitive state (Busalim, Fox and Lynn, 2022). In other words, Organism is the individual's psychological or cognitive state formed by stimulus factors (Wang, Shahzad and Ashraf, 2023). Moreover, In S-O-R, the organism mediates the relationship between the stimulus and response (Wu and Li, 2018).

Building on prior categorizations, such as the work by Vrontis et al. (2021), which identifies PSR as a psychological factor, our present study conceptualizes the organism variable within the S-O-R framework as PSR. Specifically, once the stimulus evokes the followers' sensations, organismic factors are likely to account for followers' sharing behaviour, that is, elicitation of PSR between the SMI and the follower.

Response (R):

Finally, Response is the follower's ultimate decision in response to a specific stimulus. The mediation mechanism converts stimuli into behavioural and intentional responses, such as purchasing or not purchasing and approaching or not approaching (Lichtenstein, Bloch and Black, 1988). In our current study, the response is the tendency of followers to share or not share SMIs' content. Based on the above discussion, the adaptation of the S-O-R framework is depicted in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4: Adapted S-O-R framework for the current study



3.3.1 S-O-R in the Influencer Marketing Literature

The S-O-R has traditionally provided the foundation for consumer behaviour studies (Chan, Cheung and Lee, 2017) and has been adapted in a variety of disciplines, including celebrity endorsement (Burnasheva and Suh, 2020) and consumer engagement (Ul Islam and Rahman, 2017).

Most importantly, the S-O-R has been applied in various influencer marketing studies, as seen in Appendix 5. For example, Zafar, Qiu and Shahzad (2020) examined the impact of SMIs on impulse buying, utilizing PSR and social support as a stimulus. Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021) examined the impact of Instagram brand publications on affective commitment and interaction intentions through creativity and positive emotions. Similarly, Belanche et al. (2021a) considered SMIs' posts on social media as stimulus posts, attitudes and credibility as an organism, and behavioural intentions as the response. Yousaf (2022) examined the impact of food vloggers on behavioural intentions. In addition, Barta et al. (2023) studied the impact of originality, quality, quantity, and humour on the intention to follow the SMIs' account and advice. Lastly, Kılıç and Gürlek (2023) investigated the role of green influencer marketing on green behavioural intention through the mediation of perceived fit and environmental consciousness.

The S-O-R framework has been employed not only in quantitative studies but also in qualitative research. For example, a qualitative study conducted by Djafarova and Bowes (2021) in the context of Instagram found that advertisements, SMIs, and content act as stimuli in the S-O-R framework and confirmed the framework's applicability to the SMI context. To explore the value of SMIs' narrative strategies, Zhou et al. (2021) regraded consumer perception of SMI narrative strategy as an organism and behavioural response as the ultimate consumer response.

3.3.2 Justification for Adapting S-O-R

Although the S-O-R framework successfully explained behavioural differences resulting from various stimuli, it has been given little attention and application in the influencer marketing context (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). For instance, “future research can be conducted to extend further the theoretical understanding and applicability of S-O-R framework, for example exploring the influencing factors and behavioural responses of consumers on certain promotional activities presented by influencers in different social media platforms.” (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021, p. 8). Moreover, to date, no study in the influencer marketing literature has used the S-O-R framework to investigate how the source, content, and audience factors impact followers' sharing behaviour through the mediation of PSR and moderation of verification behaviour. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to fill this gap and investigate precisely how these variables interact in shaping followers' sharing behaviour in the context of influencer marketing.

The S-O-R framework applies to the current study for three main reasons. First, the S-O-R offers a crucial theoretical lens to understand individual behaviour. It has been widely used in online user behaviour research (e.g., Xiang *et al.*, 2016; Fu, Yan and Feng, 2018; Liu, Luo and Cao, 2018) and has been used to understand customer engagement in the online brand community context (e.g., Ul Islam and Rahman, 2017; Kim and Johnson, 2016). In particular, it has been used in influencer marketing research (e.g., Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Belanche *et al.*, 2021a; Barta *et al.*, 2023). Second, the S-O-R provides a foundation for exploring the impact of influencing factors on the follower's sharing behaviour, enabling a deeper examination of followers' internal psychological changes. More specifically, it provides a structured manner to understand how external (i.e., source and content) and internal factors (i.e., audience) affect behaviour while highlighting the vital mediating role of the organism (i.e., PSR) in this process. Thus, besides considering the direct relationship, the S-O-R theory provides a theoretical framework to understand the underlying mediation mechanism. Third, S-O-R's flexibility allows it to accommodate mediation and moderation variables (Wu, Yang and Liu, 2023; Hazari and Sethna, 2023; Eroglu, Machleit and Davis, 2001).

As a result, S-O-R is employed because the constructs included and the relationships among them explain the underlying interests of this research. Specifically, it is posited that source, content, and audience factors (S) evoke internal organismic responses (O), and these internal states affect behavioural responses (R). That is when a follower encounters an SMI's post, three (i.e., source, content, and audience) factors are processed by followers (S) to generate PSR towards the SMI (O), which leads them to respond to perform behaviours such as sharing content (R). Lastly, this theoretical framework assumes that PSR will transfer source, content, and audience-related factors to drive meaningful engagement behaviours such as post-sharing. In simpler terms, (O) mediates the impact of (S) on (R). Verification behaviour was also included as a moderator between (O) and (R). Therefore, the S-O-R theory is believed to provide one of the best explanations of the mechanism of sharing and is expected to be a good fit for the context of this study.

3.4 Hypotheses Development

3.4.1 (S-O): Source Popularity to Sharing Behaviour and PSR

According to Haenlein et al. (2020), smaller SMIs tend to have higher engagement rates relative to the total number of followers and a more homogenous follower base. Tafesse and Wood (2021) found that the willingness of followers to engage with an SMI increases as the

number of followers decreases. Meanwhile, celebrities boasting high follower counts and historical influence in traditional marketing, experience lower engagement rates due to their limited online interaction with followers. Although a higher follower count implies a broader reach, it is more likely to reduce followers' engagement likelihood (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023). Moreover, Park et al. (2021) conducted an experimental study revealing that micro-influencers tend to be more persuasive than mega-influencers. Conversely, micro-influencers, with follower counts ranging from 10k to 100k, not only incur lower costs but also exhibit significantly higher engagement rates, thereby yielding greater impact (Ryding, Boardman and Konstantinou, 2023). Similarly, the results of Rao Hill and Qesja's (2023) study suggest that a low level of popularity of SMIs is more likely to lead to effective endorsement outcomes. In light of the aforementioned research findings, it is proposed that a lower level of popularity elicits higher levels of engagement, encouraging greater sharing behaviours among their followers.

Hypothesis 1a: Source popularity will have a negative effect on sharing behaviour.

SMIs with high popularity are not necessarily considered appropriate endorsers because they are viewed as commercialized SMIs with a distant relationship and limited connection with their followers (Kay, Mulcahy and Parkinson, 2020). An SMI's higher popularity may provide followers with an indication that this SMI will dedicate less effort to foster intimate follower relations (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023), while followers tend to view SMIs with modest follower counts as relatively more trustworthy and personally relevant (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Therefore, the lower the popularity, the greater the SMI's emotional connection with their followers (Conde and Casais, 2023). Moreover, micro-influencers tend to deliver a greater sense of intimacy because of their ability to interact with their followers (Britt *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, Aw and Chuah (2021) and Yuan et al. (2021) found that popularity exerts a negative influence on PSR, challenging the conventional belief that popularity is associated with likability (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). As marketers invest more in less popular SMIs, understanding the audience's relationship with them becomes essential (Syrdal *et al.*, 2023). Hence, this study postulates a negative relationship between popularity and PSR.

Hypothesis 1b: Source popularity will have a negative effect on PSR.

3.4.2 (S-O): Source Authenticity to Sharing Behaviour and PSR

Perceptions of SMIs' authenticity play a crucial role in driving their persuasiveness, as highlighted by Lee and Eastin (2021). Particularly, when an SMI is perceived as an authentic source, followers will be more willing to accept and share their message (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Marketers can capitalize on SMIs' authenticity to foster increased engagement between them and their followers (Syrdal *et al.*, 2023). This authenticity is cultivated through consistency and honesty, which build trust with followers, as SMIs present themselves as genuine and relatable role models (Chen, Yan and Smith, 2023). Specifically, Leung *et al.* (2022) show that SMIs who share a mix of positive and negative content achieve the highest engagement, as solely positive endorsements may raise authenticity concerns among followers. On the other hand, a decline in SMI authenticity may jeopardize engagement levels and the overall effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns, as observed by Chen, Yan and Smith (2023). Consequently, when perceived as more authentic, SMIs can elicit higher degrees of engagement from their followers (Syrdal *et al.*, 2023; Cascio Rizzo *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, leveraging and maintaining authenticity in SMIs can be a crucial strategy for marketers to stimulate followers' sharing behaviour and maximize the impact of influencer marketing efforts.

Hypothesis 2a: Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour.

The perceived authenticity of SMIs is expected to be a crucial factor in shaping the formation of PSR with their followers. Media characters are perceived as genuine and relatable role models, similar to real-life friends (Liu, 2023). When their followers perceive SMIs as authentic and genuine, they are expected to develop a more profound sense of trust and emotional connection with them (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016). The perception of authenticity may arise from various factors, such as being true to oneself, transparency and honesty displayed by the SMIs in their content (Lee and Eastin, 2021). Such perceived authenticity enables SMIs to establish stronger bonds with their followers and fosters more personal interaction. Moreover, authenticity should allow followers to see SMIs for who they are as real people based on how they uncover themselves (Syrdal *et al.*, 2023). This makes SMIs' authenticity an important factor in assessing their relationship with their followers. As a result, it is hypothesized that higher levels of perceived authenticity in SMIs will be positively associated with the strength and quality of PSR developed between followers and the SMI.

Hypothesis 2b: Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on PSR.

3.4.3 (S-O): Content Creativity to Sharing Behaviour and PSR

Creating creative and original content by SMIs might achieve differentiation in followers' minds (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021). Creative SMIs produce content in their own words and style, which makes them stand out from the abundant number of SMIs in the industry (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Previous research indicates that newspaper articles producing certain surprising content are shared more than other articles (Berger and Milkman, 2012). Similarly, individuals prefer to share original and surprising content (Dobele *et al.*, 2007; Tellis *et al.*, 2019), which are fundamental aspects of creativity. Therefore, SMIs with higher content creativity should attract more engagement than those with low creativity. Likewise, SMIs who post creative content will likely be recognized as credible and knowledgeable with whom followers may prefer to engage (Ki and Kim, 2019). Moreover, creative content strengthens followers' intention to engage with the posted content (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018) and drive their intention to consume, contribute, and create content on the endorsed brand's social media (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). Overall, creative SMIs may be more likely to be noticed by followers, making them more effective in fostering sharing behaviour. Thus, it is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3a: Content creativity will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour.

Creative advertisements will result in positive responses and leave an impression on the viewers (Till and Baack, 2005). Specifically, creative messages grab more attention, last longer, and build a fan community (Reinartz and Saffert, 2013). Past studies observed that offering users the tools necessary to promote their creativity is associated with increased positive emotions such as pleasure, excitement, and enjoyment (Hampton-Sosa, 2017). Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021) found that creative branded content posted on Instagram can evoke positive emotions. As the content becomes more creative and original, followers perceive it to be more meaningful, useful, and valuable, resulting in more favourable attitudes towards the SMI (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). Creative posts are also useful to foster PSR between SMIs and followers (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). Building on the S-O-R, it is posited that perceived content creativity -as a stimulus- will trigger organismic processes in the form of PSR.

Hypothesis 3b: Content creativity will have a positive effect on PSR.

3.4.4 (S-O): Content Quality to Sharing Behaviour and PSR

High-quality content is assumed to be powerful and appealing to increase followers' sharing behaviour. For instance, Berger and Milkman (2012) posited that content on social media is more likely to go viral when it is useful and interesting. Specifically, high-quality content can increase the motivation to share brand-related content (Rohm, Kaltcheva, and Milne, 2013). In the context of Twitter, Li and Xie (2020) found that high-quality branded content encourages higher engagement with airlines and sports utility brands. Moreover, Magno (2017) found that the quality of a blog's content positively affects reader engagement with the blog. Followers of SMIs are more inclined to engage and share their content if they perceive it as high quality (Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022), while engagement is unlikely to occur if followers find the content scripted and of lower quality (Chidiac and Bowden, 2022). In this regard, Tafesse and Wood (2021) found that SMIs who consistently share a large content volume tend to be perceived as lower in quality, leading to decreased engagement from their followers. Based on these arguments, it is posited that receiving high-quality content from an SMI will positively affect followers' sharing behaviour.

Hypothesis 4a: Content quality will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour.

A common understanding nowadays is that to gain followers' attention, SMIs should create valuable content for their audience (Venciute *et al.*, 2023). Content quality plays a considerable role in driving relationships between SMIs and followers (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). In their qualitative study, Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019) indicated that over 70% of the participants concurred that the quality of posts by SMIs ranks as one of the most crucial content attributes. Similarly, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) argued that quality of content is a key decision upon following a specific SMI. Similarly, when a blog provides high information quality, it generates attachment (Tsai and Men, 2013). Therefore, followers are motivated to develop intimate relationships with SMIs who provide meaningful information, as they actively seek such information to fulfil their need for competence (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). When SMIs provide high-quality content, it helps followers understand trending topics and enhances followers' desire to build an intimate relationship with an SMI (Hu *et al.*, 2020). This intimate relationship can be built through psychological connections between SMIs and followers in the form of PSR (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). Specifically, Cheung *et al.* (2022a) have shown that content quality strengthens PSR between followers and SMIs. Following this reasoning, the following hypothesis is presented:

Hypothesis 4b: Content quality will have a positive effect on PSR.

3.4.5 (S-O): Audience Self-efficacy to Sharing Behaviour and PSR

Using different social media platforms demands the acquisition of new skills for every platform (Aw and Agnihotri, 2023). Self-efficacy reflects the user's perceived ability to perform an activity to acquire the expected outcome (Huang, Lin and Lin, 2009). Extant research suggests user engagement depends on skill (Sutcliffe, 2009). Specifically, in their systematic review, Charband and Jafari Navimipour (2016) demonstrate that self-efficacy is crucial in influencing knowledge sharing. For instance, self-efficacy influences news sharing among internet users (Lee and Ma, 2012). Moreover, Papadopoulos, Stamati and Nopparuch (2013) found that self-efficacy is positively related to the intention of knowledge sharing in employee weblogs. Similarly, self-efficacy significantly influences knowledge-sharing behaviour in virtual communities (Hsu *et al.*, 2007). In the context of YouTube, users' video-sharing self-efficacy significantly influences sharing behaviour (Chiang and Hsiao, 2015), while Munar and Jacobsen (2014) found that tourists with a high level of self-efficacy are more likely to share their tourism experiences on Facebook. Based on the above, it is argued that followers with higher self-efficacy possess the skills and ability to understand and connect with the SMI, making them more likely to engage better and increasingly share SMIs' posts. Thus, it is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 5a: Self-efficacy will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour.

Because SMIs can easily connect with their audience, those who choose not to are seen as uncaring (Marwick, 2013). Followers with high self-efficacy possess the necessary skills and knowledge to use specific social platforms (Aw and Agnihotri, 2023), allowing them to distinguish genuine SMIs who seek personal connections from those who seek commercial collaborations. Thus, followers with higher self-efficacy may feel more comfortable and competent in establishing a virtual connection with the SMI. In addition, they can establish whether the SMI is applying beautification face-filters and thus attempting to enhance their appearance (Javornik *et al.*, 2022). These filters smoothen the skin, sharpen the nose, and enlarge the eyes, promoting unrealistic content circulation. Limiting the use of such filters enables the audience to feel close and similar to the SMI (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). However, suppose followers lack competency, skill, and knowledge of using a specific social platform. In that case, they may be reluctant to engage with the SMI's content or form emotional connections stemming from unfamiliarity or inability to navigate the platform effectively (Petty

and Cacioppo,1986). People's perceptions of their efficacy affect the types of anticipatory scenarios they construct (Huang, Lin and Lin, 2009), so it is reasonable to assume that followers with high self-efficacy comprehend the content, relate to the SMI's experiences, and interpret their messages accurately, fostering a sense of intimacy and emotional bond. While there is limited existing research that directly links self-efficacy to PSR (Siegenthaler, Aegerter and Fahr, 2023), it would be worthwhile to explore whether self-efficacy enhances PSR development in the SMI context. Based on this, it is proposed:

Hypothesis 5b: Self-efficacy will have a positive effect on PSR.

3.4.6 (S-O): Audience Collectivism to Sharing Behaviour and PSR

Cultural differences act as major drivers of followers' behavioural diversity (Gvili and Levy, 2021). In other words, followers of different cultures are expected to prefer content consistent with their own cultural orientations (Tsai and Men, 2017). They might be less likely to trust or follow SMIs who promote radical ideas or challenge traditional norms. On the other hand, individuals with more openness to change values may be more receptive to novel content and experimental ideas, leading to more active engagement with SMIs who represent new and unconventional perspectives. According to Brown (2015), when individuals identify strongly with a media persona, it fosters involvement and, consequently, increases engagement on social media platforms. Cheng et al. (2021) suggested that collectivist cultures have higher rates of social media addiction. Therefore, social media engagement rates in such cultures tend to be higher than in individualistic countries. Moreover, research shows that consumers from collectivist cultures react more favourably to celebrity endorsements than those from individualist cultures (Choi and Lewis, 2017). It can, therefore, be assumed that this inclination can be expressed by greater degrees of engagement.

In the domain of blogs, social similarity makes it possible to develop a sense of community that leads to engagement with a blog (Magno, 2017). Furthermore, individuals who share the same values as others in their national culture feel more at ease sharing branded user-generated content (Kitirattakarn, Araujo and Neijens, 2019). Similarly, collectivistic users tend to share product information on social media more often than individualists (Goodrich and de Mooij, 2014). Gvili and Levy (2021) found that the effect of attitude on shoppers' intention to share information is stronger for collectivist shoppers than for individualist shoppers. Lee and Choi (2019) found that cultural values differ in predicting eWOM intent between the U.S. and Korea. A cross-cultural study conducted by (Tsai and Men, 2017) found that Chinese users exhibited

a greater level of engagement with brand pages on social media than American users in both content-consuming (i.e., likes) and content-contributing (i.e., shares). These previous studies provide enough evidence to speculate about the effect of individual-level cultural values on followers' sharing behaviour. Thus, it is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 6a: Collectivism will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour.

Across cultures, people have emotions that are consistent with their values (Tamir *et al.*, 2016). That is, the more people endorse a certain value, the more they have the emotion that is consistent with it. In individualistic cultures, SMIs' content highlights the independence, uniqueness, and success of SMIs; meanwhile, in collectivist cultures, it highlights interdependence, family integrity and group well-being (Silva, Farias and Silva, 2023). Therefore, collectivist individuals emphasise harmony, societal stability, and relationship growth (Schwartz, 1992). In addition, collectivist members strongly support in-group members (Beheshti *et al.*, 2023) and are more motivated to follow recommendations made by significant others (Hueso *et al.*, 2020) or, in our case, an SMI. Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) identified the relevance of PSR and suggested that audience members turn to media personalities for guidance on how to behave. PSR considers the affinity between followers and SMIs (Lou and Kim, 2019) based on the perception of culture, personal values, language, and interest similarity (Conde and Casais, 2023; Sakib, Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2020; Hu *et al.*, 2020).

An increasing body of research suggested that the formation of PSR may differ across different cultures (individualism vs. collectivism) (e.g., Schmid and Klimmt, 2011; Tsai and Men, 2017). In particular, the cultural context plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals perceive and respond to information from the media, highlighting its significance as a key determinant in the development of PSR. For example, fans from a collectivistic culture (Mexico) developed more PSR toward Harry Potter (a fictional character) than fans from Germany (individualistic culture) (Schmid and Klimmt, 2011). Similarly, Tsai and Men (2017) found that Chinese users demonstrated greater PSI with brand endorsers than their American counterparts. Moreover, collectivist cultures fancy emotionally appealing messages from SMIs (Silva, Farias and Silva, 2023). Specifically, when SMIs share stories involving family members, friends, or romantic partners, it increases the affinity and interaction of their followers (Conde and Casais, 2023). This leads us to understand that collectivist cultures are more inclined to develop PSR than individualistic cultures. The results of the exploratory study (Chapter 5) suggested that features

of followers' culture, such as collectivism, may contribute to follower attachment to the SMI. Thus, it can be expected that collectivist culture will influence the formation of PSR in the SMI domain.

Hypothesis 6b: Collectivism will have a positive effect on PSR.

3.4.7 (O-R): PSR to Sharing Behaviour

Research has revealed that PSRs are essential to change followers' behaviour and attitude (Lou and Kim, 2019; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Hence, the ability to persuade followers stems from SMIs' ability to build an intimate relationship with their followers (Wellman *et al.*, 2020). Such relationships will, in turn, transfer from SMIs to their posts, driving meaningful engagement behaviours such as post-sharing (Tian *et al.*, 2023). To enhance the SMI's effectiveness in stimulating sharing behaviour, the follower must perceive the SMI as a friend who offers genuine advice and with whom they can easily identify (Lee and Watkins, 2016). That is, PSR should be elicited. Elevated levels of PSR increase the likelihood of the follower being persuaded by the SMI, subsequently provoking their sharing behaviour (Santateresa-Bernat, Sánchez-García and Curras-Perez, 2022). Research suggests that PSR appears not only as an interaction between SMIs and followers but also as a follower's trust in the recommended content (Dewantara, Jin and Gardiner, 2023). Using S-O-R as a theoretical framework, Kim and Johnson (2016) found that emotions positively influence sharing intention. Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) found that the influencer-follower relationship positively correlated with eWOM intention. Specifically, both Hwang and Zhang (2018) and Manchanda, Arora and Sethi (2021) found that PSR affected followers' eWOM intentions, while Chen, Lin and Shan (2021) found that PSI significantly influenced engagement with branded content. Specifically, PSR was found to have a significant and positive effect on post-engagement (Hudders and De Jans, 2021) and follower engagement (Melnychuk, Arasli, and Nevzat, 2024). Therefore, it is expected that when followers develop intense PSR with an SMI, they become more fascinated and develop engagement with the SMI, thus sharing their content more frequently. Therefore:

Hypothesis 6: PSR will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour.

3.4.8 (S-O-R): The Mediating Effect of PSR

Because sharing SMIs' content on social media occurs when one follower shares content with other followers, it is reasonable to consider that the characteristics of the SMI, content and audience are all core of the sharing process (Hsieh, Hsieh and Tang, 2012; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a;

Lou and Yuan, 2019). A study by Chapple and Cownie (2017) revealed that followers' willingness to share SMIs' branded content only occurred where the followers had a positive pre-existing relationship with the SMI. This is because SMIs can replicate friendships between themselves and their followers (Allen, 2022). SMIs can drive followers' intention to spread positive eWOM due to their emotional connection with their followers (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). The persuasive power of SMIs strongly depends on the affective relationships they establish with their followers (Conde and Casais, 2023). Thus, the persuasiveness of influencer-created content is mediated by the extent of psychological connections between SMIs and followers (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). When followers share interests and personal characteristics with SMIs, their PSR is reinforced, boosting their engagement (Yuan and Lou, 2020; Ren *et al.*, 2023).

This study proposes that PSR between SMIs and their followers can be used to establish better engagement. Studies have empirically tested models proposing PSR as a mediator with different antecedents and consequences. Specifically, the literature has shown the mediation influence of PSR on various behavioural outcomes such as purchase intention (Chung and Cho, 2017; Colliander and Dahlén, 2011), credibility (Breves *et al.*, 2021), brand equity (Yuan *et al.*, 2021), eWOM intention (Manchanda, Arora and Sethi, 2021), behavioural loyalty (Lim *et al.*, 2020), SMI compliance intentions (Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023), and intention to adopt the SMI's recommendation (Conde and Casais, 2023). Moreover, some previous studies showed that PSR acts as a mediator between various antecedents of influencer marketing on engagement (e.g., Farivar, Wang and Turel, 2022; Shan, Chen and Lin, 2020; Hudders and De Jans, 2021; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). Therefore, PSR is key in facilitating and mediating the engagement process between SMIs and followers (Silva *et al.*, 2020). However, the literature still lacks an understanding of the mediation influence of PSR on engagement outcomes such as sharing behaviour. Therefore, the current study has proposed that PSR could mediate the relationship between source, content, and audience factors with followers' sharing behaviour. In other words, the current study assumes that regardless of the extent of how much SMIs enjoy a high degree of popularity and authenticity, content creativity and quality, and if the audience has a high degree of self-efficacy and collectivism, if followers are not adequately attached to those SMIs, they will not be motivated to share their content.

Moreover, the S-O-R model suggests that the impact of stimuli on followers' behaviours is mediated by the internal state of people (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Specifically, the

organism (PSR) mediates the relationship between the stimulus (popularity, authenticity, creativity, quality, self-efficacy, collectivism) and response (sharing behaviour). It is hoped that the results will elucidate some of the mechanisms behind what may lead a follower's sharing behaviour to be effectively 'influenced'. Thus, the following mediation hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 8a: PSR mediate the effect of source popularity on sharing behaviour

Hypothesis 8b: PSR mediate the effect of source authenticity on sharing behaviour

Hypothesis 8c: PSR mediate the effect of content creativity on sharing behaviour

Hypothesis 8d: PSR mediate the effect of content quality on sharing behaviour

Hypothesis 8e: PSR mediate the effect of audience self-efficacy on sharing behaviour

Hypothesis 8f: PSR mediate the effect of audience collectivism on sharing behaviour

3.4.9 The Moderating Effect of Verification Behaviour

The social media environment allows the sharing of content between often unknown individuals, and cues that traditionally have helped to assist people in determining the dependability of a source or a message are often absent in this online environment (Hocevar, Flanagin and Metzger, 2014). Consequently, it is logical to assume that the flood of information provided by SMIs increases uncertainty and may encourage users to be more cautious in verifying information and sharing behaviour (Cooke, 2017). Since sharing an SMI's post requires more cognitive effort than other engagement activities (i.e., commenting, liking), it can be assumed that followers are more committed to assessing the value of the post before sharing (Kim and Yang, 2017).

Based on Haug's (2019) findings, individuals who employ information verification strategies tend to perceive information differently than those who do not. Additionally, those who engage in information verification are more inclined to view the majority of information as false. If an individual watches content posted by a particular SMI but has no intention of sharing that post, they are less likely to actively verify that post item because there is no direct impact on their online persona (Torres, Gerhart and Negahban, 2018). However, those with a greater intention to share are more likely to engage in verification behaviours. A study by Stanger, Alnaghaimshi and Pearson (2017) demonstrated that Saudi Arabian social media users were careful when sharing content with friends. Any content they shared had to correspond to cultural and religious standards. This situation is especially likely to occur when the content provided by SMIs is not in line with the ideological position taken by the user. In this case, the recipient

will likely verify the source or critically evaluate the information, as would probably have occurred in another situation (Majerczak and Strzelecki, 2022).

Past research has underscored that individuals with high verification behaviour engage in cautious information processing, seeking factual accuracy and credibility before sharing content (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000; Flanagin and Metzger, 2007; Dabbous, Aoun Barakat and de Quero Navarro, 2022). Importantly, this approach may sometimes conflict with the emotional connections fostered through PSRs. These strong, one-sided, emotionally driven bonds may not necessarily align with the more critical and discerning nature of high verification behaviour. Even if followers have established a strong PSR with the SMI, they may still exhibit scepticism when sharing the SMI's content within their social networks (Jamil and Qayyum, 2022; Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020). This was also highlighted by some of the participants in our qualitative study (Chapter 5). Therefore, even if the source is trusted and perceived as a friend, followers are still more likely to attempt to verify the content's veracity before proceeding to engage and share. Since sharing requires more cognitive effort than other engagement behaviours (Kim and Yang, 2017), it seems reasonable to assume that followers are likely to engage in verification behaviour before sharing. Specifically, this verification behaviour is likely to weaken the impact of PSR on sharing behaviour. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

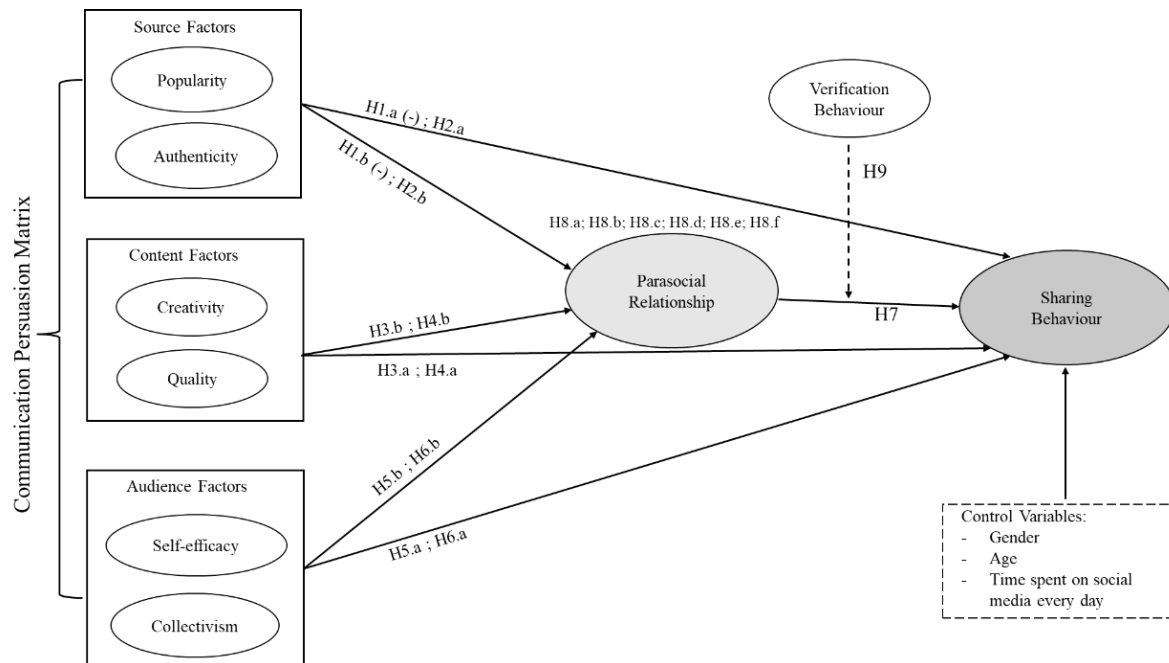
Hypothesis 9: A high level of verification behaviour will weaken the effect of PSR on sharing behaviour.

3.5 The Conceptual Framework

In developing the research model, this study adapted the CPM (McGuire, 2001) and the S-O-R framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) as umbrella frameworks. Furthermore, drawing on previous researchers' calls, findings, and recommendations, along with insights from the above discussion, the conceptual foundations of the proposed model and related hypotheses are derived from a diverse range of studies. These studies, both within and outside the context of influencer marketing, have demonstrated their significance in influencing engagement and sharing behaviour. Additionally, the insights obtained from the qualitative research conducted in Chapter 5 further contribute to the formulation of the model. The proposed conceptual model (Figure 3.5) aims to elucidate how follower sharing behaviour within influencer marketing is influenced by three primary factors: source, content, and audience factors. Additionally, the

model considers the role of PSR as a mediator that can impact these relationships while also considering the role of verification behaviour as a moderator between PSR and sharing behaviour.

Figure 3.5: The proposed conceptual framework



Note: Hypotheses 8.a, 8.b, 8.c, 8.d, 8.e, and 8.f suggest mediation effects between IVs and outcome variable.

The framework contains nine constructs explained as follows: popularity, authenticity, creativity, quality, self-efficacy, and collectivism; these six factors first play a role as the source, content, and audience factors; second, they indicate the Stimulus (S); third, they act as antecedents to PSR and sharing behaviour. PSR serves as the factor indicating the Organism (O) and is regarded as a mediator between the Stimulus (S) and the Response (R). Finally, sharing behaviour indicates the outcome variable and Response (R), while verification behaviour is treated as a moderator between PSR and sharing behaviour. Moreover, demographic factors that are crucial variables for classifying social media users, such as gender and age, have been shown to impact followers' engagement with SMIs (e.g., Lou and Yuan, 2019; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Boerman, 2020) and were included as control variables. Time spent on social media was also added as a control variable because followers who dedicate more time to social media are likely to have greater exposure to SMIs and, consequently,

exhibit higher levels of engagement with them (Cao *et al.*, 2021). The set of research hypotheses is presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Hypotheses of the current study's conceptual framework.

Direct effect	
H1	Source popularity will have a negative effect on (a) sharing behaviour, (b) PSR
H2	Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on (a) sharing behaviour, (b) PSR
H3	Content creativity will have a positive effect on (a) sharing behaviour, (b) PSR
H4	Content quality will have a positive effect on (a) sharing behaviour, (b) PSR
H5	Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on (a) sharing behaviour, (b) PSR
H6	Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on (a) sharing behaviour; (b) PSR
H7	PSR will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour
Mediation effect	
H8	PSR will mediate the effect of (a) source popularity, (b) perceived influencer authenticity, (c) content creativity, (d) content quality, (e) self-efficacy, (f) collectivism on followers' sharing behaviour
Moderation effect	
H9	A high level of verification behaviour will weaken the effect of PSR on sharing behaviour

3.6 Summary

In this chapter, and from exploring and examining the relevant literature, a conceptual framework has been developed to address the research gaps and theoretically advance our understanding of factors affecting followers' sharing behaviour of SMIs' posts. This chapter began by reviewing theories related to this study and establishing the rationale for adopting the S-O-R framework within our research context. Thereafter, the chapter formulated nine hypotheses, reflecting the relationship among the variables under study and identified the postulated significance and direction of influence for each construct. The framework contains nine constructs: source popularity, source perceived authenticity, content creativity, content quality, audience self-efficacy, audience collectivism, PSR, verification behaviour, and sharing behaviour. The next chapter will discuss the suitable methodology that can be adopted to accomplish this study's objectives and justify the stages taken to carry out the research.

4 Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is structured into 12 sections. The research process “Onion” diagram, based on Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), is discussed in Section 4.2. This diagram explains various methodological approaches and serves as an organizational framework for the chapter. Following this, Section 4.3 delves into the examination of research philosophy, while subsequent sections, namely Sections 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6, cover the research approach, research

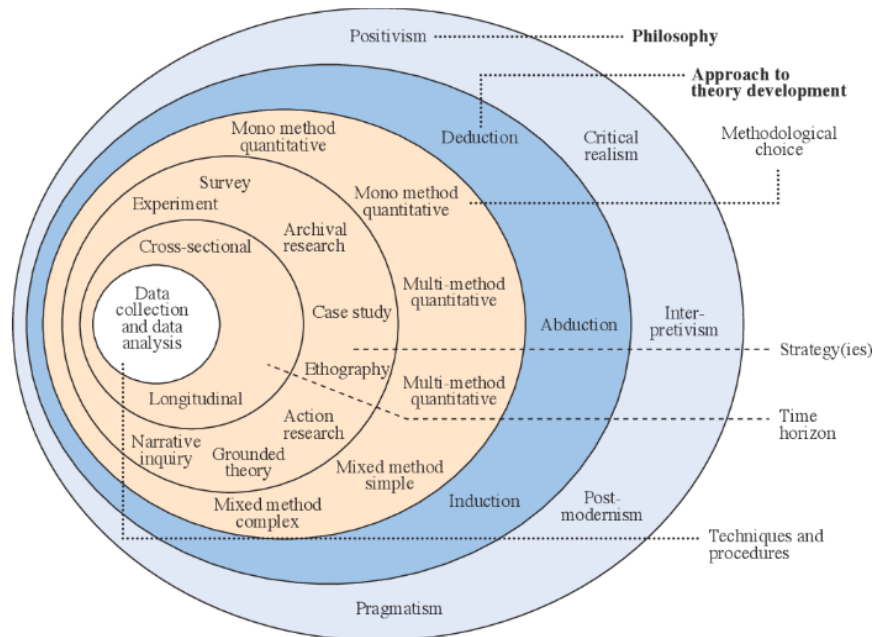
strategy, and research design, respectively. Sections 4.7 and 4.8 are devoted to the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the study, and Section 4.9 clarifies the time horizon of the research. Translation-related issues are addressed in Section 4.10, and ethical considerations are discussed in Section 4.11. The chapter concludes with a summary in Section 4.12.

4.2 The Research Process “Onion”

A research methodology includes the overall approach used throughout the research process (Collis and Hussey, 2013). Identifying a suitable research methodology is a crucial step in any research study. Researchers typically begin by addressing the theoretical foundations, followed by the data collection and analysis stage, and finally, they provide conclusions on the issues under investigation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The choice of research methodology depends on the specific problem being examined and varies according to the nature of the problem. Consequently, selecting the appropriate methodology is paramount to ensure that the research aim, questions, and objectives are effectively achieved and that the study is rigorous and valid.

In their work, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) depicted the entire research process as a sequence of different layers forming the ‘research process onion’ (Figure 4.2). While these layers are distinct, they are interconnected, meaning that decisions in the inner layers depend on choices made in the outer ones. For example, deciding which research approach to adopt, such as deductive or inductive, in the second outer layer depends on the research philosophy chosen in the first outer layer. Due to its widespread and ease of use (Zolfagharian *et al.*, 2019), our methodology chapter will be structured following the layers of this onion’s framework.

Figure 4.1: The research process “onion”



Source: Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019)

Based on Figure 4.2, the current study adopts pragmatism as a philosophy, abductive research approach, mixed methods research strategy, and exploratory sequential mixed method research design and adheres to a cross-sectional classification for the time horizon. An explanation justifying these choices will be provided in the following sections.

4.3 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy, which appears in the first outer layer of the research onion, is “an overarching term relating to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p. 127). In other words, it refers to the researcher’s view of how knowledge is constructed. The research philosophy signifies the technique of how researchers view the world and influences the strategies adopted to investigate the topic (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Thus, researchers must be conscious and recognise the philosophical commitments supporting their research. It is crucial to understand the research philosophy as the researcher is required to choose the appropriate research approach based on these assumptions before venturing further into their research. Consequently, this section introduces research philosophies, helping to select and rationalize the most fitting paradigm for this research.

Generally, research philosophies can be categorized based on three fundamental assumptions that reflect different research perspectives: ontology, axiology, and epistemology (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Ontology is a fundamental concept in research philosophy that delves into the nature of reality or existence. It seeks to understand what exists and what can be considered real or true within the context of a research inquiry. In essence, ontology asks questions about the nature of the world, including whether there is a single objective reality that can be known and studied or if reality is subjective and varies based on individual perspectives (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The ontological stance taken in a research study profoundly influences how researchers approach and interpret their subject matter.

Axiology is a branch of philosophy that studies judgements about value. The researcher's values play great importance in all stages of the research process if the results are to be credible (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). One's choice of philosophical approach reflects one's values and data collection techniques (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). Value judgements may also lead to conclusions that may differ from those drawn by researchers with other values. On the other hand, epistemology is concerned with answering the question of what is regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline. Epistemology may be described as the study of what to know about the world and how to gain such knowledge. In this sense, epistemology is concerned with understanding the criteria for recognizing acceptable knowledge within any given discipline (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

In the context of marketing and social research, researchers commonly rely on specific philosophies shaped by their ontological, epistemological, and axiological viewpoints (Collis and Hussey, 2013; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The prevalent philosophies include positivism, interpretivism, and pragmatism. The upcoming section will delve into a detailed discussion of these philosophical approaches.

4.3.1 Positivism

Positivism is a philosophy that adopts the viewpoint of natural scientists. Concerning this, scholars usually deal with observable social reality, and at the end of their research, findings can be generalised. It is almost like using an accessible theory to develop hypotheses for testing and confirming them (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). According to Collis and Hussey (2013), positivism is an epistemological assumption that the presentation of reality is objective and is capable of characterisation through measurable qualities independent of a researcher and their tools. Using certain theories, elements, and evolving hypotheses are positivist research's

primary concerns and objectives (Collis and Hussey, 2013). In addition, this philosophy must be independent of the research topic, have no personal values, and use hypotheses to examine the accessible theory (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018). In positivism, according to Saunders, Lewi, and Thornhill (2019), researchers most commonly employ research methods such as experiments, surveys, and statistical analyses.

4.3.2 Interpretivism

Interpretivism is a research philosophy that focuses on understanding the subjective nature of human experiences and social phenomena. It emphasizes the importance of individuals' interpretations, meanings, and perspectives. Specifically, it argues that investigating and discovering the subjective meanings that inspire human actions can be understood because humans do things differently based on how they recognise and understand situations (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Researchers adopting interpretivism use qualitative methods like interviews, case studies, and content analysis to delve into the rich details of human experiences (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Interpretivists acknowledge their own subjectivity and practice reflexivity to ensure a deeper understanding of the complexities of human behaviour.

4.3.3 Pragmatism

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), choosing between one position and the other is somewhat unrealistic in practice. Pragmatism is a philosophical position that argues that the most important factor of the research philosophy adopted is the research question and that it is possible to work within both positivist and interpretive positions (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Pragmatism offers a strong emphasis on research questions and a belief in complementarity. That is, qualitative and quantitative approaches can be combined to complement the advantages and disadvantages present within each (Shannon-Baker, 2016). In addition, pragmatism can steer clear of philosophical debates about the nature of truth and reality but accepts that there are singular and multiple realities that are open to empirical inquiry and adapt themselves toward solving practical problems in the real world (Feilzer, 2010; Patton, 2014). Specifically, pragmatism considers what is useful — what works in a practical situation — is true; what does not work is false. Pragmatism encourages researchers to base choices on the relevance of methods “in terms of carrying us from the world of practice to the world of theory and vice-versa” (Kelemen and Rumens, 2012, p. 1) and that knowledge is complementary with action (Sorrell, 2013). In that sense, pragmatism allows the researcher to

be free of mental and practical constraints imposed by other paradigms, and researchers do not have to be prisoners of a particular research method.

Pragmatism acknowledges that no single philosophical stance or methodological approach can universally fit all research situations. Instead, it encourages researchers to take a more adaptive and inclusive perspective, drawing from various traditions and methodologies to suit the particular needs of their research. This philosophy is particularly beneficial in interdisciplinary research, as it allows for integrating diverse viewpoints and methods to address complex and multifaceted problems. Additionally, its emphasis on transferability offers a paradigm that can revise previous or create new disciplinary theories based on a particular context but is still generalizable to others (Shannon-Baker, 2016). In other words, transferability allows researchers to “investigate the factors that affect whether the knowledge we gain can be transferred to other settings” (Morgan, 2007, p. 72). It does this by considering theories, concepts, hypotheses, and research findings not in an abstract form but in terms of the roles they play as instruments of action and their practical consequences in specific contexts (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

Table 4.1 presents the main differences between positivism, interpretivism, and pragmatism in relation to ontology, epistemology, axiology, and typical methods.

Table 4.1: A comparison between interpretivism, positivism, realism, and pragmatism

	Ontology (nature of reality or being)	Epistemology (what represents acceptable knowledge)	Axiology (role of values)	Typical Methods
Positivism	Real, external, and independent of the researcher.	Observable phenomena can only provide credible data and facts, observable, measurable, and the focus is on causality and law-like generalisations.	Value-free research, the researcher is detached, objective, neutral and independent of the subject of the research.	Typically deductive, highly structured, large samples, measurement, quantitative, but can use qualitative.
Interpretivism	Socially constructed, subjective, may change and has multiple interpretations.	Social phenomena focus on the details and the reality behind these details, and they believe that theories and concepts are too simplistic.	Value-bound research, researchers are part of what is being researched, and the researcher's interpretations are key to the contribution.	Typically inductive, small samples, in-depth investigations, and qualitative analysis methods.

Pragmatism	Rich, external reality is the practical result of ideas. A flow of processes, experiences, and practices. Both objective and subjective points of view.	The practical meaning of knowledge. True theories and knowledge enable action. The focus is on the problem, practice, and relevance of problem-solving. In practice, this implies employing various data collection and interpretation methods, aiming to illuminate the problem more effectively by considering it from multiple perspectives.	The researcher's doubts and beliefs commence value-driven research. Pragmatist axiology requires the researcher to consider subjective and objective perspectives.	It can use a range of methods, i.e., mixed methods. Follows the research problem and question.
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Adapted from: Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019).

4.3.4 Current Study's Research Philosophy: Pragmatism

Pragmatism is the most suitable paradigm for this research because it offers a practical, outcome-orientated method of inquiry. It is centred on the research question, focused on the consequences of actions, and oriented towards real-world practice. As Feilzer (2010) states, "A pragmatic approach to problem-solving in the social world offers an alternative, flexible, and more reflexive guide to research design" (p. 7). Rather than constraining the methodological approach to a strict positivist or interpretative stance, researchers embracing pragmatism choose their methodology based on their beliefs (Morgan, 2007; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

Adopting a pragmatic research stance for investigating the underlying mechanism of follower sharing behaviour in the context of influencer marketing is well-justified. Being an important but relatively underexplored phenomenon, pragmatism's emphasis on practicality, flexibility, and the use of diverse research methods aligns with the multifaceted nature of the research topic. This approach allows for flexibility in selecting methods based on the specific research questions and objectives, ensuring that the most appropriate techniques are employed to address the complex aspects of sharing behaviour. By promoting the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative methods, pragmatism enables a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, considering both the depth of qualitative insights and the breadth of quantitative data (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Therefore, this study employs both positivist and interpretive perspectives, which aligns with the concept of pragmatism. Specifically, the

interpretivism perspective helps the researcher to obtain in-depth knowledge about the phenomena, whereas positivism and its characteristics (e.g., scientific methods, numbers, and measurable facts) can be used to examine the relationship between research variables.

Moreover, the idea of transferability is the central feature of pragmatism (Shannon-Baker, 2016; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). As this study investigates the underlying mechanism of follower sharing behaviour within the specific context of Saudi Arabia, it is important that the knowledge and insights generated in this study can be transferred and applied in similar cultural settings or other contexts with shared characteristics. Pragmatism's emphasis on producing knowledge that can address practical issues and challenges resonates with the nature of our research, where the goal is to develop a comprehensive understanding that is not only theoretically sound but also practically valuable.

4.4 Research Approach

The second layer in the research onion is the research approach. According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2018), there are three main approaches that researchers decide to use when conducting their research: deductive, inductive, and abductive approaches. The deduction approach is the dominant research approach in the natural sciences, where laws present the basis of explanation. With this in mind, the deductive approach is commonly associated with quantitative studies, which often have the study's particular theory guiding it, as explained by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019). For Creswell and Creswell (2018), quantitative studies incorporate the testing of objective theories by effectively exploring the relations between particular variables. As a result, when using the deductive approach, the researcher usually needs to start with the hypotheses' postulation. After this, they examine them empirically to confirm or reject them. Therefore, the use of the deductive approach is associated with the positivist paradigm (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018). Additionally, as Saunders, Lewi, and Thornhill (2019) state, quantitative research collects data through experiments or surveys.

In contrast, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) state that the inductive approach is commonly associated with qualitative research. In qualitative studies, the theory is often the product of the study itself. The researcher should understand that these studies depend on understanding people, both individuals and groups, to investigate social problems (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). When any research topic is new, and there is scarce literature available, the inductive approach is usually the appropriate choice. In contrast to the deductive approach,

the inductive approach does not usually start with the hypotheses' postulation. However, a researcher may rely on the use of research questions, tightening the scope of their research to come up with findings and conclusions. Therefore, Bell, Bryman and Harley (2018) state that the inductive approach is more inclined towards the interpretivism paradigm. Finally, according to Saunders, Lewi, and Thornhill (2019), qualitative research employs interviews, ethnography, case studies, narrative inquiry, and grounded theory to collect data.

However, in practice, these two approaches rarely occur in isolation (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018). The majority of studies combine these two approaches at the same time. This mixed approach, which is also known as an abductive approach, is used where hypotheses are formed and evaluated in such a way as to contribute to the conceptual understanding of the phenomenon and to aid the discovery of new findings, constructs, and relationships (Thagard and Shelley, 1997). Researchers seek to choose the best explanation among many alternatives to explain surprising facts identified at the start of the research process. Surprising facts may emerge when a researcher encounters an empirical phenomenon that the existing range of theories cannot explain. Unlike inductive and deductive reasoning, abductive research can explain, develop, or change the theoretical framework before, during or after the research process (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Abductive research moves back and forth between inductive and open-ended research settings to more hypothetical and deductive attempts to verify hypotheses.

Table 4.2 summarises the distinctions among deductive, inductive, and abductive approaches concerning logic, generalisability, use of data, theory, and limitations.

Table 4.2: Differences between deductive, inductive, and abductive approaches

	Deductive Approach	Inductive Approach	Abductive Approach
Logic	When the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true.	Known premises are used to generate untested conclusions.	Known premises are used to generate testable conclusions.
Generalisability	Generalising from the general to the specific.	Generalising from the specific to the general.	Generalise from the interactions between the specific and the general.

Use of data	Data collection is used to evaluate hypotheses related to an existing theory.	Data collection explores a phenomenon, identifies themes and patterns, and creates a conceptual framework.	Data collection is used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes, locate these in a conceptual framework and test this through subsequent data collection.
Theory	Theory falsification or verification.	Theory generation and building.	Theory generation or modification, incorporating existing theory, building new theory or modifying the existing theory.
Risks and weakness	Non-return of questionnaires. Lack of clarity regarding how to select theory to be tested via formulating hypotheses.	No useful data and theory emerge. No amount of empirical data will necessarily enable theory-building.	

Adapted from: Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019).

4.4.1 Current Study's Research Approach: Abduction

The selection of an abductive approach for this study, complemented by a pragmatist stance, is justified by its alignment with the research's exploratory nature. Addressing the connections between theory and data, pragmatism uses *abduction* (Shannon-Baker, 2016), which “moves back and forth between induction and deduction—first converting observations into theories and then assessing those theories through action” (Morgan, 2007, p. 71). Therefore, pragmatism as a research paradigm supports the use of mixed methods as well as abductive reasoning while being guided primarily by the researcher's desire to produce socially useful knowledge (Feilzer, 2010). This combined approach accommodates multiple perspectives and supports integrating qualitative and quantitative data, which is essential for a comprehensive understanding of sharing behaviour.

The Abductive approach is particularly appropriate when research involves constructs which are either new or where the constructs are established in one culture, but their meaning in another culture needs to be understood (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), which aligns with the current study's setting. Although the major constructs of the present study have been generated from well-established existing literature, conducting these constructs in a relatively new context (i.e., Saudi Arabia) has required it to start with an inductive research stage and then move to the deductive stage. Specifically, abduction allows the researcher to find and add new dimensions to the study's concepts (i.e., audience-related factors). The advantage of using both

induction and deduction approaches within the same study is that it offers a complementary perspective of the social world, making it even more appropriate to understand and explain the study's findings (Sorrell, 2013). Using both approaches can avoid the limitations of one approach and provide a stronger understanding of the problem or question under investigation (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

4.5 Research Strategy

The onion's third layer is research strategy (or methodological choice). According to Bryman (2016), a research strategy guides a researcher on how to conduct their study. Indeed, it is "the general plan of how the researcher will go about answering the research questions" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 600). There is no superior research strategy to another, and each has advantages and drawbacks. However, the research strategy selection should be based on the research aim, questions and objectives, the research philosophy, and the available resources such as time and money (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). In summary, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) highlight various research strategies: experiments, archival studies, case studies, interviews, surveys, action research, narrative inquiry, ethnography, and grounded theory. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) claim that experiments and surveys are mainly associated with the *quantitative* research design. However, case studies and interviews are commonly related to *qualitative* design. A mixture of both indicates a *mixed-method* research design.

4.5.1 Current Study's Research Strategy

The current study's research strategy aligns with the chosen pragmatic philosophy (between positivism and interpretivism) and the abductive approach (between deductive and inductive). Pragmatism as a research paradigm supports the use of mixed methods as well as abductive reasoning while being guided primarily by the researcher's desire to produce socially useful knowledge (Feilzer, 2010). Specifically, Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) explicitly linked pragmatism and mixed methods research. Mix methods involve utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods. Adopting both of these two methods offers this study a complementary view of the social world. Qualitative research provides rich data but may lack firm conclusions, whereas quantitative research offers precision but raises questions about the meaning of findings (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). To overcome these limitations, the current study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews, and

quantitative methods, like surveys. With a primary emphasis on quantitative methods, this combination aims to strengthen the findings' robustness.

Pragmatism strongly emphasises research questions and encourages the belief in complementarity, allowing for the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to harness the strengths of each while mitigating their respective limitations (Shannon-Baker, 2016). Solely employing a quantitative approach would risk overlooking antecedents of sharing behaviour specific to Saudi Arabian followers, while using only qualitative methods might limit the scope of the study and overlook variables unique to this distinct cultural context. Specifically, research questions suited for mixed methods are those for which one data source may be insufficient to answer, as is the case here (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). By integrating both approaches, this study ensures a more comprehensive exploration of the research topic. While the utilization of a mixed methods approach has gained traction in recent influencer marketing literature (e.g., Farivar, Wang and Turel, 2022; Wang and Huang, 2023; Gomes, Marques and Dias, 2022), its popularity is not as pronounced when examining the subject of engagement with SMIs. Therefore, it is evident that further studies are warranted.

4.6 Research Design

To conduct any research effectively, it is crucial to formulate a comprehensive design outlining the entire process. As outlined by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), a research design serves as a holistic plan that directs researchers in addressing the specific questions posed in their study. The prevalent categorization of research designs, frequently discussed in research methodology literature, includes exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive research.

Exploratory research is appropriate when a researcher needs to define the problem more precisely, where there is limited or no knowledge of the subject area, and where there is no clear apprehension about what model should be used for gaining a better understanding of the dimensions of the problem (Iacobucci and Churchill, 2018). Exploratory research is flexible and unstructured, and the focus becomes progressively narrower as the research progresses (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). In contrast to exploratory research, *explanatory* research is stricter, more planned, and more structured (Iacobucci and Churchill, 2018). It helps identify relationships between two or more variables (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Lastly, *descriptive* research is suitable for studies where the research question and problems are clear before the beginning of the study (Iacobucci and Churchill, 2018). Descriptive

research aims to portray an accurate profile of persons, events, or situations (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Descriptive research designs help answer the questions of who, what, when, where, and how associated with a particular research problem. However, these differentiations do not mean that some characteristics of the above designs cannot be joined together in some cases (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This will be discussed in detail in the next section.

4.6.1 Mixed-Methods Research Design

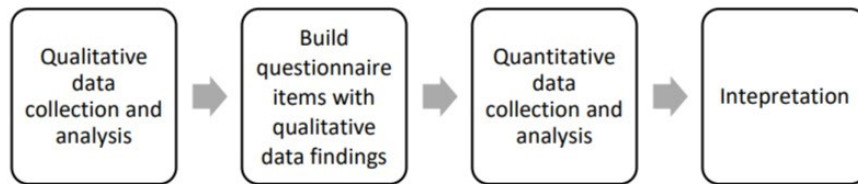
Having recognized the necessity of adopting a mixed method approach, as discussed in section 4.5, Creswell and Creswell (2018) posit that the mixed methods domain comprises three primary designs: convergent, explanatory, and exploratory sequential mixed methods. In sequential designs, one method takes precedence initially, succeeded by implementing the other (Giddings and Grant, 2006). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the choice of a particular design depends upon four criteria:

1. The nature of implementation: whether data will be collected sequentially or concurrently.
2. The priority given: whether the greater priority is given to the qualitative or quantitative approach or the two approaches are given equal status.
3. Integration of data: At which stage of the research process will the qualitative and quantitative data be integrated? For example, will it be at the stage of data collection, analysis, or interpretation?
4. Theoretical perspective: whether a particular theory guides the study.

Convergent mixed methods design collects both qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously. An explanatory sequential design starts with quantitative research, analyses the results, and then builds on them to explain them in more detail with qualitative research. It is considered explanatory because the initial quantitative results are further explained with the qualitative data. It is also considered sequential because the data collection happens in the form of a sequence where one phase follows the other (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). On the contrary, exploratory design starts with qualitative data to explore participants' views. The data are then analysed and used to build the quantitative phase. The qualitative phase may be used to build an instrument that fits the sample under study, identify appropriate instruments to use in the quantitative phase or specify variables that need to go into a quantitative phase (Creswell

and Creswell, 2018). The sequence of exploratory sequential mixed-method design is outlined in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2: Exploratory sequential design.



Adopted from: Creswell and Creswell (2018).

4.6.2 The Rationale for Adopting Exploratory Sequential Mixed-Method Design

This study is exploratory in nature because it is an initial investigation into an issue in its early stages that remains understudied in previous research. A mixed method sequential exploratory design, in which qualitative data is collected and analysed first, was chosen as the most suitable for the conducted research. Only a handful of studies in the SMI literature have opted for exploratory sequential methods (e.g., Kılıç and Gürlek, 2023). Specifically, for future influencer marketing studies, “a sequential exploratory mixed method could be utilised in the future” (Bu, Parkinson and Thaichon, 2022, p. 16).

In Chapter 2, a methodological limitation in previous studies was emphasized, particularly those that heavily relied on web-scraped data (considered as secondary data). This limitation arises because such an approach may fail to comprehensively understand the fundamental factors influencing engagement and sharing behaviour. Moreover, the inherent lack of control over the data collection process in web scraping introduces concerns regarding data quality and accuracy. It was also noted that qualitative methods, such as interviews, have been noticeably absent in previous research, making it crucial to employ them to explore and uncover additional variables that impact follower engagement behaviour. In line with the recommendations of scholars such as Vrontis et al. (2021), there is a growing need for increased integration of mixed methods in influencer marketing research. This call is especially relevant, given that mixed methods are specifically needed when investigating engagement with SMIs, as emphasized by the work of Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale (2023) and Chen, Lin and Shan (2021). Consequently, the incorporation of mixed methods, including both quantitative and qualitative data, is not only warranted but also justifiable.

Since there is limited research on influencer marketing in the Saudi context (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Fowler and Thomas, 2023), the study's first phase is qualitative in nature. In line with other qualitative studies in the field (e.g., Gomes, Marques and Dias, 2022; Chen and Lee, 2018; Ki, Chow and Li, 2022), this method aims to yield deeper insights, refining the proposed model and hypotheses. The rationale for this qualitative phase is supported by Creswell and Creswell (2018), particularly in situations where limited information on the subject exists and there is a necessity to identify variables for the following quantitative phase. In this case, the focus is on exploring and identifying variables related to audience factors in the proposed model. In the second phase, by employing a deductive approach using a close-ended survey, the study aims to develop and accept or reject hypotheses based on measurable and observable empirical evidence (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), one key advantage of using the survey method as a research strategy is that it facilitates collecting large amounts of data from large populations in a highly economical manner.

Figure 4.3 illustrates the exploratory sequential design implemented in this study, employing a two-phase research approach that initiates with qualitative methods and progresses to a quantitative method. During the first phase, data was gathered through an SLR and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was applied to the textual data derived from interviews, which was then imported into NVivo for analysis. Implementing the qualitative phase first allows for discovering emergent themes deemed important by many participants. Specifically, the participants' responses help to identify audience factors (i.e., self-efficacy and collectivism) and understand their sharing and verification behaviour. In addition, two novel items relating to self-efficacy and verification behaviour were added to their original scales. In the subsequent phase, a survey questionnaire was crafted, incorporating established measurement scales. Following this, a pre and pilot-test of the survey was conducted to refine the questionnaire design. Finally, the quantitative data was collected through an online self-administered survey and analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) via AMOS.

Figure 4.3: Stages of the Exploratory Sequential Mixed Method for the current study

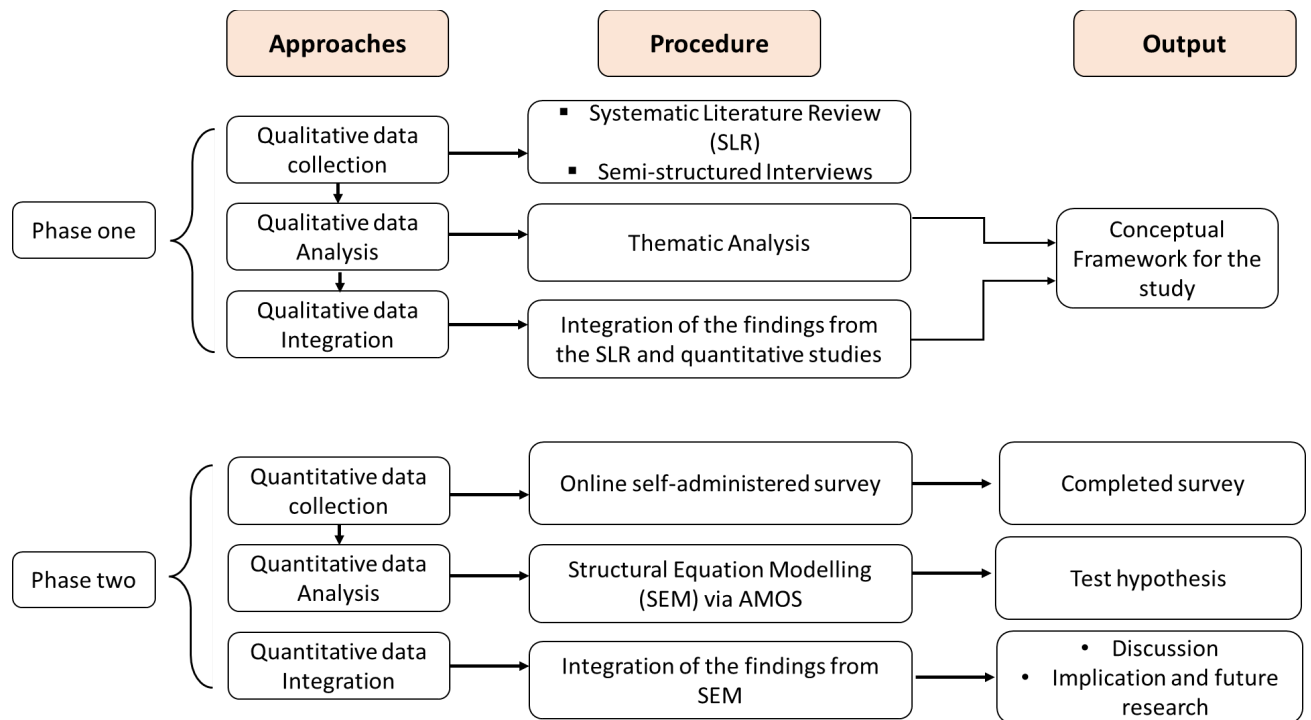


Table 4.3 provides an overview of the main stages of this research with their main characteristics and objectives. The upcoming sections will delve into detailed discussions of both phases.

Table 4.3: Overview of research methods adopted for the current study

Research Phase	Objectives	Characteristics
Qualitative study (first)	- To identify ‘audience-specific factors’ that can favourably influence followers’ sharing behaviour with SMIs. - To explore followers’ verification behaviour and how it affects their sharing behaviour.	- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 Saudis who follow SMIs. - The participants varied in their demographic information. - The participants’ responses help to identify the audience factors (i.e., self-efficacy and collectivism) and understand their sharing and verification behaviour. In addition, two novel items relating to self-efficacy and verification behaviour were added to their original scales.
Quantitative study (second)	- To establish relationships between the factors identified in the proposed framework.	- The survey-based study is utilized to empirically validate the proposed conceptual framework.

	- To test hypotheses.	- 567 responses were recorded. However, only 507 were deemed valid. - 14 out of 20 hypotheses were supported.
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4.7 Phase One: Qualitative Study

Qualitative research aims to clarify unclear or ambiguous problems (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). When a problem is described as ambiguous, the nature of that problem under investigation is unclear (Zikmund *et al.*, 2013). On some occasions, even if some facts are known, more information is needed to develop a conceptual framework that is viable in reality (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Usually, qualitative studies rely on secondary research (e.g., literature review) or qualitative approaches to data collection, such as more formal approaches (e.g., interviews and focus groups). Hence, an SLR was conducted first to gain a thorough insight into what the literature tells us.

A number of qualitative research studies have been conducted in the context of influencer marketing, as summarized in Appendix 6. In the context of Saudi Arabia, one qualitative study has been found that discusses issues related to influencer marketing and celebrity endorsement. In this study, Aljasir (2019) utilized semi-structured interviews and found that endorsements from ordinary individuals with a reasonable social media following are particularly appealing. It is noteworthy, however, that her study primarily focused on assessing the applicability of classic celebrity endorsement theories within the Saudi context. Therefore, there is a dearth of qualitative research conducted in the Saudi context.

4.7.1 The Rationale Behind the Qualitative Study

According to Hague (2006), one reason an exploratory study should be conducted in general and adopt a qualitative approach in particular is that “qualitative research can be used as an exploratory tool. Where there is uncertainty about a subject, and the researcher does not know what detailed questions to ask, a few in-depth interviews or groups may be sufficient to provide an understanding and explanations which answer the problem” (p. 81). The uncertainty that this research intends to deal with is two-fold: (1) the audience factors that stimulate follower sharing behaviour in the context of Saudi Arabia; (2) the role of followers’ verification behaviour in developing sharing behaviour. Thus, conducting a qualitative study would help develop deeper insights, improve the conceptual model, specify variables that need to go into

the quantitative phase, and give the confidence that the researcher addresses issues deemed important to the participants.

4.7.2 Qualitative Study Aim and Objectives

The literature on engagement with SMIs has suggested many factors that are important in the interaction between SMIs and followers. These factors can be categorized as the source, content, and audience. In the context of influencer marketing, where the audience's role is central (Leung *et al.*, 2022), researchers have increasingly emphasized the need to delve into audience-specific characteristics that may influence the effectiveness of SMIs (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023). According to our SLR highlighted in Chapter 2, audience factors have been given less attention in influencer marketing literature, particularly in Saudi society. Influenced by the Arab and Islamic cultures, Saudi society values religion, conservatism, tradition, and family, setting it apart from Western and Asian cultures (Leung, Sun and Asswailem, 2022). This suggests the possibility of unique audience factors in the Saudi context. Moreover, introducing verification behaviour in our study is a new addition to the influencer marketing literature, necessitating additional exploration before its inclusion in the final model. The main aim of the qualitative phase is to draw out knowledge, experiences, and insights relating to audience factors that are anticipated to influence followers' engagement behaviour. Additionally, this phase also aims to gain an understanding of their verification and sharing behaviour. The objectives of this qualitative phase are summarised below:

1. To qualitatively explore and identify audience-specific factors that may influence followers' sharing behaviour.
2. To qualitatively explore followers' verification behaviour and how it affects their sharing behaviour.

This qualitative study has adopted the qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews, as discussed in the next section.

4.7.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

In qualitative research, three types of interviews are commonly employed: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. Table 4.4 outlines the key differences among them based on the informing methodology. While some aspects of semi-structured interviews share similarities with unstructured interviews, distinctions exist: (1) semi-structured interviews deviate from

unstructured interviews by incorporating a flexible agenda or a list of themes to guide the interview; (2) in contrast, unstructured interviews are more open and resemble a conversation, lacking a predetermined set of questions, relying instead on thematic exploration to engage interviewees as co-researchers in shaping the discussion (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Specifically, semi-structured interviews are best utilized when the researcher has an idea of some questions he wants to ask but wants to empower participants to take them in another direction if necessary. Participants are known to express their views with ease when the style of the interviewing questions is deemed flexible and open-ended over interview questions that are structured and limited (Flick, 2007). In addition, semi-structured interviews offer opportunities for revealing new and unknown experiences and insights to arise from the participants' answers (Babbie, 2013).

To identify and investigate audience factors influencing follower engagement in the study and how follower verification behaviour influences sharing decisions, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather insights from Saudi Arabian followers. This qualitative research approach is widely employed, particularly when the literature lacks a clear perspective on a specific issue. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their suitability in qualitative research, especially when the literature lacks a clear perspective on a specific issue and limited existing knowledge about a phenomenon (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This aligns with the recommendations of numerous scholars in the field of engagement (e.g., Silva *et al.*, 2020; Zhou *et al.*, 2021; Fowler and Thomas, 2023), who advocate for interviews with followers as a crucial means of deepening our understanding of engagement issues.

The decision was made to conduct semi-structured interviews virtually through Zoom, leveraging its numerous advantages over in-person interviews. Virtual interviews provide heightened anonymity and confidentiality compared to on-site meetings, fostering a more open environment for participants. Additionally, they offer increased flexibility and cost savings for the interviewer and interviewee (Oliffe *et al.*, 2021). The use of virtual interviews as a qualitative research data collection medium is increasingly used by qualitative researchers (e.g., Archibald *et al.*, 2019; Gray *et al.*, 2020; Oliffe *et al.*, 2021) fundamentally because Zoom interviews can ensure authenticity to an equal extent with face-to-face interaction and interviews. The interviewer and interviewees can see each other during the interview despite being in a different location. This has the obvious benefit of convenience, allowing the

researcher to interview anyone anywhere and in the comfort of one's own space (Olliffe *et al.*, 2021).

Table 4.4: Comparison of structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews

	Structured	Semi-Structured	Unstructured
Style	Specific protocol of question and answer	Conversation-like	Conversation
Design	Structured	Semi-emergent	Emergent
Research stance	Objective	Subjective	Subjective
The consequence of the researcher's stance and perspective	Limited reflexivity	Reflexivity	Reflexivity
Exchange issues during the research process	Limited reciprocity	Reciprocity	Reciprocity
Basis of analysis	Mathematical and statistical analysis	Textual analysis	Textual analysis

Adapted from: Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) and Jennings (2005)

4.7.4 Interview Design

In interview-based qualitative research, success lies in well-crafted questions delivered through a well-structured interview guide (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This guide comprises a series of questions that steer the conversation between the interviewer and the participant. Adhering to the principles outlined by Johnson and Turner (2003) and Braun and Clarke (2006), several key principles were followed in constructing a reliable interview guide to elicit rich and detailed accounts to address the qualitative phase's objectives. The interview guide adhered to these principles by commencing with an opening question, followed by a sequence of open-ended questions that were simple, direct, and naturally progressed from general to specific. Leading questions were avoided to prevent bias and ensure participants provided genuine perspectives by maintaining neutrality and objectivity in questioning (Cairns-Lee, Lawley and Tosey, 2022).

The initial conceptual framework, derived from the literature review and research gaps, informed the design of the interview guide (Priporas, Stylos and Fotiadis, 2017), comprising ten questions with preambles for clarity. Prompts and probes were strategically incorporated to

encourage elaboration (McCracken, 1988) and guide the expected level of response (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). The interview guide is organized into six sections. The first addresses participant demographics, the second includes ice-breaking questions about participants' favourite SMI and content update frequency, the third delves into participants' sharing behaviour, the fourth explores audience-specific characteristics influencing SMI engagement, the fifth examines participants' verification behaviour, and the sixth concludes the interview by inviting participants to share any final thoughts. In alignment with the objectives of this qualitative phase, special emphasis was placed on audience factors and verification behaviour due to a recognized deficiency in previous studies on these subjects. The full interview guide is available in Appendix 7.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were briefed on the purpose of the research and told that each interview should last approximately 15 – 30 minutes (determined through two pilot interviews). Once the participants agree to participate in the research, they are informed that they must sign the consent form to start the interview (see Appendix 8). After the consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded using Zoom's recording feature to increase the accuracy of data collection since it permits the interviewer to be more attentive to the interviewee (Priporas, Stylos and Fotiadis, 2017) and permits verbatim transcription. After the introductory questions, utilizing a smartphone, the researcher conducted a live demonstration of the content-sharing process on social media platforms tailored to participants' preferences based on the app they use to follow SMIs. This practical demonstration was implemented to ensure an understanding of the discussed topic and to facilitate a clearer dialogue about participants' experiences with content sharing.

The interviews were conducted in Arabic, the native language of the participants, making it easier for participants to communicate without language barriers. The interviews were immediately transcribed in Arabic after each was completed, even if other interviews were still pending. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the data, guiding, and directing subsequent interviews. To ensure that no information is overlooked, the researcher listened to the recording while simultaneously referring to the corresponding transcription. After the transcripts were translated into English (refer to Section 4.10), they were uploaded to NVivo (refer to Section 4.7.9), which greatly facilitated the coding process by enabling the tagging and naming of specific text segments within the data. To ensure anonymity, the participants' names were substituted with coded numbers.

The researcher decided not to provide the participants with copies of their transcripts for verification and accuracy. This decision was influenced by several factors. First, ensuring the spontaneous and honest nature of responses was a priority, as sharing transcripts could lead participants to alter or second-guess their initial statements, potentially introducing bias (Seidman, 2006). Second, the study relied on a rigorous transcription process involving audio recordings and detailed notetaking. To ensure no information was overlooked, the researcher reviewed the recordings while concurrently cross-referencing them with the transcriptions, thereby maintaining accuracy and fidelity to the original responses. Third, practical considerations of the research timeline and resource allocation also played a role; the additional step of transcript verification would have required substantial time and resources, which were not feasible within the constraints of the study. Lastly, potential respondent fatigue or disinterest in the verification process could compromise the quality of the feedback received, thereby undermining the reliability of the data (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). These rationales collectively justify the methodological choice to omit respondent transcript verification while maintaining the integrity and robustness of the research findings.

4.7.5 Sampling

In this study's qualitative and quantitative phases, careful consideration was given to sampling procedures. In the qualitative phase, convenience sampling was employed for its practicality in accessing engaging participants. However, the heart of our sampling strategy lies in the quantitative phase, where a more detailed examination of sampling procedures is provided (see Section 4.8.4).

According to Bryman (2016), one may use a non-probability sampling frame when a population's sampling frame is inaccessible. Specifically, in the absence of a sampling frame, a researcher may resort to convenience choice-based sampling (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Convenience sampling is widespread in marketing and has been employed in qualitative influencer marketing studies (e.g., Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). Therefore, consistent with previous research, the researcher utilized convenience sampling to obtain easy access to the participants, availability at a given time, and willingness to participate in the interviews (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016). This study's target population is Saudi Arabian individuals who follow at least one SMI and are above 18 years old.

In qualitative research, a smaller participant sample size is typically sufficient, contrasting with the larger samples often required in quantitative studies. Qualitative research aims to gather in-depth information, exploring the complexity, depth, variation, or context surrounding a phenomenon rather than aiming for population representation as in quantitative research. The concept of information power supports this approach, suggesting that as the participant sample size decreases, the amount of information each participant contributes increases, thus requiring a lower number of participants (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). While an initial estimate of the participant sample size is necessary, ongoing evaluation during the research process ensures the adequacy of the final sample size (ibid).

Various recommendations exist for determining sample sizes in qualitative research, influenced by factors such as research purpose, design, accessibility, and available resources. For instance, Kuzel (1992) suggested a range of 5 to 20 participants, while (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) proposed 25 to 30. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) recommended 15 to 20 participants. In the context of qualitative influencer marketing studies, which often rely on semi-structured interviews, typical sample sizes range from 15 to 18 participants (e.g., Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Coco and Eckert, 2020; Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019). However, the predominant criterion for determining adequate qualitative sample sizes is saturation (Bowen, 2008), indicating the point where data collection ceases to reveal new information (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). In this regard, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) suggested that saturation is typically achieved with 4 to 12 participants, while Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) proposed that it occurs after approximately 12 interviews. Aligned with these considerations, the study applied the principle of data saturation, determining that a sample size of 21 participants met the saturation criterion and provided an understanding of participants' interactions and experiences with SMIs.

4.7.6 Invitation

To declare the study to the public and recruit participants needed for the interviews, the researcher reached out to two Saudi SMIs: Mohammed Abdulrahman (with +900k followers at the time of data collection) and Fahad Alyahya (with +100k followers at the time of data collection). The selection of these SMIs aimed to capture diverse perspectives, representing the macro and micro-influencer categories. Specifically, Mohammed Abdulrahman represents the macro-influencer category, while Fahad Alyahya represents the micro-influencer category. This strategic choice allows for insights into contrasting approaches, considering high reach

but low engagement (macro) versus low reach but high engagement (micro) likelihood (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023). The SMIs shared an invitation on their Snapchat Story sections (similar to Instagram stories), prompting interested followers to contact the researcher via email or WhatsApp. After expressing interest, participants received an invitation letter (see Appendix 9) with the attached consent form (see Appendix 8). Upon obtaining consent, a unique virtual Zoom interview link was created for each participant.

4.7.7 Pilot Study

Pilot studies are commonly associated with the quantitative approach for testing research instruments. However, their significance has been extended to qualitative approaches, serving to prepare for the main study (Priporas, Stylos and Fotiadis, 2017). In the context of qualitative research, pilot tests ensure the content's relevance, clarity, and readability (Priporas and Poimenidis, 2008).

Before conducting the pilot test, two Saudi SMIs were invited, Mohammed Abdulrahman (with +900k million followers) and Fahad Alyahya (with +100k followers), to review the interview guide for clarity and comprehension and to provide any suggestions for additional content. Both SMIs confirmed possessing more than five years of experience in influencer marketing tactics, demonstrating their expertise in the field. Based on their input, certain questions were reworded for enhanced clarity. Additionally, aligning with previous qualitative research studies in the field (e.g., Aljasir, 2019), two academic staff members from Middlesex University of London, specializing in marketing, reviewed the interview guide, leading to edits in some questions based on their informative feedback.

The pilot study involved a small sample size of two interviews. Specifically, two interviews were conducted with one male and one female participant representing an eligible sample. According to Turner (2010), pilot studies in qualitative research often use small sample sizes to test and refine interview guides. This small sample size was sufficient for preliminary testing but is acknowledged as a limitation later in this study. Despite the limited number of participants, the pilot study provided valuable insights that helped refine the interview guide. During the actual study, which involved 21 interviews, it was observed that participants did not ask for any clarifications regarding the interview questions. This suggests that the questions were clear and well-understood, a positive outcome attributed to the effectiveness of the pilot study. The absence of requests for clarification during the actual study provides assurance that

the pilot interviews successfully served their purpose in validating the clarity and comprehensibility of the interview questions.

After the two participants agreed to take part in the pilot study, they were informed of the pilot-testing process and its purpose and were then conveniently recruited. Direct feedback from participants led to a few adjustments regarding the wording and structure of some of the questions provided. Specifically, (1) ‘frequency of post’ questions confused participants because it was difficult for participants to give an exact answer. To avoid speculations, this question was dropped. (2) The researcher initially intended to ask participants whether they could distinguish between sponsored and non-sponsored posts to enrich our understanding of verification behaviour. Participant 01 insisted: “How would I know?” while participant 02 laughed: “Of course we know”. Based on those conflicting answers, the researcher decided to remove this question to avoid further confusion. In addition, some questions related to audience attributes and verification behaviour were repetitive in different ways, which made those parts unclear. Therefore, the researcher decided to re-word those questions. Consequently, questions were simplified and restructured. The pilot stage also provided insights into time requirements and assessed the interviewer’s skills.

4.7.8 Data Analysis

In the qualitative study, the analysis of semi-structured interviews utilized thematic analysis as the chosen methodological approach. This approach aims to identify emerging themes within the dataset and applies to both large and small qualitative datasets (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). A theme is defined as a “broad category appropriating several codes that appear to be related to one another” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 657). Thematic analysis is characterized by its flexibility and adaptability, allowing researchers to transition between different research approaches without being tied to a specific research philosophy (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Specifically, thematic analysis is useful for researchers with little or no experience because it is a simple and adaptable approach that can be quickly learned and applied (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Recognized for its flexibility compared to other qualitative analyses (Braun and Clarke, 2006), thematic analysis is widely used in the influencer marketing context (e.g., Al-Emadi and Ben Yahia, 2020; Djafarova and Bowes, 2021).

According to Saunders, Lewi, and Thornhill (2019), thematic analysis involves a set of guidelines: familiarizing oneself with the data, data coding, searching for themes, and refining

themes. Initially, data familiarization occurs through readings of the data. Subsequently, coding is implemented to categorize data with related meanings, involving the labelling of each unit of data within a data item. This process includes breaking down original data items and regrouping units with similar meanings, which may be derived from existing theory or developed from the data. Following this, the researcher searches for patterns and relationships in the list of codes to create a concise list of themes. After developing these themes, codes should be reorganized under themes or sub-themes. Lastly, the researcher creates a report of the findings after connecting them to the study's objectives (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

There are two types of coding for thematic analysis: deductive and inductive (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). As Creswell and Creswell (2018) demonstrated, deductive or a priori coding begins with a set of pre-established codes and applies them to the data set. In other words, deductive codes are applied to match the proposed relationships in the initial conceptual framework and identified in the literature with the actual data of the qualitative study findings. Inductive coding works in reverse, as the researcher creates a set of codes based on the data. In other words, the codes emerge from the data. Inductive codes are used to develop new themes that may provide new insights from the findings. The choice between deductive and inductive codes depends on the study's design. Studies driven by a theoretical or conceptual framework might use deductive codes, while qualitative studies often utilize inductive codes. This study employed a hybrid coding approach, commencing with a set of deductive (a priori) codes while remaining open to inductive (emerging) codes. The study initially had hypotheses and pre-planned concepts drawn from existing literature. However, the researcher remained open to discovering insights and themes from participants' experiences, particularly regarding their own characteristics, which is referred to as audience factors.

To decide if a theme is robust, a certain theme must show some degree of patterned answers and importance in the data set. This has raised the question about the acceptable size of a theme. For example, at what level is a repeated answer or something of importance within the data to be accepted as a theme; both within a single unit of data and across the entire collected data? Frequent occurrences of the theme are desirable within the data. However, more occurrences do not particularly convey the theme to be more important. In qualitative analysis, there is no definitive and quick solution to the query of what percentage of the data set required an indication of the theme to be counted as one (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Similarly, a theme is

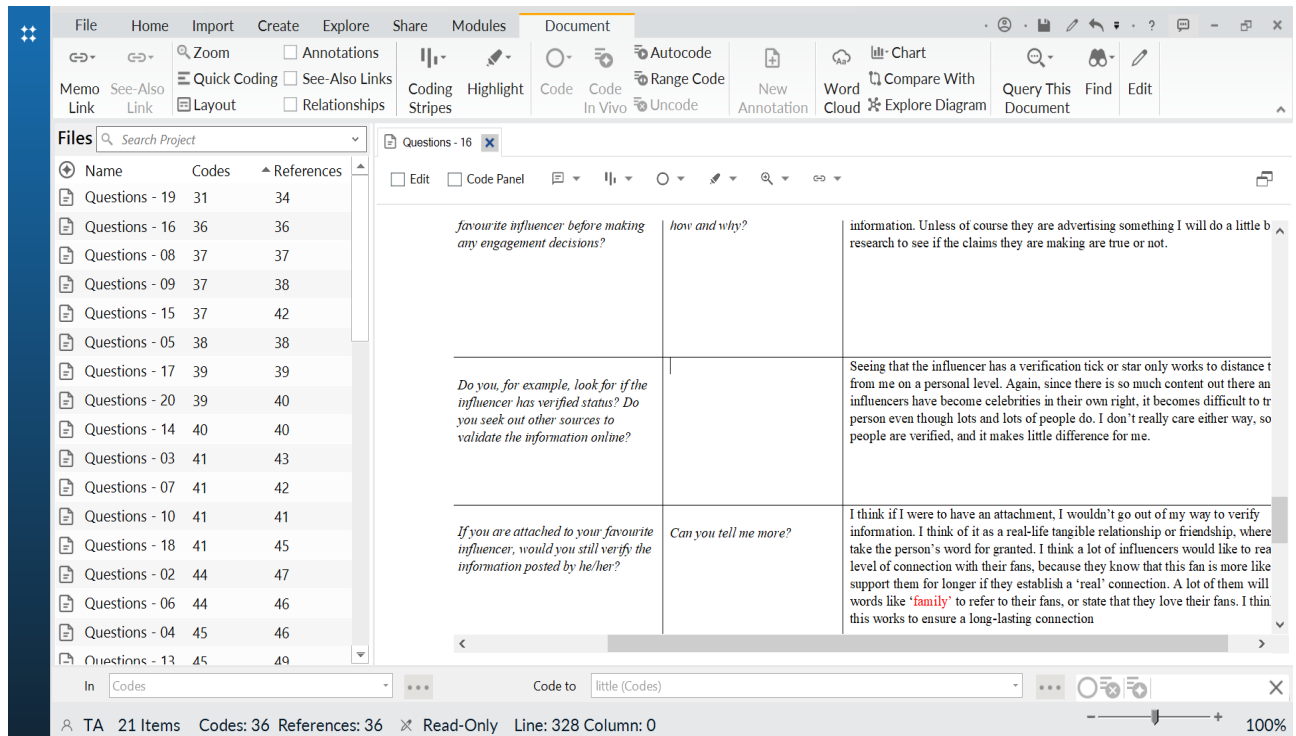
not merely an occurrence mentioned by several data units and is not the case when only mentioned once or twice. Therefore, researcher knowledge is crucial to conclude what a theme is.

Furthermore, it is not how frequently a theme is mentioned but if it finds something essential relating to the research objective (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes for this study were decided mainly based on the frequency level of the repeated answers within the transcripts. However, consideration was given to the emergence of strong connections between the essence of a possible theme and the objectives set beforehand. Thematic analysis has been known for its flexibility in enabling the researcher to interpret themes with no strict roles (Braun and Clarke, 2006). What is important, however, is that the themes chosen should have consistency and relevancy relating to the study under analysis.

4.7.9 NVivo as an Analytical Tool

Qualitative research often generates substantial textual data in the form of transcripts, so analysing such data can be time-consuming. The utilization of CAQDAS (Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software) provides several advantages for analytical procedures, contributing to continuity, increased transparency, and enhanced methodological rigour (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). NVivo is a widely used qualitative data management program known for its compatibility with various research designs and analysis methods, including grounded theory, content analysis, thematic analysis, literature review, mixed methods, and more (Zamawe, 2015). Importantly, NVivo helps minimize coding subjectivity, thereby enhancing study rigour and quality (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019). Researchers in influencer marketing have also employed NVivo in their studies (e.g., Zhou *et al.*, 2021; Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019). In this research, after transcription completion and translation (see section 4.10), interview transcripts in Word files were imported into NVivo version 12 to manage the transcribed data efficiently and prepare for analysis. Figure 4.5 displays a screenshot of one interview imported into NVivo 12.0 for analysis.

Figure 4.4: A screenshot of one of the interviews imported to NVivo 12.0 for analysis



4.7.10 The Quality of Qualitative Research

In qualitative studies, the terms validity and reliability, commonly used in quantitative research, are redefined as quality, rigour, dependability, and transferability to describe the credibility and believability established in qualitative analysis (Hair, Ortinau and Harrison, 2010). This research employs various methods to ensure the quality of qualitative study findings. Firstly, two marketing experts and two Saudi Arabian SMIs were invited to review the interview guide, ensuring clarity and participant suitability. Secondly, participants were assured that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point during the interview. Thirdly, the interview approach is flexible, treating questions as non-final and allowing for alternative or additional questions based on the interview discussion flow (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Fourthly, the researcher ensured that the transcripts accurately reflected the recorded discussions from the interviews. Fifthly, using NVivo minimizes coding subjectivity, enhancing study rigour and quality (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019). Finally, the qualitative study phase is followed by quantitative data collection to validate or refute research hypotheses developed based on qualitative study findings (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

4.8 Phase Two: Survey-based Study

This section outlines the second and main research phase, a quantitative cross-sectional survey with followers of SMIs in Saudi Arabia. The phase aims to empirically test the conceptual framework and the proposed hypotheses.

A self-administered survey is a data collection technique in which the respondents read survey questions and record their responses without the presence of a researcher (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Surveys, as informed by Bell, Bryman and Harley (2018) and Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), are a fast, easy, and cost-effective way of collecting data from a large number of sample respondents. Additionally, structured or close-ended questions ensure consistency in the questions' context for all respondents, as Hair *et al.* (2019) highlighted. Structured questions are favoured as they are respondent-friendly and reduce researcher bias (Frazer and Lawley, 2000). The participants are given several fixed answers, making analysing and interpreting such collected information much easier. Moreover, a survey questionnaire can reach a large number of the target population and can be delivered in various ways, such as verbally by telephone, electronically as an email attachment, or as online web links (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

A questionnaire enables a researcher to examine and explain relationships between variables (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Although one might argue that experiments offer control over variables and the ability to establish cause-and-effect relationships, they might not be suitable for initial exploratory studies or when the phenomena are complex and multi-dimensional. As such, surveys were chosen in this study to capture behaviours without directly inferring causality. This approach allows for a broad exploration of the phenomenon, providing foundational insights and informing future experimental studies that could establish more causal relationships.

In survey strategies, multiple data collection methods exist, including face-to-face and telephone interviews, mail questionnaires, and online surveys, among other variants (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Selecting the most efficient tool involves weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each method against the study's objectives. In this phase, an extensive empirical investigation is intended to validate a conceptual model and hypotheses, for which a self-administered online survey was chosen as the data collection method, as detailed in the following section.

4.8.1 The Rationale for Using an Online Survey Questionnaire

The most frequently used survey method today in marketing research is an online survey, which collects data using the Internet (Hair *et al.*, 2019). There are several advantages to using an online survey. For example, there is no cost of copying surveys or buying postage, making it easy, fast, and cost-effective. Moreover, the results are almost immediately ready for statistical analysis as there is coding for each question and answer (Lefever, Dal and Matthíasdóttir, 2007; Hewson, Vogel and Laurent, 2016). Online surveys are mostly created using online survey creation software offered by businesses like SurveyMonkey.com and Google.com. Furthermore, the functional abilities of survey websites, such as randomising the order of questions within a group, avoiding respondents' skip questions, and graphic and animation capabilities, are helpful for a researcher to collect data effectively. Moreover, respondents are more comfortable providing honest and insightful responses as their identity is not revealed, and they are free to complete the survey at their convenience and have time to think about the answers (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In addition, a questionnaire can collect data from wide and distant geographical areas (*ibid.*).

According to Lehdonvirta *et al.* (2021), online surveys are suggested for exploratory research on emerging topics like SMIs (Cabeza-Ramírez *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, our SLR highlights a growing body of online survey-based studies focused on engagement with SMIs (e.g., Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022; Gupta, Mahajan and Dash, 2023). As a result, this research aligns with these studies and opt for an online survey-based approach. To facilitate this approach, Survey Monkey was utilized for questionnaire design, leveraging its accessibility as a cost-free resource provided by the researcher's university.

4.8.2 Survey-based Study Questions and Objectives

The main fieldwork of this PhD investigation is a comprehensive survey-based study intended to examine the relationships between the factors highlighted within the proposed framework, as outlined in the research aim, questions, objectives, and hypotheses detailed in Table 1.1. The insights gathered from the SLR in Chapter 2 and the semi-structured interviews in Chapter 5 contributed to informing the conceptual framework and developing questionnaire items for this survey phase. Consequently, this survey study aims to test and validate the framework proposed in this research. The survey's questions, which this study seeks to address, are expounded upon as follows:

1. What source, content, and audience factors directly influence followers' sharing behaviour and the development of PSR with SMIs?
2. How does PSR mediate the relationship between source, content, and audience factors and sharing behaviour?
3. How does followers' verification behaviour moderate the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour?

In order to address the research questions, this study pursued the following quantitative objectives:

1. Identify and examine the direct effects of source factors (i.e., popularity and authenticity), content factors (i.e., creativity and quality), and audience factors (i.e., self-efficacy and collectivism) on followers' sharing behaviour and the development of PSR.
2. Assess the mediating role of PSR between source, content, and audience factors and sharing behaviour.
3. Evaluate the moderating effect of verification behaviour on the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour.

4.8.3 Survey Design

Creating a well-designed questionnaire is crucial in gathering the precise data required to address research questions and achieve objectives (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018). It significantly impacts response rates and the reliability and validity of the collected data. To enhance these aspects, considerations from Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) must be taken into account: (1) Thoughtful construction of individual questions, (2) A visually appealing and clear layout, (3) Providing a clear purpose, (4) Pilot testing, and (5) Carefully planned administration. In this study, the questionnaire's design, conducted through an online survey using Survey Monkey, is based on an updated conceptual framework. This framework assesses the relationship between source, content, audience factors, and sharing behaviour, mediated by PSR and moderated by verification behaviour.

To enhance inclusivity and accommodate diverse respondent preferences, respondents were given the option to choose between the English and Arabic languages in the questionnaire. The introductory page outlines the survey's purpose and emphasizes confidentiality and voluntary participation. To encourage participation, a \$50 Amazon gift card was offered. Respondents

were informed that the survey is expected to take around 12 minutes to complete, a duration estimated based on the pilot study. The initial survey section comprises screening questions to determine eligibility. To qualify, respondents must be native Saudis, over 18, and actively follow at least one SMI. Ineligible respondents were screened out from the survey, whilst eligible respondents had the chance to move on to the next section of the survey. Consistent with previous studies in the field (e.g., De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Gamage and Ashill, 2023; Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023), a short definition of SMIs was offered to help respondents better understand the context of the survey.

Afterwards, and consistent with other studies in the field of influencer marketing (e.g., Yuan and Lou, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2022; Ki, Chow and Li, 2022), participants were asked to name their favourite SMI that they have been following for the last three months. The name of that SMI was automatically embedded into the rest of the survey questions. The time frame of three months is based on the concept of PSR. Similar to previous studies, it assumes that three months is enough to develop and strengthen a PSR with a particular SMI (Hsu, 2020; Bi and Zhang, 2022). Followers with longer relationships are more likely to establish greater PSR with the SMI and hence, develop greater sharing behaviour (Farivar, Wang and Turel, 2022). Thus, this method allows for measuring PSR with an SMI in which respondents can recall best, potentially contributing to a more accurate measurement of PSR.

Respondents were also asked to specify the primary social media platform they used to follow their selected SMI. The chosen platform was automatically embedded to survey questions related to self-efficacy. Different platforms have varying features and engagement styles. Allowing participants to select the platform they primarily use ensures that the survey questions are relevant to their actual experiences on that platform. These platforms include Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Previous studies indicate that YouTube (Munnukka *et al.*, 2019), Instagram (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020), and TikTok (Yang and Ha, 2021) are the most commonly used platforms by SMIs. Moreover, given the significant popularity of Snapchat in Saudi Arabia, as outlined in Statista's (2021b) report, it is essential to consider Snapchat due to our study's primary focus on Saudi participants. Additionally, scholars like Fowler and Thomas (2023) and Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale (2023) suggest expanding influencer marketing research to multiple platforms. Therefore, instead of concentrating solely on one platform, four commonly used platforms by SMIs—Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok—were incorporated in the survey.

The subsequent section of the survey asked about source factors, including popularity and authenticity; content factors, including creativity and quality; and audience factors, including self-efficacy and collectivism. Following this, respondents responded to survey questions related to PSR, sharing behaviour, and verification behaviour. Concluding the survey, the final section gathered demographic data from the respondents. The survey's design ensured that respondents completed all items for each variable, utilizing a friendly error prompt for unanswered questions (e.g., "This question requires an answer") in order to reduce missing data. However, if a respondent exits the survey before completion, their data will still be recorded but marked as incomplete and missing. An attention question was also integrated to assess respondents' focus during the survey (e.g., "What was this study about? Dogs, Lions, Tigers, Social Media Influencers"). Respondents who inaccurately responded to the attention check were excluded from the data analysis to maintain the quality and integrity of the results (Hugh *et al.*, 2022).

Several elements in the questionnaire design were implemented to minimise the potential impact of various response biases. Initially, items assessing the specified drivers and outcomes were placed apart using page breaks. This approach aimed to establish theoretical and cognitive separation, thereby reducing the likelihood of self-generated validity issues (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). To address the potential threat of Common Method Bias (CMB), several measures were adopted, including using a question randomizer, an attention check question, ensuring respondent anonymity and confidentiality, and maintaining question clarity (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Additionally, survey items were formulated in a straightforward manner, adhering to the convention in the literature (e.g., Dwivedi *et al.*, 2016), thereby minimizing respondent confusion that could lead to response errors or item non-response. Lastly, the voluntary nature of respondents' participation and the assurance of respondent anonymity were affirmed to address social desirability bias. The English version of the survey questionnaire is included in Appendix 12, while the Arabic version is in Appendix 13.

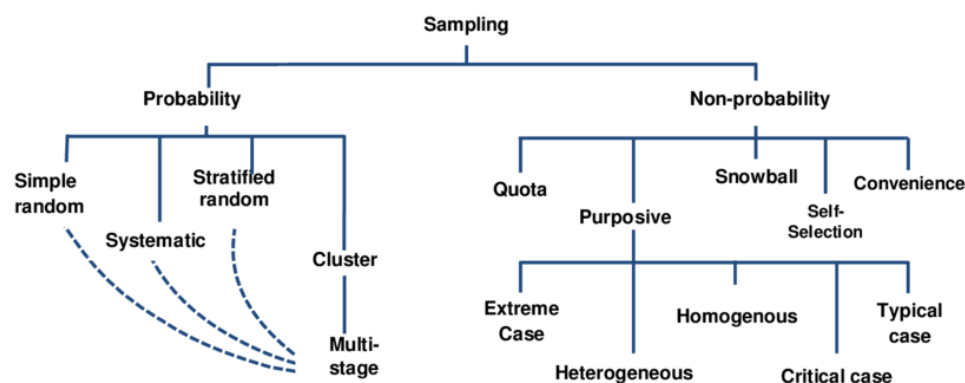
4.8.4 Sampling

Researchers must communicate as much as possible with individuals who may influence their research topic to gain as much information as possible that satisfies the research objectives. However, reaching a wide population and questioning every unit seems difficult or almost impossible (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Therefore, researchers employ sampling methods to effectively estimate the entire population's characteristics. Bell, Bryman and Harley

(2018) define the population as the complete set of units from which a sample is drawn. Sampling includes methods that yield results based on measurements derived from the population (Zikmund *et al.*, 2013). By adhering to specific statistical protocols, researchers can forego selecting each item within a population, as a well-constructed sample should reflect the population's attributes as a whole (*ibid*). Hence, careful sample selection is crucial to produce results that can be generalized to the entire targeted population.

Figure 4.6 illustrates the branching of the sampling design into two main categories: probability and non-probability, as detailed by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019). Probability sampling, also referred to as random sampling, ensures that each case within the population has a known and usually equal chance of being selected, hence generating a representative sample. Moreover, the population must be known (Zikmund *et al.*, 2013). This method allows for equal consideration of all individuals in the population, selected randomly through simple, systematic, stratified, or cluster sampling techniques depending on the research objectives (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Conversely, non-probability sampling involves an unknown chance of selection for each case within the overall population, resulting in a non-representative, judgmental sample. With this method, the population might be unknown or inaccessible for random selection, necessitating alternative techniques such as quota, purposive, snowball, or convenience sampling to collect data. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) advocate for carefully selecting the most suitable sampling technique, considering factors like research type, representativeness, costs, and controllability of the sample.

Figure 4.5: Sampling Techniques



Adopted from: Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019)

4.8.4.1 *The Rationale for Adopting Non-probability Convenience and Snowball Sampling*

This study's target population is native Saudis, over 18, who actively follow at least one SMI. However, due to the extensive range and complexity of the Saudi populace, obtaining a probability-based sample frame proves challenging. According to Al-Jabri and Sohail (2012), acquiring probabilistic samples within Saudi Arabia presents difficulties due to the unavailability of comprehensive sampling frames, such as postal address systems, electoral registers, or telephone directories covering the entire population. Moreover, the major crowdsourcing platforms dedicated to survey research, like Mturk or Prolific, do not have a large number of workers from Saudi Arabia (Leung, Sun and Asswailem, 2022). Given the population's large size and widespread nature, accessing the target sample utilizing a probability sampling method seemed difficult and impractical in this case (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Therefore, in situations where accessing a sampling frame of the population is challenging, (Bryman, 2016) suggests employing a non-probability sampling approach.

Bias is a primary concern when data are gathered through non-probability sampling, raising questions about the sample's representativeness (a limitation addressed later in Chapter 8). Probability sampling, characterized by random selection, is designed to achieve a more balanced representation. However, because of the large size and widespread nature of the population that uses social platforms to follow SMIs in Saudi Arabia, our study adopted non-probability techniques, specifically convenience and snowball sampling. These techniques, as noted by Cabeza-Ramírez et al. (2022), are well-suited for exploratory research. They aid in comprehending a phenomenon in its initial stages, allowing the development of new research questions and refining applied methods.

Convenience sampling depends on reaching respondents who are readily available and meet the basic criteria (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019), which is consistent with past studies that investigate the behaviour and the perception of SMIs' followers (e.g., Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Sánchez-Fernández and Jiménez-Castillo, 2021; Chen, Lin and Shan, 2021; Leung, Sun and Asswailem, 2022). According to Hair et al. (2019), convenience sampling is one of the most widely used, quick, and cost-effective data collection methods in business and marketing research. In addition, and similar to the procedure used by other studies in the field (e.g., Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Esteban-Santos *et al.*, 2018; Gomes, Marques and Dias, 2022), respondents will be encouraged to share the questionnaire

on their social networks and forward it to their contacts who share similar characteristics or experiences to create a snowball effect. The snowball method stems from the analogy of a snowball, which begins small but becomes bigger and bigger as it rolls downhill (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). These two procedures allow us to harness the power of social media to reach a broad set of eligible units easily and cheaply.

4.8.4.2 Sample Size

Determining an appropriate sample size before commencing the primary data collection phase holds significant importance. Several elements, including model complexity, analytical techniques, and the analysis software, influence the choice of sample size. According to scholars like Hair et al. (2019), when employing SEM, the sample size should typically range from 150 to 400 respondents, depending on the framework's variables. Specifically, the same authors recommend an extensive sample of around 500 respondents for models involving six or more variables. Additionally, Kline (2015) asserted that a complex path model necessitates a sample size of 200 or more. Tabachnick and Fidell (2019) suggested a minimum of 300 cases for factor analysis, while Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and Field (2018) recommended considering 5–10 respondents per measurement item. Further, according to Lodico, Spauldin and Voegtler (2010), in cases where the population is greater than 5,000 people, a minimum sample size of 350 is adequate.

Based on the discussion above and similar to previous engagement studies in the field (e.g., Gupta, Mahajan and Dash, 2023), a guideline of 10 observations per item was adopted. More specifically, Hair et al. (2019) suggest that the sample size for performing multivariate data analysis should be at least 10 observations for each variable. Based on this suggestion, the sample size for the current study should be at least 410 (41 variables * 10). Moreover, similar to the works of Chen, Lin, and Shan (2021), the sample size calculator by Qualtrics was used with the Saudi population size of 32.2 million, a 95% confidence level, and a 5% margin of error. The results indicated that the minimum sample size should be 385 responses.

The data collection took place between May and June 2023, resulting in 567 responses. Out of these, 507 responses were deemed suitable for analysis. The exclusion of 60 respondents was based on incomplete submissions, incorrect attention question responses, or outliers, as elaborated in Chapter 6. Hence, the effective sample of 507 respondents surpasses the recommended size, signifying its appropriateness for the forthcoming data analysis.

4.8.5 Survey Distribution

During the pilot study phase (Section 4.8.8), the survey questionnaire was distributed with the help of two SMIs. However, a different method was employed in the main field study to avoid duplication among respondents and minimize biases linked to specific followers. The main survey was distributed across diverse social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter (now known as X), WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Instagram.

Initially, the survey link was shared among the researcher's Facebook and Twitter contacts, accompanied by a polite request to further circulate the survey link on their personal social media platforms. Additionally, the survey was distributed within various WhatsApp groups where the researcher held connections after receiving authorization from the group administrators to adhere to group guidelines. With memberships exceeding 700 individuals in some groups, this method aimed to leverage the large group settings to attract a substantial number of respondents. Expanding the outreach, the survey link was also shared among the researcher's Snapchat and Instagram contacts, encouraging them to forward the link to their own connections, facilitating a snowball effect for wider circulation. To encourage participation, the researcher offered two \$50 Amazon gift cards as incentives, leading to around 50% of respondents providing their email addresses at the end of the survey for entry into the prize draw.

Utilizing the expansive scope of diverse social media platforms allows this research to access a more extensive pool of potential respondents with varied demographic traits and social media preferences, distinct from the followers of a single SMI. This approach enriches the sample's diversity and representativeness. Moreover, employing social media for respondent recruitment aligns with the study's focus on social media users as followers of SMIs. This method proved effective, yielding a total of 567 responses, with 507 deemed valid for analysis.

4.8.6 Measurements

After reviewing the literature for existing constructs and conducting the qualitative study, initial measurement items were established for each construct. To ensure content validity (Iacobucci and Churchill, 2018), most of the items selected for this research were mainly adapted from previous studies published in peer-reviewed journals, which are proven reliable and valid. Using items from previous research is useful because the researcher will use developed and tested variables (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Specifically, using tested, proven

measures enhances the validity and keeps this research in line with previous studies. The selection of items should follow the conceptual definition of the constructs, and only those items that best fit the definition should be selected (Anastasi, 1986). Moreover, Hair et al. (2019) suggested that during SEM analysis, every variable should have a minimum of three items. Likewise, Iacobucci and Churchill (2018) recommend that a variable should employ multiple items to minimise the high levels of measurement error associated with single-item scales. Thus, this study decided to have no fewer than three items for each variable in the framework because lower-item scales may have inbuilt measurement error, and the response produced by such scales may not be reliable (Iacobucci and Churchill, 2018).

All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree), consistent with the original adopted scales. The 7-point Likert scale is most commonly used in the influencer marketing literature (e.g., Lou and Yuan, 2019; Lou and Kim, 2019; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a; Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmsted, 2018). It is suggested that seven-point Likert items were more accurate, easier to use, and better reflected respondents' true evaluation, especially questionnaires such as those used in usability evaluations, developing a new summative scale, and a satisfaction survey (Finstad, 2010). In contrast, the 5-point Likert response scale has been criticized for providing insignificant systematic damage scale reliability (Cummins and Gullone, 2000). In addition, the 5-point items might not accurately measure participant responses and are not sensitive enough to capture a usability test (Finstad, 2010). Therefore, 7-point Likert scale was utilized.

Popularity was measured using a four-item scale derived from the work of Ladhari, Massa and Skandrani (2020). This scale assesses respondents' perceptions of the SMI's level of popularity. Higher scores suggest a higher perceived popularity, indicating the likelihood of the SMI being a macro- or mega-influencer. Conversely, lower scores suggest lower popularity, aligning with the likelihood of the SMI being a micro-influencer ($\alpha = .94$). The assessment of perceived SMI *authenticity* used four items adapted from Zhang et al. (2023). This instrument was designed to measure followers' perceptions of the authenticity of their preferred SMI. It aligns with our conceptualization of perceived authenticity, focusing on the perception that the SMI acts in accordance with their true self, adheres to their values, and earns trust through a genuine and honest persona ($\alpha = 0.93$). *Creativity* was measured with the help of a four-item scale adapted from the study of Cheung et al. (2022a). This scale measures the extent to which the content is unique, intriguing, surprising, and out of the ordinary, with higher scores

reflecting greater creativity and lower scores indicating lower creativity ($\alpha = 0.85$). Content *quality* was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Magno (2017) that measures the extent to which the content is deemed accurate, reliable, updated, and provides high-quality information, with higher scores indicating greater quality and lower scores representing lower quality ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Three *self-efficacy* items were borrowed from Zhou (2012), initially designed for the tourism context, and modified to align with the study's context. The scale asked respondents to assess their confidence levels in using their preferred social media platform, covering proficiency in navigation, usage, and the ability to utilize various functions (i.e., sharing). Additionally, one item was added based on the qualitative study findings (i.e., I feel confident in my abilities to know if content posted on [app] used enhancement filters, for example, face filters). Consequently, the scale consisted of four items ($\alpha = 0.92$), paying attention to advice from the extant literature on the advantages of including more items when conducting SEM (Hair *et al.*, 2019). To assess *collectivism*, a simplified eight-item scale was adopted from Kitirattarkarn, Araujo and Neijens (2019), which studied collectivism in the context of engagement with brand-related user-generated content. Grounded in the work of Singelis *et al.* (1995), this scale focuses on measuring collectivism at the personal level rather than the national level. Building upon Hofstede's (1984) seminal work, Singelis *et al.* (1995) extended and refined the concept by introducing horizontal and vertical collectivism. In the context of this study, the four items related to horizontal collectivism measure the extent to which respondents integrate themselves within their in-groups (e.g., If a coworker gets a prize, I would feel proud), while the items related to vertical collectivism assess the degree to which respondents submit to the authority of the in-group and are willing to make sacrifices for it (e.g., Parents and children must stay together as much as possible). The scale showed excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Parasocial relationship was measured using a five-item scale, adapted from Sokolova and Perez (2021), utilizing it to assess the extent to which respondents developed one-sided connections with the SMI, with higher scores indicating a more developed parasocial relationship and lower scores signifying a lower tendency to form a parasocial relationship ($\alpha = 0.88$). Three verification behaviour items were adapted from Dabbous, Aoun Barakat, and de Quero Navarro (2022) to assess respondents' actions in verifying if information posted by their favourite SMI is complete, up-to-date, and whether they seek additional sources for verification. One additional item derived from qualitative findings assesses whether

respondents, despite being emotionally attached to the SMI, would still engage in the verification of their favourite SMI's content, demonstrating a commitment to ensuring information accuracy (i.e., I would still verify [name]'s content, even if I was attached to them). Accordingly, the scale consisted of four items in total ($\alpha = 0.91$). Five measurement items for *sharing behaviour* were initially adapted from Kim and Johnson (2016) and reworded to the context of our study as the original items were for Facebook information sharing. This scale was based on the original work of Chu and Choi (2011) measuring sharing behaviour on social networking sites. However, Kim and Johnson's (2016) scale was preferred as it was measured as a behavioural response in the S-O-R framework, aligns with the concept of sharing SMIs' posts, and contributes meaningfully to the construct this research is measuring. As mentioned, the initial scale included five items, but one item was dropped after content and face validity from a few initial sets of experts (see section 4.8.8 for more detail), resulting in four items ($\alpha = 0.89$).

Thus, the proposed conceptual framework comprises nine reflective constructs and 41 items. Table 4.5 presents the definitions of each construct alongside their corresponding measurement items.

Table 4.5: Definitions and Questionnaire Items for the Constructs in the Model

Construct	Definition	Items	Adapted from
Popularity [POP]	A phenomenon where a higher number of followers correlates with an increased perception of popularity or fame (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Conde and Casais, 2023).	POP1: [Name] is famous.	Ladhari, Massa and Skandrani (2020)
		POP2: [Name] has a lot of followers.	
		POP3: The popularity of [name] is increasing.	
		POP4: [Name] has a lot of interactions under each post.	
Perceived Influencer Authenticity [AUT]	The perception that the SMI acts according to their true self, aligns with their stated values, and the trust others have in the SMI's genuine identity (Moulard, Garrity and Rice, 2015; Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry, 2018).	AUT1: [Name] tries to act in a manner that is consistent with their held values.	Zhang et al. (2023)
		AUT2: [Name] cares about openness and honesty in close relationships with others.	
		AUT3: [Name] places a good deal of importance on others understanding about their true self.	
		AUT4: People can count on [name] being who they are.	
Content Creativity [CRE]	The extent to which the content posted by the SMI is original, unexpected, and expresses a great amount of uniqueness (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Lee and Hong, 2016).	CRE1: The content shared by [name] is unique.	Cheung et al. (2022a)
		CRE2: The content shared by [name] is really out of ordinary.	
		CRE3: The content shared by [name] is intriguing.	
		CRE4: The content shared by [name] is surprising.	
Content Quality [QU]	Followers' perception regarding the quality of an SMI's posts. It	QU1: The content provided by [name] is accurate.	

	encompasses factors such as accuracy, reliability, and high information quality (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018; Magno, 2017).	QU2: The content provided by [name] is reliable.	Magno (2017)
		QU3: The content provided by [name] is updated.	
		QU4: [Name] provides high-quality information.	
Self-Efficacy [SE]	The level of confidence and belief in one's ability to use social media platforms, navigate their features, and engage in various online activities (Zhou, 2012; Hocevar, Flanagin and Metzger, 2014).	SE1: I feel confident and familiar with [app] interface very quickly.	Zhou (2012)
		SE2: I feel confident of using [app] even if there is no one around to show me how to do it.	Zhou (2012)
		SE3: I feel confident in my abilities to use the various functions of [app] (for example, sharing content with others).	Zhou (2012)
		SE4: I feel confident in my abilities to know if content posted on [app] used enhancement filters (for example, face filters).	Based on the qualitative study's findings
Collectivism [CV]	A cultural orientation that prioritizes the interests and needs of the collective group over individual pursuits, emphasizing values such as family, religion, interdependence, traditions, and harmony among its members (Hofstede, 1984; Singelis <i>et al.</i> , 1995).	CV1: If a coworker gets a prize, I would feel proud.	Kitirattarkarn, Araujo and Neijens (2019)
		CV2: The well-being of my coworkers is important to me.	
		CV3: To me, pleasure is spending time with others.	
		CV4: I feel good when I cooperate with others.	
		CV5: Parents and children must stay together as much as possible.	
		CV6: It is my duty to take care of my family, even when I have to sacrifice what I want.	
		CV7: Family members should stick together, no matter what sacrifices are required.	
		CV8: It is important to me that I respect the decision made by my groups.	

Parasocial Relationship [PSR]	A one-sided emotional bond that a follower develops with the SMI through media interactions, often resulting in feelings of familiarity and personal attachment despite the absence of direct interaction (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956; Sokolova and Perez, 2021).	PSR1: [name] makes me feel comfortable as if I am with friends.	Sokolova and Perez (2021)
		PSR2: If [name] appears on another social media platform, I would watch/read it to know more.	
		PSR3: I look forward to watching the last post uploaded by [name].	
		PSR4: I miss seeing [name] when he or she is not posting.	
		PSR5: I would like to meet [name] in person.	
Verification Behaviour [VB]	The actions and practices followers undertake to confirm the accuracy and reliability of the content shared by SMIs before engaging with it (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000; Majerczak and Strzelecki, 2022).	VB1: When I watch [name]’s content, I check to see if the information is complete and comprehensive.	Dabbous, Aoun Barakat and de Quero Navarro (2022)
		VB2: When I watch [name]’s content, I look for other sources to validate the information.	Dabbous, Aoun Barakat and de Quero Navarro (2022)
		VB3: When I watch [name]’s content, I check to see if the information is current and up to date.	Dabbous, Aoun Barakat and de Quero Navarro (2022)
		VB4: I would still verify [name]’s content, even if I was attached to them.	Based on the qualitative study’s findings
Sharing Behaviour [SB]	An act of behavioural engagement in which the follower shares content created or endorsed by SMIs with one’s own network of followers (Ham <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Leung <i>et al.</i> , 2022).	SB1: I would click on “Share” [name]’s content.	Kim and Johnson (2016)
		*SB2: I would share [name]’s content on my own timeline. (Dropped)	
		SB3: I would share [name]’s content on my own social media.	
		SB4: I would share [name]’s content to contacts on my friends list.	
		SB5: I would share the [name]’s content using other forms of social media platforms.	

4.8.7 Control Variables

As the data collection for this study involves an online questionnaire without random assignment, the potential for systemic individual differences influencing the findings is acknowledged. To address this, the study incorporates specific controlled variables, focusing on isolating the relationships between the studied factors and sharing behaviour. Notably, previous research in influencer marketing consistently emphasizes age and gender as key demographic factors influencing engagement with SMIs (e.g., Lou and Yuan, 2019; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Boerman, 2020; Hudders and Jans, 2021; Chetioui *et al.*, 2023) shaping followers' engagement with their favourite SMIs. Moreover, time spent on social media (the respondents' choice of preferred social platform) was included as a control variable because followers who dedicate more time to social media are likely to have greater exposure to SMIs and, consequently, exhibit higher levels of engagement with them (Cao *et al.*, 2021; Hu *et al.*, 2020). While other demographic data, such as education and occupation, were collected, they were not included as control variables due to the absence of supporting literature. However, demography can add to and enhance the research by presenting the characteristics of the sample. Hence, the control variables in this research are age, gender, and time spent on social media.

4.8.8 Pre-test and Pilot Study

Conducting a pilot study is crucial to assess and validate the developed questionnaire before widespread distribution to respondents. The primary objectives of the pilot study include evaluating the survey design, assessing the time required for completion, and checking the reliability and validity of the content to ensure that question order, wording, and scales are easily comprehensible (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Moreover, piloting serves two important purposes: minimizing the likelihood of respondents encountering difficulties while responding to survey questions and ensuring smooth data recording without any issues (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The pilot study for this research is structured into two phases: a pre-test involving expert review and a pilot test of the questionnaire.

Conducting a qualitative pre-test can identify whether items have certain wording concerns, such as being double-barrelled, leading, or confusing (Howard, 2018). Seven experts, including three university lecturers in marketing and tourism management, two frequent followers of SMIs, and two SMIs, were invited to review the initial 42 items. Their task was to provide feedback on each item, decide which items to retain, enhance the clarity and effectiveness of

questions, and identify any unclear items. This stage was conducted to test to what degree the items of the scales cover the main characteristics of the concept being measured (Malhotra *et al.*, 2004). Additionally, the two followers and SMIs, all native Arabic speakers, evaluated the translated questionnaire's clarity and accuracy to ensure the items' intended meaning. In response to experts' recommendations, consistently flagged items were either revised or eliminated. Specifically, one item from the sharing behaviour scale: "I would share [name]'s content on my own timeline" was suggested for removal. The rationale behind this decision is that the term 'timeline' is closely associated with Facebook, a platform not covered in our study. To prevent potential confusion, this item was dropped. Moreover, the experts suggested reordering certain questions to enhance the overall flow and coherence of the survey. Lastly, it was suggested to implement question randomization to prevent respondents from anticipating the relationships among the measures. Thus, the questionnaire's content validity was established.

The next step was administering a pilot study on a small sample of respondents before conducting a full-scale study. The pilot study aims to achieve four goals. First, it examines whether the survey questions work as intended and are understood by respondents. Second, it intends to identify whether some statements or questions need to be revised to enhance questionnaire response rates (De Leeuw, 2001). Third, it evaluates the time required to complete the questionnaire. Fourth, to ensure that the adapted scales are reliable. Pilot studies typically involve smaller samples because their primary purpose is instrument testing and not hypothesis testing or generalization to the broader population (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). Additionally, smaller sample sizes in pilot studies are considered adequate for detecting major flaws and making necessary adjustments to the survey instrument. Diamantopoulos and Siguaw (2000) suggest that a pilot study sample size of around 100 respondents is usually sufficient for these purposes. In this research, the pilot study included 158 respondents, which aligns with these guidelines and ensured a thorough preliminary evaluation of the questionnaire. Additionally, this sample size provides enough data to conduct preliminary statistical analyses, ensuring that the survey design is robust and effective for the larger main study. To facilitate survey distribution, the researcher contacted two Saudi SMIs and asked them to share the pilot survey with their followers. A comment box was included at the end of each page to allow respondents to provide feedback on any questions they found ambiguous or encountered difficulties with.

The pilot study collected data from a convenience sample of 179 respondents. However, only 158 completed the survey and were suitable for analysis. Respondents took an average of 12 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Feedback from the comment box highlighted the need to shorten some questions for increased simplicity. Additionally, some respondents provided insights into the confusion around the concept of ‘face-filters’, suggesting the inclusion of a brief definition beforehand. Lastly, the respondents understood the items associated with ‘collectivism’, but they sought clarification, seeking reassurance that it specifically related to their cultural perspective. As a result, all the feedback received was thoroughly considered and addressed for both the English and Arabic versions of the survey. Analysis for the pilot study included assessing construct reliability through Cronbach’s alphas, one of the most commonly used indicators to measure reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The reliability of a construct means ensuring that the instrument items represent their corresponding construct (Cronbach, 1971). Ideally, Cronbach alpha values range from 0 to 1, and the lowest acceptable value, generally, is 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). As shown in Table 4.6, All measurement scales showed strong reliability ranging from 0.809 to 0.881, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.70.

Table 4.6: The Cronbach’s alpha test for the items in the pilot testing stage

Scale	Number of items	Cronbach’s alpha
Popularity	4	0.874
Authenticity	4	0.881
Creativity	4	0.859
Quality	4	0.809
Self-efficacy	4	0.832
Collectivism	8	0.863
Parasocial relationship	5	0.875
Verification behaviour	4	0.811
Sharing behaviour	4	0.870

4.8.9 Data Analysis

Once the research design requirements and data collection procedures have been established, the next step involves categorizing the data analysis techniques. These techniques enable the researcher to derive empirical evidence and findings. Selecting the most appropriate statistical technique for analysis entails carefully considering various research components, such as the study’s aim, questions, objectives, attributes of the data, and the suitability and characteristics of the statistical tool under review (Malhotra *et al.*, 2004). To achieve the primary goals of this

study, a range of statistical techniques will be applied for data analysis. Data analysis techniques are discussed in five key sections: data preparation, sample characteristics, factor analysis, common method bias, and structural equation modelling.

4.8.9.1 Data Preparation

Before conducting data analysis, it is imperative to undergo a crucial step known as data preparation, a procedure emphasized in all studies (Hair *et al.*, 2019). This research phase identifies potential issues within the dataset that could introduce distortions to the analysis outcomes. The researcher addresses five key data preparation procedures before delving into data analysis: data cleaning, non-response bias, descriptive statistics, and assessments of normality and multicollinearity.

Data cleaning involves the removal of any missing data, a common challenge in research (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Missing data can lead to two main issues in data analysis: a reduction in statistical power and biasing parameter estimates (Roth, 1994). To simplify the process, this study collected data online, prompting respondents to answer all questions for each variable's item. An error message will appear if respondents skip questions, encouraging them to complete all items. Additionally, respondents who did not answer the screening and attention questions will be excluded from subsequent analysis. The last part of data cleaning involves identifying outliers or extreme responses. Outliers are "observations with a unique combination of characteristics identifiable as distinctly different from other observations" (Hair *et al.*, 2019, p. 35). The occurrence of outliers can be problematic for data analysis because it might weaken the outcome of the statistical analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). Therefore, it is fundamental to detect and remedy any outliers that may have taken place to ensure the accuracy of the outcome. The presence of multivariate outliers will be assessed using the Mahalanobis Distance test. A high Mahalanobis Distance score means the case is not close to the general distribution of other observations and is a potential multivariate outlier (Hair *et al.*, 2019). According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2019), a suggested probability estimate for identifying an outlier is $p < 0.001$.

Non-response bias poses a potential challenge in survey research, emerging when the characteristics of individuals who opt not to participate diverge from those who respond (Maitland *et al.*, 2017). This bias can compromise the external validity of study findings, as the sample may not mirror the entire population. To mitigate non-response bias, various methodological techniques are employed, such as extrapolation. This widely used technique

assumes that late respondents share greater similarity with non-respondents, operating under the premise that late respondents invest more effort and time in formulating their responses (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). The approach involves comparing sample units who submit responses before a survey deadline or within specific response waves to those responding later or in subsequent waves. If no statistically significant differences emerge between these groups, it is inferred that non-response bias has not unduly influenced the study (Wagner and Kemmerling, 2010).

Descriptive statistics offer a comprehensible representation of the raw data in a manner that lends meaning to the measured items of each construct (Zikmund *et al.*, 2013). This form of descriptive statistics includes key metrics such as minimum values, maximum values, mean, and standard deviation for each measurement item (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018).

Hair *et al.* (2019) stated that normality is an important assumption of SEM. Normality is classified as univariate normality and multivariate normality. The difference is whether the normality is related to a single variable or a set of variables (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Univariate normality is examined by looking into the skewness and kurtosis of a single variable. Skewness is the symmetry of a distribution, where a skewed variable's mean is not at the centre of the distribution, while kurtosis is the overall shape of a data distribution curve, the data distribution's peak character or flatness compared to the normal distribution. Kline (2015) and West, Finch and Curran (1995) suggested that the acceptable absolute values for skewness and kurtosis can be within the range of -3 to +3. Scholars have suggested that univariate normality assessment is appropriate when the sample size is large (Kline, 2015; Hair *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, a large sample produces less concern with regard to irregular or strange data because large samples tend to reduce the detrimental effects of abnormality (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In the case of a large sampling, multivariate normality is limited in its testing when applying SEM (Kline, 2015).

Multicollinearity is measured in terms of tolerance; this signifies that two or more independent variables are highly correlated. This indicates that one variable can be highly explained or predicted by the other variable(s), and thus, it has a limited contribution to the explanatory power of the entire set (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, multicollinearity is problematic in multiple regressions (Pallant, 2020). According to Field (2018), the presence of multicollinearity limits the size of the regression (R) value and makes it difficult to understand the contribution of each independent variable. The most widely used diagnostic for

multicollinearity is the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), which indicates whether a predictor has a strong linear relationship with the other predictor(s). The suggested acceptable value of VIF should be more than 0.1 and less than 10 (Pallant, 2020).

In conclusion, after finalising the data collection, it is still essential to review all responses and ensure no record mistakes, missing data, or odd values such as out-of-range values. Subsequently, the researcher must address non-response bias and present descriptive statistics for the data. With these preliminary steps completed, the researcher can then move on to ensuring adherence to key assumptions essential for effective factor analysis and the utilization of SEM, as outlined by Hair et al. (2019). These critical assumptions involve normality and multicollinearity. Once it is confirmed that the dataset is free from errors and is prepared for analysis, it becomes imperative to identify the characteristics of the sample, as elaborated in the following section.

4.8.9.2 Sample Characteristics

Presenting the sample's characteristics is a type of descriptive statistics to better understand the main sample's characteristics. It also ensures that the sample has sufficient breadth and is representative. Sample characteristics are pivotal in organizing, summarizing, and describing data, offering a comprehensive overview of selected sample characteristics and their distribution. The current study will look into the sample's demographics (i.e., gender, age, education, occupation), preferred social media platform to follow favourite SMI, time spent on preferred social media platform, and a breakdown of the respondents' favourite SMI.

4.8.9.3 Factor Analysis

Factor analysis is a statistical method used in research to identify underlying patterns or latent constructs within a set of observed variables. It aims to uncover the relationships between observed variables and the latent factors that influence them (Byrne, 2016). By reducing the dimensionality of the data, factor analysis helps researchers gain a deeper understanding of the underlying structure and interrelationships among variables (Hair *et al.*, 2019). There are two main types of factor analysis: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). EFA consists of grouping the factors which correlate with one another, and CFA is used in testing a pre-specified factor structure based on prior theory or expectations rather than exploring the data to identify the factor (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Both factors are discussed in the next sub-sections.

4.8.9.3.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Generally, the goal of factor analysis is to “identify the minimal number of factors that underlie (or account for) covariation among the observed variables” (Byrne, 2016, p. 5). EFA aims to determine a strong correlation among the indicators in a data set (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In other words, EFA is used to explore the data and provide information to the researcher about the possible factors that best represent the data. Specifically, EFA can discover inter-relationships between a group of variables; this method is loaded onto a group to remove underlying latent factors. In addition, this method shows statistically what the raw data produces when combining factors under one factor or the accurate number of factors. EFA is particularly important in the current study as the adapted scales are translated and tested in a new research setting and a different geographical location (Hair *et al.*, 2019). More importantly, two new items are added based on the semi-structured interviews, one for the scale of self-efficacy and another for the scale of verification behaviour.

To assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis, two statistical measures are recommended: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity. KMO test is used to find out about the suitability and accuracy of factors within a provided sample, while Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity aims to assess whether the observed variables in the dataset correlate significantly with each other, indicating the appropriateness of factor analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2019). A KMO value greater than 0.6 is considered acceptable, while Bartlett’s test requires having a p-value less than 0.05 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Subsequently, the researcher may proceed to examine communalities, eigenvalues, and the extraction of factors along with their respective loadings.

Communalities in factor analysis represent the proportion of variance in an observed variable accounted for by the extracted factors. Essentially, communalities indicate the extent to which the common factors explain the variability observed in each specific variable. A high communality value close to 1 suggests that the common factors capture a large proportion of the variable’s variance, indicating a good fit between the variable and the underlying factors (Pallant, 2020). On the other hand, a low communality value suggests that the common factors do not explain the variable’s variance well, and it might be less suitable for inclusion in the factor model (Pallant, 2020). If a particular variable is low (lower than 0.5), the variable might struggle to load to any other factor significantly (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Thus, a cut-off value of 0.5 is acceptable (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Analysing communalities is a critical step in assessing the

overall effectiveness of the factor model and understanding how well the chosen factors represent the observed variables in the dataset.

Eigenvalues are important in factor analysis as they provide insights into the amount of variance explained by each factor. Each eigenvalue corresponds to a factor, indicating the amount of variance accounted for by that factor. The eigenvalues are typically ranked in descending order, with the first eigenvalue being the largest and subsequent ones decreasing. Researchers often focus on the eigenvalues to determine the number of factors to retain in the analysis. Researchers often choose to retain factors with eigenvalues above 1, as these factors are deemed to capture the most meaningful variance in the dataset (Pallant, 2020). However, theoretical considerations and the research context influence the decision on how many factors to retain.

Factor extraction in EFA involves identifying latent factors that explain observed covariation among variables. Techniques like Principal Components Analysis (PCA) aim to uncover the minimum number of factors capturing maximum variance (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Factor loading, reflected in the factor matrix, reveals the strength of relationships between observed variables and factors. Loadings near 1 signify strong correlations, while those near 0 indicate weak associations. The matrix guides researchers in interpreting the factor structure, determining which variables align most closely with each factor, and simplifying the complexity of data by highlighting meaningful underlying factors (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The present study will employ both methods to ensure the validation of the well-organized structure of the constructs, their loading into single components, and the satisfaction of acceptable factor loadings (above 0.5).

The key statistics associated with EFA are illustrated in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7: Key statistics associated with EFA

Test	Aim	Reference
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO)	Test whether the sample is suitable for factor analysis. (KMO > 0.6) the higher, the better.	Hair et al. (2019)
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Assess whether the observed variables in the dataset correlate significantly with each other ($p < 0.05$).	Tabachnick and Fidell (2019)
Communalities	Understanding how well the chosen factors represent the observed variables in the dataset in terms of variance. A communality under 0.5 is undesirable.	Hair et al. (2019)

Eigenvalue	The aggregate number of variances is explained by factors, and only factors with an eigenvalue of 1.0 or above are worthy of a continued investigation.	Pallant (2020)
Factor extraction and loading	Determine the minimum number of factors that represent the interrelationships among the variables set, as well as determine the strength of the relationships between the observed variables and these latent factors. A factor loading under 0.5 is undesirable.	Tabachnick and Fidell (2019)

4.8.9.3.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Following the completion of EFA, the next step involves testing the variables using CFA to confirm a pre-specified factor structure based on theoretical expectations or prior knowledge. CFA assesses the overall fit of the measurement model and enables the researcher to test how well the measured variables represent the constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In other words, CFA aims to confirm or reject the hypothesized relationships between observed variables and latent factors. As a recommended step before executing SEM (Hair *et al.*, 2019), CFA involves specifying the measurement model, which is presented by a diagram wherein each measure (item) is assigned to its construct (latent variable). After specifying the measurement model, the researcher assesses its validity by examining the model fit, reliability, and validity of the constructs.

To test how well a measurement model fits a set of observations, researchers are recommended to assess the model's overall fit. The aim of testing this is to confirm the consistency between a theoretical model and the estimated model based on the observed values (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Although many fit indices have been developed to test the overall fit of a model, none of them alone can provide an absolute assurance of model fit. According to Hair *et al.* (2019), three kinds of overall Goodness of Fit (GOF) indices can be noted: absolute, incremental, and parsimonious.

1. Absolute fit indices evaluate how well a model fits the sample data. Those measures determine the extent to which the specified measurement or structural models reproduce the observed covariance matrix. Chi-square (χ^2), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) are common absolute fit indices.

2. Incremental fit indices measure the fit improvement between the hypothesised conceptual framework and the null model. Common incremental fit indices include the following: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) or Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and Relative Fix Index (RFI).
3. Parsimonious fit indices evaluate which model is best among a set of the final developed models and aim to identify the extent to which the model fit has been achieved by using too many coefficients. Common parsimonious fit indices include the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), Parsimonious Normed Fit Index (PNFI) and the Parsimonious Goodness-of-Fit Index (PGFI).

In the present study, eight fit indices representing three different GOF indices were reported to conclude the model's fit, as summarized in Table 4.8. Specifically, this study reports three absolute indexes (i.e., χ^2/df , GFI, and RMSEA), four incremental indexes (i.e., CFI, TLI, IFI, and NFI), and one parsimonious fit index (i.e., AGFI).

Table 4.8: Measure of fit indices

Goodness-of-Fit Measure	Description	Acceptable Level
1. Absolute fit indices		
Normed Chi-Square (χ^2/df) or Chained Multilateral Index Number / Degree of Freedom (CMIN/DF)	A simple ratio of the Chi-square (χ^2) divided by the degree of freedom (df)	Between 1 and 3
Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI),	Used to calculate the ratio of the sum of the squared differences between the observed and reproduced matrices to the observed variances	≥ 0.90
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	How well the model, with unknown but optimally chosen parameter estimates, will fit the populations' covariance matrix. In other words, it measures the badness of fit in a model relative to a perfect model	< 0.08
2. Incremental Fit		
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	Measures goodness of fit by examining the level of discrepancy between the estimated model and the independence model	≥ 0.90
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	Measures a comparison of alternative models or a proposed model against a null model. It adjusts NFI by considering degrees of freedom	≥ 0.90

Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	Addresses sample size and parsimony issues associated with NFI and the variability of TLI values	≥ 0.90
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	Examines the level of discrepancy between the estimated model and the independence model	≥ 0.90
3. Parsimonious fit indices		
Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI)	Aims to consider the varying levels of model complexity. It achieves this by adjusting the GFI based on the ratio between the degrees of freedom used in a model and the total degrees of freedom available	> 0.80

Source: Hair et al. (2019), Byrne (2016), Kline (2015), Browne and Cudeck (1992), Vandenberg and Lance (2000), Schumacker and Lomax (2016), and Hu and Bentler (1999)

Reliability refers to the consistency of a variable's measurement (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2018). A reliable variable must obtain consistent outcomes even if it is repeatedly used in a different context, replicated by other researchers, or written at a different time point (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). This study conducted two reliability tests: Cronbach's alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR). Cronbach's alpha is a widely utilized measure to evaluate the overall scale's consistency, with an acceptable threshold of 0.7 or higher (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, the CR test, which is derived from CFA, measures the reliability and internal consistency of variables representing a latent construct (Hair *et al.*, 2019). A CR value of 0.7 or higher indicates good reliability, signifying that the measures consistently represent the same latent construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair *et al.*, 2019). Following the establishment of construct reliability, the researcher can proceed to assess construct validity, recognizing that reliability is a prerequisite for validity since it ensures that "measures are free from error and therefore yield consistent results" (Peter, 1979, p. 6).

Validity represents the accuracy of a measure and "the degree to which instruments truly measure the constructs which they are intended to measure" (Peter, 1979, p. 6). This study conducted two types of validity: convergent validity and discriminant validity. First, convergent validity, which reflects the correlations between different measures of the same construct, can be measured by the average variance extracted (AVE) factor loadings and the CR. Convergent validity is established if the factor loading is 0.5 or higher, the AVE is 0.5 or higher, and the CR is 0.7 or higher (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair *et al.*, 2019). Second, discriminant validity reflects the extent to which a construct is truly distinct from other

constructs and ensures that the scale is sufficiently different from other related scales. Discriminant validity between constructs can be examined by comparing the AVE value for each construct with the squared correlations of the remaining constructs of the study (Hair *et al.*, 2019). To achieve discriminant validity, the AVE should be greater than the squared correlation estimate. The key statistics associated with CFA are illustrated in Table 4.9.

Table 4.9: Key statistics associated with CFA

Test	Aim	Cut-off Value	Reference
Model Fit Assessment	Evaluate whether a good fit between a covariance matrix of measured items (based on sample data) and the estimated covariance matrix (based on theory).	χ^2/df between 1 and 3 $GFI \geq 0.90$ $RMSEA < 0.08$ $CFI \geq 0.90$ $TLI \geq 0.90$ $IFI \geq 0.90$ $NFI \geq 0.90$ $AGFI > 0.80$	Tabachnick and Fidell (2019) and Schumacker and Lomax (2016)
Cronbach's alpha (α)	Assesses the internal consistency reliability of a scale or a set of items within a measurement instrument.	$\alpha > 0.70$	Hair et al. (2019)
Composite Reliability (CR)	Derived from CFA, it evaluates the internal consistency reliability of a measurement model, particularly for latent constructs.	$CR > 0.70$	Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Hair et al. (2019)
Convergent Validity	Evaluates the degree of correlation between different measures of the same construct. The objective is to ensure that multiple indicators or measures intended to assess the same underlying construct are indeed measuring that construct consistently.	Factor loadings ≥ 0.50 $CR > 0.70$ $AVE > 0.50$	Hair et al. (2019)
Discriminant Validity	Assesses the extent to which a construct is distinct from other constructs. The goal is to ensure that a measurement scale or construct is unique and not highly correlated with other related constructs.	The AVE for each construct is greater than the squared correlations between that construct and all other constructs.	Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Hair et al. (2019)

4.8.9.4 Common Method Bias

Before examining the hypothesized relationships in the structural model, it is crucial to directly address the issue of Common Method Bias (CMB), particularly when collecting primary data through self-report questionnaires. In such designs, concerns about CMB may arise (Santateresa-Bernat, Sánchez-García and Curras-Perez, 2022; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). CMB refers to the “variance that is attributable to the measurement method rather than to the constructs the measures represent” (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003, p. 879). According to Bagozzi, Yi and Phillips (1991), CMB occurs when the instrument itself, rather than the actual predispositions of the respondents that the instrument attempts to uncover, influences variations in responses. This implies that the instrument introduces bias, leading to variances in the analysis. Additionally, CMB can result from “any artificial covariance between the predictor and criterion variable produced by the fact that the respondent providing the measure of these variables is the same” (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003, p. 882). The presence of CMB introduces measurement errors that could impact the hypothesized relationships between measures (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Despite implementing several procedural measures in survey design to minimize CMB (e.g., utilizing a question randomizer, including an attention check question, ensuring respondent anonymity and confidentiality, and maintaining question clarity), it remains imperative to apply statistical methods to further reduce the occurrence of CMB.

This study will diagnose CMB using Harman’s single-factor analysis and Common Latent Factor (CLF). First, Harman single factor analysis, which is widely used to solve the issue of CMB (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), employs EFA where all the variables presented in the model are loaded as a single factor, and forced so that there is no rotation (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). If the variance exceeds 50%, it suggests the potential presence of CMB. Harman’s single-factor test assumes the existence of CMB when a single factor emerges from the factor analysis, indicating that one factor can account for the majority of covariance among all measures (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The second diagnostic technique is CLF, or, as some refer to it, Common Latent Variable. This technique presents a new latent variable in such a way that all research variables are linked to it. Those paths are forced to be equal, while the variance of the common factor is forced to be 1 (Eichhorn, 2014). Then, the standardized regression weights of all items are compared for models with and without CLF (Gaskin, 2023a). If the differences in these

regression weights were found to be bigger than 0.2, then CMB might be present (Archimi *et al.*, 2018; Trivedi and Sama, 2020).

4.8.9.5 Structural Equation Model (SEM)

Following the confirmation of the measurement model, the structural model, which represents the relationships among the hypothesised model's constructs, is tested. The purpose of testing the structural model is to confirm the relationships among the latent variables and subsequently accept or reject the model (Byrne, 2016). Through using SEM, interdependent relationships can be transformed into a series of structural equations that can generate an understandable model (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The term 'structural relation' refers to the core concept of SEM, which involves managing relationships between latent variables. These relationships are usually formulated by linear regression equations, graphically expressed by path diagrams using arrows (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In the structural model, both exogenous and endogenous variables are linked by arrows indicating a relationship. Variables on which arrows are pointed are known as endogenous variables (dependent variables) and are affected by what are known as exogenous variables (independent variables) (Byrne, 2016). SEM was utilised in the current study to confirm the structural model and test the hypothesised relationships among the key constructs in the model, which was accomplished using direct, indirect, and moderation effects.

SEM models are still dominant in social and behavioural research due to their maturity and strong explanatory power in predicting human behaviour (Cao *et al.*, 2021). According to Byrne (2016) and Kline (2015), SEM is recognized for possessing numerous advantages. Firstly, SEM enables the simultaneous testing of complex conceptual models encompassing multiple hypotheses. In contrast, traditional techniques would necessitate conducting separate analyses for each hypothesis. Secondly, unlike conventional analytical methods like regression analysis, SEM explicitly addresses measurement errors, contributing to more reliable and unbiased findings. Thirdly, SEM goes beyond analysing observed variables (measurement items) by incorporating unobserved variables into the analysis. Lastly, SEM allows for examining multiple dependent variables, a capability not afforded by multiple regression, which only accommodates one dependent variable.

After drawing the path diagram, the fit of the final structural model can be evaluated in a similar way used to evaluate the fit of the measurement model for overall constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The closer the structural model goodness-of-fit comes to the measurement model, the healthier the structural model fit (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Checking model fit at this stage evaluates how well

the structural model aligns with the observed data, including the specified relationships between latent variables. It ensures that the proposed structural relationships adequately represent the underlying patterns in the data. Next, the analysis delves into p-values and standardised (beta) coefficients to describe the nature of the relationships between the model's constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2019). These coefficients describe the strength and direction of the relationships between constructs, and the associated p-values indicate the statistical significance of these relationships.

Two kinds of SEM exist: Covariance-Based (CB-SEM) and Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS-SEM). While PLS-SEM method could have been an option, CB-SEM works better with a large sample size (Dash and Paul, 2021). The sample size in our study is considered large (i.e., 507). Furthermore, Dash and Paul (2021) recommend the utilization of CB-SEM for factor-based (reflective) models and PLS-SEM for composite-based (formative) models. Since our research solely involves reflective models and lacks formative structures, CB-SEM is the suitable and recommended approach. Moreover, CB-SEM is applicable under certain assumptions, including normality, the absence of outliers, and the lack of multicollinearity, as outlined by Kline (2015). The current study satisfied the normality assumption, with skewness and kurtosis values falling within the recommended range of -3 to +3. Additionally, a check for outliers using Mahalanobis distance identified a small number of outliers, which were subsequently excluded from the sample. Finally, our data analysis confirmed the absence of multicollinearity issues.

Importantly, CB-SEM has gained prominence in the influencer marketing literature, as evidenced by several notable studies (e.g., Lee and Lee, 2021; Belanche *et al.*, 2021b; Wang, Huang and Davison, 2021; Leite and Baptista, 2022; Zhang and Mac, 2023; Kim, Kim and Lee, 2024; Melnychuk, Arasli, and Nevzat, 2024). This method is particularly prevalent in research examining engagement dynamics between SMI and their followers (e.g., Cheung *et al.*, 2022a; Chen, Lin and Shan, 2021; Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022). For the reasons above, CB-SEM was adopted for the current study.

The Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS V.28) was employed for CFA and testing this study's structural model. The selection of AMOS is justified based on its relevance to the current research and widespread use in recent studies. AMOS stands out as a user-friendly tool, allowing researchers to visually construct the framework with items. Specifically, being an add-on analysis tool in SPSS adds to its accessibility for researchers. Moreover, AMOS utilizes

graphical interfaces rather than syntax or computer codes, enhancing its usability (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The SEM conducted through AMOS involves assessing the measurement model via CFA to evaluate model fit and convergent and discriminant validity. Subsequently, the structural model and its hypotheses are tested using path analysis.

4.9 Time Horizon

Scholars have declared that the time horizon is an essential consideration in shaping the design of any research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Two main classifications exist: Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal studies. Cross-sectional studies involve collecting data at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of a specific phenomenon. The collection time can span from minutes to months (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). In contrast, longitudinal studies take a diary perspective, aiming to understand a research topic over an extended period, allowing the exploration of changes or improvements in research objects (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This research, which focuses on examining the development of sharing behaviour at a specific point in time, is categorized as a cross-sectional study. Its primary aim is not to assess the development of factors or variations in followers' behaviours over time.

4.10 Translation

Three methods for ensuring equivalence between the original and translated measures have been recommended by Brislin (1970), including back-translation, the bilingual method, and the committee approach. Back-translation, in particular, is a widely recognized technique for maintaining equivalence between the original and translated versions (Behling and Law, 2000). Numerous researchers have employed this method in the influencer marketing field (e.g., Ming *et al.*, 2021; Leung, Sun and Asswailem, 2022; Weismueller *et al.*, 2020). According to Brislin (1970), the back-translation process involves a bilingual translator blindly translating from the original to the target language while another bilingual translator independently back-translates from the target language to the original language. The two versions (original and back-translated) are then compared for concept equivalence. If an error is identified in the back-translated version, another translator retranslates the item, and this process continues until the bilingual translators agree that the two versions are identical and have no errors in meaning. Behling and Law (2000) assert that back-translation is a distinguished approach for maintaining equivalence between the original and translated versions.

At first, a professional Arabic translator translated the qualitative study's consent form and invitation letter from English to Arabic (see Appendixes 8 and 9). Subsequently, the interview guide was translated into Arabic by an accredited English-Arabic translator, and the translation certificate for the interview guide is provided in Appendix 10. Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed them into Arabic. The interview transcripts were later translated into English by a bilingual translator. To implement the back-translation method, the English transcripts were given to a different translator for translation back into Arabic. The resulting Arabic version was then compared to the original Arabic transcript to assess the validity and accuracy of the translation process, following the methodology proposed by (Brislin, 1970). A sample of an original and translated interview transcript is included in Appendix 11.

The current study's survey was made available to the respondents in English and Arabic because of the population's bilingual capabilities (AlRawi, AlShurafa and Elyas, 2022). Since Arabic is the primary language spoken by the majority, if not all, Saudi citizens, a translation was necessary to ensure respondents' comfort with the survey, considering that some might not fully understand the English version. Thus, the original instruments in English underwent translation into Arabic for equivalence purposes, employing the back-to-back translation process, as recommended by (Brislin, 1970). A reputable translation agency translated the questionnaire into Arabic. Another bilingual translator, without access to the original version, conducted a back translation into English to ensure linguistic equivalence. A pretest and pilot study were then conducted to validate the survey's accuracy, and adjustments to the scale item descriptions were made based on expert and respondent feedback to enhance readability and understandability (refer to Appendix 14 for a sample of the certified translated survey).

4.11 Ethical Considerations

For any study conducted with people, ethical considerations play an essential role. In business studies, ethics represent the set of behavioural principles and norms starting with the research's first stage to the end phase (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Before conducting the research, ensuring that the study follows ethical considerations is very important. For instance, provide informed consent, ensure respondent anonymity, confidentiality, and no harm to the participants (Priporas *et al.*, 2020; Priporas and Poimenidis, 2008). In this study, all the requirements for ethical issues have been followed at all the research phases.

After completing and submitting the necessary documentation, the Middlesex Business School Ethics Committee officially granted ethical approval for both qualitative and quantitative phases on April 4, 2022 (refer to Appendix 15). This aligns with the research guidelines laid out by Middlesex University's Code of Practice for Research. The qualitative study ensured that participants were aware of the research's main objective and emphasized their voluntary participation, allowing them to withdraw at any point. Confidentiality, anonymity, and secure data storage were assured, and data would be deleted when no longer needed. Participants were given control over the recording process during virtual interviews and were free to stop recordings at their will. Real names were substituted with pseudonyms to protect identities, and any identifying information was omitted to protect participant anonymity. Each participant signed an informed consent form.

The quantitative study largely follows the ethical procedures of the qualitative study but with some slight differences in how it is presented. On the cover page of the online survey, the study's aim is briefly explained, and it is assured that any information provided will remain anonymous and will not be linked back to the participants. Participants were asked to participate voluntarily and could withdraw without consequences if they decided not to continue. The survey clarifies that no reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link the respondents to the study. In contrast to the qualitative phase, where written consent was required, in the quantitative phase, completing the survey is considered as giving consent to participate.

4.12 Summary

The focus of this chapter was to present the researcher's view of the research methodology adopted to answer the research questions and meet its objectives. Besides presenting the researcher's methodological view, the chapter also provided the rationale behind each methodological choice adopted in every stage of the research process. The research philosophy of the current study is pragmatic. Regarding the research approach, this study employed both inductive and deductive approaches, better known as the abductive approach. To address the objectives of this study, a sequential exploratory mixed method (qualitative followed by quantitative) was adopted. The research design includes two phases: phase one, semi-structured interviews, and stage two, an online questionnaire survey. This chapter discussed the rationale for using the methods in each stage and presented detailed procedures, such as participant sample size, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, research ethical

considerations were presented. Table 4.10. summarizes the methodological approaches for achieving the objectives of this research. The next chapter will present the findings of the first phase.

Table 4.10: Summary of key approaches in this chapter

Research Philosophy	Pragmatism
Research Approach	Abductive
Research Strategy	Mixed methods
Research Design	Exploratory sequential mixed-method design 1 st Phase: Virtual semi-structured interviews 2 nd Phase: Online self-administered survey
Time Horizon	Cross-sectional
Sampling Method	1 st Phase: Convenient sampling 2 nd Phase: Convenient and snowballing sampling
Sample Size	1 st Phase: 21 participants 2 nd Phase: 507 respondents
Pilot Study	1 st Phase: Two semi-structured interviews 2 nd Phase: Pre-test with seven experts; pilot test with 158 respondents
Data Analysis	1 st Phase: Thematic analysis via NVivo V.12 2 nd Phase: SPSS V.28 + CB-SEM via AMOS V.28

5 Chapter 5: Qualitative Data Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the analysis of data derived from semi-structured interviews involving 21 participants. The interview process was guided by a comprehensive interview guide, shaped by insights from existing literature. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section provides an overview of the exploratory study objectives, the second discusses participants' characteristics, the third explains emerging themes and findings, the fourth deals with refining the original conceptual model, and the final section summarises the chapter.

5.2 Qualitative Study Objectives: A Brief Overview

Aligned with the detailed methodology outlined in Chapter 4, specifically in Section 4.7.1, a qualitative study was undertaken with the overarching aim of achieving the following pivotal objectives:

1. To qualitatively explore and identify audience-specific factors that may influence followers' sharing behaviour.
2. To qualitatively explore followers' verification behaviour and how it affects their sharing behaviour.

5.3 Profile of the Qualitative Sample

Table 5.1 describes the participants interviewed for the qualitative data. The table is divided into ten columns. The first shows the participant's ID. The second exhibits the date of the interview. In the third and fourth, the participant's gender and age are mentioned. The fifth shows the participant's marital status, while the sixth shows their education. The seventh shows the participant's occupation. The eighth and ninth columns display the participants' frequency of watching SMIs' content and frequency of sharing SMIs' content, respectively. The last column gives the interview duration in minutes.

The interviews were conducted from 15-04-22 to 01-05-22. A relatively equal distribution of male and female participants was evident, divided into twelve males and nine females. Different age groups were represented in the sample, ranging from 21 to 47 years old, with 21

to 30 being the most dominant age group. Eighteen participants were single, while three were married. Eight participants had a bachelor's degree, seven had a master's degree, four had a high school degree, one had an MBA degree, and one said that they held a PhD degree, thus reflecting participants from a wide range of educational levels. Fourteen participants were employees, six were students, and one was unemployed.

Twenty participants stated that they watch SMIs' content daily. Participants' frequency of sharing SMIs' content ranged from more than eight times a day, to once a month, to never. In addition, most participants mentioned that they use Snapchat as a social media platform to follow SMIs, followed by Instagram. This is logical since Saudi Arabia has one of the biggest Snapchat audience reach in the world (Statista, 2021b), and 56% of Saudis are on *Snapchat* (Statista, 2022a). The most followed categories of SMIs were lifestyle SMIs (n=12), beauty SMIs (n=5), travel SMIs (n=5), and historical storytelling SMIs (n=3). The table below shows sufficient breadth in the sample for the interviews.

Table 5.1: The participants' profiles and the details of semi-structured interviews

Participant ID	Interview Date	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Education	Job Status	Frequency of Watching SMIs' Content	Frequency of Sharing SMIs' Content	Interview Time ($\approx$ min)
01	15/04/2022	Female	27	Single	Bachelor	Full-time employee + businesswomen	Once a month	Once a month	19 minutes
02	15/04/2022	Female	23	Married	High School	Student	Twice a day	More than once a day	20 minutes
03	16/04/2022	Male	32	Single	Masters	Full-time employee	Once a day	Monthly	28 minutes
04	16/04/2022	Male	47	Married	Bachelor	Full-time employee	Twice a day	Once a day	22 minutes
05	17/04/2022	Male	38	Married	MBA	Full-time employee	Twice a day	Once a month	14 minutes
06	17/04/2022	Male	25	Single	Masters	Student	Once a day	Daily	19 minutes
07	17/04/2022	Male	26	Single	Bachelor	Full-time employee	Twice a day	Weekly	20 minutes
08	17/04/2022	Male	33	Single	Masters	Full-time employee	Once a day	Rarely	27 minutes
09	19/04/2022	Male	27	Single	Bachelor	Part-time employee	Twice a day	Four times a day	20 minutes
10	23/04/2022	Female	25	Single	High School	Student	Once a day	Ten times a day	15 minutes
11	23/04/2022	Female	21	Single	High School	Student	Once a day	Three times a day	20 minutes
12	23/04/2022	Male	33	Single	Bachelor	Full-time employee	Every couple of hours a day	Five times a day	29 minutes
13	24/04/2022	Female	31	Single	Bachelor	Unemployed	Twice a day	2-3 times a day	27 minutes
14	24/04/2022	Female	19	Single	High School	Student	Daily	Daily	18 minutes
15	25/04/2022	Female	36	Married	PhD	Full-time employee	Twice a day	More than once a day	16 minutes
16	25/04/2022	Male	27	Single	Bachelor	Student	Five times a day	2 -7 times a day	21 minutes
17	26/04/2022	Male	28	Single	Masters	Full-time employee	Four times a day	7 - 8 times a day	20 minutes
18	26/04/2022	Male	34	Single	Bachelor	Full-time employee	20 times a day	Once a week	24 minutes
19	28/04/2022	Male	24	Single	Masters	Full-time employee	Once a day	Daily	15 minutes
20	29/04/2022	Female	27	Single	Masters	Self-employed	Twice a day	A few times a week	14 minutes
21	01/05/2022	Female	28	Single	Masters	Full-time employee	Once a day	Once a week	20 minutes

A range of 12-30 semi-structured interviews were estimated to satisfy the research inquiry. Data saturation became gradually evident after the 19th interview, where answers and concepts reappeared, and very limited additional insights emerged. However, to ensure the reliability of the research, two more interviews were carried out, confirming the saturation of the codes. This study's interviews lasted between 14 to 29 minutes, with an average length of 20.4 minutes. Unlike in-depth interviews, which require a length between 60 and 90 minutes (Marshall *et al.*, 2013), 30 minutes has been argued as sufficient in semi-structured interviews (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). However, when semi-structured interviews are not the sole data source (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006), as the case in this study, 29 minutes may be plenty. Consequently, a total of 7.4 hours of audio recordings were obtained and transformed via transcription into a written format using Microsoft Word document processor, which is a powerful word processing software (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This yielded a sum of 22,455 words in 87 single-spaced pages, which provided a wealth of materials to analyse and examine (Table 5.2).

Table 5.2: Interview and transcription duration

Participant	Interview Time ($\approx$ min)	Transcript Word Count	Transcript Page Count
1	19 minutes	1051	4
2	20 minutes	1227	4
3	28 minutes	1653	5
4	22 minutes	1465	5
5	14 minutes	841	3
6	19 minutes	1020	4
7	20 minutes	1212	3
8	27 minutes	1629	5
9	20 minutes	1300	4
10	15 minutes	959	3
11	20 minutes	1033	4
12	29 minutes	2006	6
13	27 minutes	1984	6
14	18 minutes	1020	4
15	16 minutes	900	3
16	21 minutes	1227	4
17	20 minutes	1187	4
18	24 minutes	1639	5
19	15 minutes	920	3
20	14 minutes	801	3
21	20 minutes	1007	4
Total	456 minutes	22,455	87

5.4 Themes and Findings

This section discusses the main themes and findings derived from the qualitative study. This section begins by exploring the participants' sharing behaviour in the context of SMIs. Afterwards, themes related to audience factors are discussed. The subsequent theme is devoted to followers' verification behaviour, elucidating the link between their verification practices and subsequent sharing behaviour.

5.4.1 Sharing Behaviour

Sharing is so important that without users generating content and then sharing that content, social media platforms cannot survive (Khan and Idris, 2019). The central objective of this qualitative study was to illuminate the audience factors that influence sharing behaviour in relation to SMIs. Since followers' sharing behaviour is the main outcome of this study, it was crucial to ensure that participants fully understand this concept. Thus, the researcher began by introducing the notion of sharing behaviour to participants. The researcher asked participants about the frequency of sharing, receivers of shared content, types of content shared, and reasons for not sharing. The researcher also explored whether participants extend their sharing to other platforms like WhatsApp or iMessage. This allowed us to introduce and comprehend the notion of sharing behaviour while uncovering its patterns in the realm of SMIs.

Understanding how often participants engage in sharing behaviour provides insight into the regularity and prevalence of their actions, which helps assess the significance of sharing within their online engagements. Notably, thirteen participants revealed a daily sharing routine, four shared content weekly, three shared monthly, and one reported rare instances of sharing. Additionally, the researcher delved into the receivers of shared content to discern whether participants direct their sharing predominantly toward specific groups or a wider audience. Participants predominantly share content from SMIs with individuals who share similar interests, namely their friends, family, or both. Other participants mentioned that they 'repost' the SMI's content on their social platforms, extending its reach beyond their immediate circle of friends and family. The following quotes serve as illustrative examples:

“Sharing is caring. I usually like sharing posts, especially if they are about topics I am interested in to know more about.” (Participant 15)

“If I see something interesting show up on my Instagram or Snapchat explore page, I will share it with those friends that have common interests.” (Participant 13)

“I prefer reposting my favourite influencer’s content because it ensures all my friends have the chance to see it. If my profile was public, even more people could benefit from these great posts.” (Participant 08)

Exploring the types of content participants share sheds light on their preferences, interests, and the nature of content that resonates with them, aiding in understanding the content’s role in their sharing behaviour. The most frequently shared category was entertainment, underlining the appeal of amusing and engaging content. Following closely were fashion-related posts. Moreover, some participants also noted sharing religious content, parenting, and volunteerism, revealing the diversity of their sharing preferences across different areas. Some of the participants’ quotes are presented below:

“I love following influencers who share hilarious memes and funny videos. It is my daily dose of laughter and a great way to unwind after a long day.” (Participant 12)

“As a parent, I find so much value in influencers who share practical parenting tips. Their advice helps me navigate the challenges of raising kids in today’s world.” (Participant 15)

“Seeing influencers actively engaged in volunteer work and community projects inspires me to contribute more to my society. Their efforts remind me of the importance of giving back.” (Participant 04)

Next, the researcher shed light on some reasons that led participants to choose not to share content provided by SMIs. For instance, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with SMIs who appeared to mimic one another, emphasizing the need for content originality and creativity, and allowing SMIs’ to have some degree of freedom when creating content (Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019). Additionally, several participants conveyed their desire for informative, high-quality content, suggesting that poor content would not elicit their engagement behaviour. Therefore, Followers are less inclined to follow and engage with an SMI who fails to provide new and valuable content (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). The following quotes highlight these perspectives:

“A lot of influencers are just clones. Some influencers are creative and come up with new ideas. However, there are only a few of them.”
(Participant 19)

“I think those influencers that work with the same media agencies all have similar content, but those working separately are more creative. I believe this is because the media agencies control every piece of content posted, whereas the other influencers are on their own and have more freedom. If they all lacked creativity and were doing the exact same things, it would be extremely boring, and I would not be interested in following their content anymore.” (Participant 13)

“I love her makeup tutorials; they are so useful. I feel like I learned a lot of tips and tricks from her... Maybe if the influencer provides something useful, then I will start to pay more attention to them.”
(Participant 11)

“I love knowledge. Accepting others’ opinions is some sort of knowledge... I am starving for knowledge. What matters to me is to grow intellectually. Therefore, when I follow an influencer, what matters to me is the quality of information he provides. Otherwise, what is the point of sharing?” (Participant 03)

Lastly, some participants mentioned sharing content from one platform to another. In essence, these individuals engage in a dynamic form of content distribution, wherein they transfer content from one online platform to another, contributing to increased visibility and wider content reach (Swani and Labrecque, 2020). In this regard, participants 02 and 06 stated:

“I know some of my friends are not on Snapchat; therefore, I share content from Snapchat to Twitter with Snapchat, either by copying the link or sharing directly.” (Participant 02)

“I am part of a few WhatsApp groups where we discuss different topics. Whenever I find interesting content from some of my favourite influencers, I share the links with my groups. It creates conversations and keeps us connected.” (Participant 06)

5.4.2 Audience Factors

Objective 1: To qualitatively explore and identify audience-specific factors that may influence followers' sharing behaviour.

One of the main objectives of this qualitative phase was to identify factors that relate to the audience following SMIs and how it affects their sharing behaviour. Participants were encouraged to think about their personality traits driving their interactions with their preferred SMIs. The prevalent recurring themes that emerged from these reflections were a strong adherence to collectivist values and a notable level of self-efficacy when engaging with a specific social media platform. These findings highlight the influential role of collectivism and self-efficacy in shaping audience engagement with SMIs. Table 5.3 presents a selection of participant quotes, their corresponding codes, and themes, collectively illuminating key audience factors.

Table 5.3: Selected participant quotes, codes, and themes on audience factors

Sample Participant Quotes	Codes	Themes
<i>"The content she shares about helping others is the most touching part. So, all in all, her family content is the most important characteristic of her content. This is the main reason I engage and follow her." (Participant 10)</i> <i>"The way he treats his family and older brothers, the way he respects them, the way he respects his nephews, and his kindness and smiley face, makes me respect him." (Participant 04)</i>	Family oriented Obeying parents Family person	Collectivism
<i>"I love her because she is showing what our culture has in Saudi Arabia; it is so inspiring and feels like she is celebrating our identity. Makes me feel proud, honestly. I send this kind of content to my foreign friends to show them our culture". (Participant 16)</i> <i>"Respecting authority is integral to our cultural norms. I have seen a few influencers being punished by the authorities for posting stuff that does not align with our traditions." (Participant 01)</i>	Focus on culture Obeying the rules Respecting authority	

<i>"I take pride in the success of [name's] because, to me, it mirrors the success of Saudi Arabia as a whole." (Participant 05)</i> <i>"I care a lot about supporting community projects and local causes." (Participant 04)</i>	Feeling proud of other's success Doing social good Helping the community	
<i>"Those platforms allow easy access to any content that influencers post. If you do not know what is going on, you will just share anything" (Participant 21)</i> <i>"I feel more confident using social media, so engaging with influencers is natural for me. It is like having a conversation with someone I know." (Participant 08)</i>	Confident Know the trick Natural	Self-efficacy
<i>"I do not think that random social media users can understand influencers. They need to have certain skills or at least follow the influencer for a substantial amount of time. I think you need some sort of skill to engage with influencers." (Participant 09)</i> <i>"It makes it more difficult for them to act because users are getting better at using [platform]." (Participant 05)</i>	Need for skill Finding SMIs Getting better	
<i>"I have noticed that when I am unsure about using a platform, I tend to just scroll through without interacting much. But if I know what I am doing, I am more active." (Participant 21)</i> <i>"Understanding the ins and outs of social media makes engaging with SMIs more enjoyable." (Participant 02)</i>	Platform Familiarity Knowledge Know-how	

5.4.2.1 Collectivism

Most participants agreed on the influence of cultural values and their significance in motivating behavioural engagement with SMIs. Every individual has values, but each person has a different value set. However, some values seem to be consistent and affected by an individual's culture (Weber, 2017). Although such values are deeply individualistic, personal, and differ from one to another, some values were commonly shared by participants. For example, the importance of family, culture, helping others, and generosity. Saudi Arabia is essentially viewed as a collectivist culture (Jiang, Garris and Aldamer, 2018; Sheikh *et al.*, 2017). The Saudi people generally share a strong moral code and cultural values, such as hospitality, loyalty, and a sense of duty to support their community. Hence, it is no surprise that their

collectivist cultural orientation plays a role in how participants engage with SMIs. Table 5.4 below presents keywords or codes the participants used to describe their collectivist values.

Table 5.4: Participants' keywords used to describe collectivism

Variable	Keywords (Codes)
Collectivism	Family oriented, religious, focus on culture, doing social good, charities, obeying parents, family person, social harmony, feeling proud of other's success, helping the community, obeying the rules, respecting authority, social person, cultural values

Participants who emphasized familial bonds displayed a heightened interest in SMIs that showcased affection towards families. Notably, the term family was mentioned over 30 times by the participants. Participant 04, echoing this sentiment, explicitly expressed a preference for family-oriented SMIs:

“The way he treats his family and older brothers, the way he respects them, the way he respects his nephews, and his kindness and smiley face, makes me respect him. Because I see myself accepting such principles, and I wish I follow him on such principles and be like him.”

When SMIs share stories involving individuals with whom they have strong personal connections, such as family members and friends, it increases their followers' engagement (Conde and Casais, 2023). Resonating with this notion, Participant 10 stated:

“I am a family person, and I expect [name] to be the same. When I see [name] posting around her family, I tend to share it with my family.”

Furthermore, Participant 11 asserted that upholding family values and adhering to established norms contribute to forming favourable opinions of her preferred SMI.

“When [name] obeys their parents and confirms to our Saudi traditions. I think these things make me have a favourable opinion toward my favourite influencer.”

Moreover, Participant 11 also mentioned that her favourite SMI spends time with her family when she is not promoting products and services:

“When she is not working, she is close to her mom and family.”

Individualistic cultures emphasize the independence and success of SMIs; meanwhile, collectivist cultures highlight interdependence, family integrity and group well-being (Silva, Farias and Silva, 2023). Participant 11 also highlighted that her preferred SMI not only engages with her family but also addresses topics concerning women at large.

“She always hangs out with her mom; she is such a sweetheart. She sometimes discusses issues that matter to women in our society and raises awareness. She not only talks about her success stories 24/7.”

In a similar vein, Participant 10 follows an SMI who frequently visits hospitals to interact with disabled children. The participant noted that SMIs engaged in charitable activities elicit favourable perceptions:

“I love helping others, especially those in need. When I see [name] doing the same, I have positive opinions towards her. She is trying hard to grow confidence in children; I can see that.”

The same participant also mentioned that her favourite SMI’s content surrounds her family and helping others, which she considers the foremost pivotal element in the content:

“The content she shares about helping others is the most touching part. So, all in all, her family content is the most important characteristic of her content. This is the main reason I engage and follow her.”

A feeling of belonging to this close conservative environment generates expectations of a relationship (Hueso *et al.*, 2020). Participant 16 noted his frequent engagement with family and friends, reinforcing the continuation of personal family values, a feature of collectivist orientations:

“I think because I am a very social person, I spend lots of time with friends and family.”

In conjunction with the emphasis on family values, several participants underscored the significance of culture and its portrayal within SMI content. Participant 10 further exemplified this sentiment, highlighting:

“His stories are historical and based on true events. His stories also touch our Saudi Arabian culture”.

Participant 01 expressed admiration for her favourite SMI due to her representation of Saudi Arabian culture, finding it deeply inspiring. This sentiment illustrates how the SMI's content resonates with and showcases cultural values, which is particularly significant in a collectivist society like Saudi Arabia, where cultural identity and shared values hold great importance. Sharing this content with foreign friends suggests a desire to share and promote the collective cultural identity of Saudi Arabia.

“I love her because she is showing what our culture has in Saudi Arabia; it is so inspiring and feels like she is celebrating our identity. Makes me feel proud, honestly. I send this kind of content to my foreign friends to show them our culture”. (Participant 01)

SMIs can significantly affect the community culture and followers' sense of belonging (Farivar, Wang and Turel, 2022). For example, Participant 13, who lives between Saudi Arabia and the United States, mentioned that her favourite SMI has a similar situation where she has a balance between two different cultures:

“I think that is the biggest connection I have with her. She is living a life similar to mine where she is balancing two cultures.”

Collectivist leaders strive to do what is right and fair for the collective good of their organization, community, or entire society (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999). Participant 18 expressed respect for his favoured SMI's adherence to rules and portrayal of Saudi Arabian conservatism in content, highlighting the cultural significance within Saudi Arabia's collectivist framework.

“I respect him for not breaking the rules once. He always acts in a modest way and speaks of how we should respect our traditions and always be proud of our culture. This is the kind of influencer that can represent us globally.”

Similarly, Participant 01 mentioned that respecting authority is central to a collectivist society. Notably, some SMIs who deviated from these cultural norms have faced repercussions from the authorities.

“Respecting authority is integral to our cultural norms. I have seen a few influencers being punished by the authorities for posting stuff that does not align with our traditions.”

Likewise, in alignment with collectivist values, Participant 06 emphasized how her favourite SMI consistently adheres to Saudi cultural norms by wearing an Islamic scarf (Abaya):

“It is amazing that she always wears the Abaya even when she is travelling abroad; she is not faking it. This makes me like her even more. No wealth or fame can change her.”

Furthermore, various other participants raised the importance of displaying kindness and engaging in acts of philanthropy towards others. For instance, Participant 04 affirmed:

“He travels around the world with charities in order to provide help for those in need, and he takes care of homeless people and orphan children. I care a lot about supporting community projects and local causes.”

Participant 05 expressed pride in the achievements of his favourite SMI, noting that the SMI’s success is seen as a reflection of the broader success of Saudi Arabia as a whole:

“I take pride in the success of [name’s] because, to me, it mirrors the success of Saudi Arabia as a whole.”

Participant 11 discussed the concept of collective security in Saudi Arabia. She highlighted how her preferred SMI consistently engages in prayers for the well-being and prosperity of the entire Saudi Arabian community, aligning with the collectivist perspective that emphasizes the welfare of the collective as a whole.

“The way she always starts with God bless our country tells you a lot about her personality. She prays for the king, the crown prince, and the nation.”

Some participants are more careful in choosing what content aligns with their own values. If they perceive that the content from SMIs does not align with their own beliefs or does not provide substantial value, they may be less inclined to share it.

“I only share content that fits with my own values. For instance, I am less likely to share content from Western cultures.” (Participant 03)

The adoption of Islam has led the Saudi people to share a strong set of cultural values. Participant 04 emphasized the influence of religion, explaining how it draws him closer to his favoured SMI, thereby exemplifying the deep connection between cultural collectivism and religious identity.

“I am a religious person, and I like religious people. So, if they provide content aligning with our culture, I am definitely sharing.”

Based on the participants’ verbatim provided earlier, the present study has chosen to adopt Hofstede’s (1984) cultural theory. It was further decided that collectivism is chosen as an audience factor for the current study. Hofstede (1984) is often credited with developing the cultural dimensions theory, which includes the concepts of individualism and collectivism. The typology of individualism/collectivism cultural value dimension is one of the most well-developed and prevalent in marketing studies (e.g., Chen, 2010; Goodrich and de Mooij, 2014; Silva, Farias and Silva, 2023). The difference can be expressed by the range of social concerns, which refers to bonds and links with others. For example, collectivistic societies emphasize loyalty to the group, family values, and emotional dependence on groups (Darwish and Huber, 2003). Singelis et al. (1995) extended and refined Hofstede’s seminal work by introducing the concepts of horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism. Related to this study, collectivism can be classified as “horizontal” (valuing equality) and “vertical” (valuing hierarchy). Specifically, horizontal collectivism assesses the degree to which individuals integrate themselves within their in-groups, while vertical collectivism evaluates the extent to which individuals submit to the authority of the in-group and are prepared to make sacrifices for it (Triandis and Gelfand, 1998).

Saudi Arabia is generally viewed as a collectivist culture (Jiang, Garris and Aldamer, 2018; Sheikh *et al.*, 2017) and scored high in Hofstede’s measurement of collectivism (Hofstede Insights, 2023; Cassell and Blake, 2012). As stated by Al-Ghathami (2005), collectivism is not exclusive to Saudi society but is a shared desire among Arab and Islamic societies as a whole. Within the context of collectivist values in Saudi Arabia, a strong sense of community identity is evident across various aspects of society, exemplified by the prevalence of tribalism,

ideological homogeneity, and the Saudi family structure (Jiang, Garris and Bendania, 2010; Jiang, Garris and Aldamer, 2018). Moreover, Saudi society is very attached to religion, traditions, and the safety of the family (Klabi and Binzafrah, 2023). Specifically, Islam inherently promotes collectivism by emphasising communal harmony, shared responsibilities, and a strong sense of unity among its followers (Cultural Atlas, n.d.). The teachings of Islam encourage close-knit social bonds, mutual support, and the prioritization of the community's welfare, reflecting the core values of collectivism (Roccas, 2005).

The decision to choose collectivism as the overarching variable is justified by the convergence of several key thematic elements identified in the participants' quotes. The concepts of culture, family, social good, community care, cultural representation, modesty, and rule obedience are all inherently linked to collectivist values. Collectivism emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within a group, valuing communal well-being, shared responsibilities, and adherence to societal norms (Hofstede, 1984; Singelis *et al.*, 1995). The consistent presence of these themes within the participants' narratives demonstrates a strong alignment with the core principles of collectivism, validating its selection as the most suitable variable to encapsulate and interpret the observed patterns in our study. Furthermore, integrating collectivism contributes to the influencer marketing literature, as suggested by Vrontis *et al.* (2021): "Use Hofstede's cultural dimensions to examine whether consumers from diverse cultures react differently to IM strategies" (p. 634). It is argued that the level of collectivism exhibited by followers holds a pivotal influence on their inclination to receive, engage with, and subsequently share messages from SMIs, thereby influencing their patterns of sharing behaviour.

5.4.2.2 *Self-efficacy*

Self-efficacy is defined as a person's judgment of his or her ability to execute a specific behaviour (Bandura, 1986). The current study builds on the notion of "social media self-efficacy" (Hocevar, Flanagan and Metzger, 2014). It defines self-efficacy as the level of confidence and belief in one's ability to use social media platforms, navigate their features, and engage in various online activities. Table 5.5. presents the keywords or codes that the participants used to describe their self-efficacy.

Table 5.5: Participants' keywords used to describe self-efficacy

Variable	Keywords (Codes)
Self-efficacy	Confident, easy access, expertise, knowledge, natural, evaluation, getting better, awareness, know the trick, fake drama, fake SMIs, navigation, finding SMIs, straightforward, face filters, know-how, need for skill, platform familiarity

The participants emphasized the importance of possessing adequate knowledge about using social media platforms when following and engaging with SMIs. More specifically, they underscored that having a high level of confidence in their ability to understand and navigate a specific social platform significantly shaped their interactions with SMIs. They suggested that individuals with lower self-efficacy might be more prone to accepting SMIs' messages without inspection and could encounter difficulties in selecting SMIs who align with their preferences. For instance, Participants 04, 14, 21, and 08 articulated these points:

"It would be difficult to find influencers that match your personality. Moreover, it will not be easy to navigate through the influencer's content." (Participant 04)

"I do not add influencers randomly. I typically cherry-pick them beforehand." (Participant 14)

"Those platforms allow easy access to any content that influencers post. If you do not know what is going on, you will just share anything" (Participant 21)

"I feel more confident using social media, so engaging with influencers is natural for me. It is like having a conversation with someone I know." (Participant 08)

Self-efficacy is dynamic. In other words, it adapts to new learnings and experiences (Lin, Fu and Lu, 2022). Over time, followers can improve their self-efficacy on a certain issue as experiences accumulate (Luthans and Peterson, 2002). As followers' self-efficacy deepens, an organic learning pattern occurs, further boosting sharing behaviour toward SMIs.

“It is like a cycle – the more confident I am with social media, the more I engage with SMIs. And the more I engage, the more I learn and become even more confident.” (Participant 07)

“I have noticed that when I am unsure about using a platform, I tend to just scroll through without interacting much. But if I know what I am doing, I am more active.” (Participant 21)

“Understanding the ins and outs of social media makes engaging with SMIs more enjoyable.” (Participant 02)

If a follower has high self-efficacy in their ability to engage in a particular behaviour, their belief in their ability can act as a stimulus that motivates them to promote that behaviour. When considering the dynamics of engaging with SMIs, Participant 09 expressed a perspective highlighting the importance of certain skills and knowledge. Their viewpoint suggests that a comprehensive understanding of SMIs might necessitate a level of skill.

“I do not think that random social media users can understand influencers. They need to have certain skills or at least follow the influencer for a substantial amount of time. I think you need some sort of skill to engage with influencers.”

Using different social media platforms demands the acquisition of new skills for every platform (Aw and Agnihotri, 2023). The complexity of social media platforms becomes evident when considering features such as stories or livestreaming. Engaging effectively with these functionalities requires a certain level of familiarity and skill.

“Oh wow, there are a lot of things to learn on social media. Take, for example, the stories tab on Instagram or live streaming on TikTok. Not anyone can engage if they do not know how to use those features. Also, new features keep evolving; think about things like polls and quizzes.”
(Participant 01)

On social media, users encounter what Marwick (2013) refers to edited personas. Although social media platforms like Snapchat and Instagram have been interpreted as user-generated content (UGC) platforms, the content on these platforms is becoming increasingly edited (Abidin, 2016). Having the confidence to identify fake or unrealistic SMIs that do not align

with their genuine personality and values has been mentioned among several participants. These SMIs may engage in false behaviours, misrepresent their lifestyles, or manipulate content to create a false impression, often leading to a disconnect between their portrayed image and actual actions (Lee and Abidin, 2021). This eventually might reduce followers' inclination to share the content.

"I can know who is acting and who is faking it. It makes it more difficult for them to act because users are getting better at using [platform]."

(Participant 05)

"I do believe that sometimes the reality of those influencers is far from the glamour associated with their content. Most of the videos or Pinterest-worthy pictures we see are one in a hundred (most of them Facetoned or photoshopped). I think it depends on our awareness as a viewer/follower. Sometimes, you have to remind yourself to avoid comparing your life with the people you follow on social media."

(Participant 15)

Snapchat, a prominently referenced social platform among participants, offers a mechanism for uncovering trending SMIs through its Discover tab—a designated section akin to Instagram's Explore tab. Snapchat's algorithm prominently showcases SMIs who have garnered substantial engagement, measured by the volume of shares, within the preceding 24 hours. Participant 18 asserted that unless you are confident in your Snapchat abilities, you might randomly follow invaluable SMIs:

"There is no way you will find trash influencers appearing on my Discover page because I keep hiding them one by one. However, other users might not know about this trick, so they keep following influencers that are trending. I guess that is one of the many ways influencers accumulate a large number of followers. Simply be controversial, say something out of the norm, people will share your content more, you will be trending, and you will appear on the Discover tab."

Several other participants noted that the utilization of beauty filters, which subtly promote evolving beauty standards by smoothing skin texture, refining nose appearance, and enlarging eyes (Javornik *et al.*, 2022), might evade the detection of inexperienced users:

“Let us say you have a certain perception about your favourite influencer. But when you meet him in person, you realize that the influencer is not as perfect as he claims. It is all about face filters.”
(Participant 09)

“When influencers use filters, they look quite different in real life. They are twisting reality basically.” (Participant 12)

The thoughts shared by participants strongly support the choice of self-efficacy as a key factor in our conceptual framework. Their experiences show that feeling confident with social media makes engaging with SMIs more simple and natural, as they perceive themselves as capable of effectively sharing content. When uncertain about using a platform, they tend to scroll without engaging much, but with knowledge, they are more active in sharing. Hence, if followers do not have enough competency and knowledge of using a social platform, they may show reluctance to engage with SMIs because they do not know them well or simply cannot do it. They also mention that having skills and knowing how to use social media affect their ability to interact with SMIs and evaluate their authenticity. Therefore, if a follower possesses high self-efficacy in their capability to engage in a specific behaviour, it is highly likely that their belief in their ability can serve as a stimulus that encourages them to promote that behaviour. By grounding the conceptual framework in the concept of self-efficacy, the research is aligned with the empirical evidence presented in the literature review (Chapter 2) and narratives gathered from participants. The qualitative impact of self-efficacy on engagement and sharing behaviour with SMIs validates its inclusion as a potential variable to explore followers' sharing behaviour within the realm of SMIs.

5.5 Verification Behaviour

Objective 2: To qualitatively explore followers' verification behaviour and how it affects their sharing behaviour.

As a crucial aspect of our qualitative study, the researcher aimed to comprehend the impact of verification behaviour on followers' sharing habits. A range of questions was posed to ensure participants' clear understanding of this concept. For instance, participants were asked if they

engaged in content verification before making decisions influenced by their favourite SMI. Subsequently, the researcher probed participants to explain the underlying motivations that prompted them to adopt this verification behaviour and their verification methods. the researcher also inquired whether they sought verified status indicators or looked for other sources to verify online information. Furthermore, the researcher explored the interplay between attachment to a preferred SMI and the inclination to verify their content. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on these points, offering insights into their verification practices and the underlying motivations driving their behaviour.

5.5.1 Reasons for Verification

Social media empowers individuals, often strangers, to create content. However, the usual cues for assessing source reliability are often missing in this online space (Hocevar, Flanagin and Metzger, 2014). While printed media typically undergoes rigorous factual verification, information on social media is often unverified (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007). Participant 12 introduced a thought-provoking perspective by highlighting the potential for deception on social media, given the absence of a comprehensive fact-checking system for everyone's opinions. This assertion underscores the challenges in ensuring the accuracy of content. Consequently, this participant emphasized the crucial role of verification as a mechanism to address this concern:

“There is no program or system that can check the factuality of information. Anyone can say anything. I can post a lie and get 100 bots to retweet it... because honestly, most people lie, and it is easier to lie on social media platforms because there is no one checking.”
(Participant 12)

The participants provided various reasons for their attempts to verify or not verify SMIs' posts and whether it affects their sharing behaviour. For instance, having a prior positive experience with a certain SMI would lessen the significance of verification behaviour. Participant 21 argued that she does not investigate products that her favourite SMI recommended:

“I do not actually because I have tried many products recommended by her, and they met my expectations. Therefore, I will not be reluctant to recommend.”

Beauty SMIs are known to record the transition from a bare face (no make-up) to a full face (full make-up). If the SMI were transparent and provided proof (e.g., presents the disadvantages of a certain product; tries the product on oneself), this would result in lower validation attempts regarding the SMI's post:

“If [name] tried a product on her own skin and I saw results, then there is no need to verify. I will believe her because I can see results in front of me, and only then can I share the product with my friends. If it is only 'chit-chat' and no results, I must verify and seek others' opinions.”
(Participant 07).

In contrast, verification behaviour becomes imperative if SMIs do not fit the subject, product, or service they recommend. Fit refers to the congruence between an SMI's domain of expertise and the sponsoring brand (Torres, Augusto and Matos, 2019). This was evident in Participant 12 reply, who follows medical doctors SMIs:

“Imagine [name] endorsed a product unrelated to his expertise. I will know that he just did it for the sake of money. It is dangerous to pass along such products to others. I have to do my part in the research.”

According to DRC (2023), 61% of Saudis unfollow SMIs if they excessively promote advertisements. Echoing this sentiment, Participant 08 expressed a lack of trust in SMIs due to their commercial intent:

“Definitely verify. Even if the influencer advertised something I like, I would not buy it from him because I do not trust a single influencer; they are in it for the money.”

In addition, having a prior negative experience with a certain product or service makes the verification process especially critical:

“If an influencer promotes a shoe store, and I had a negative experience with it a few years ago, their endorsement will not alter my perception. Verification becomes crucial, considering my personal experience.” (Participant 18)

5.5.2 Methods of Verification

According to Torres, Gerhart and Negahban (2018), when individuals become aware of credibility and misinformation concerns, they often turn to alternative sources to verify the information's accuracy. Similarly, the participants employed various techniques to validate the information posted by SMIs. One aspect that participants mentioned throughout the interview was verifying information using other sources. Participants preferred cross-checking both visual and verbal information from different sources, such as asking for peers' opinions, reviewing websites, social media, and search engines rather than relying on the SMI's statement. This is in line with a recent study conducted by DRC (2023) revealing that Saudi followers engage in verification behaviour by conducting online research about the product mentioned or by seeking opinions from friends and family members. For example, participant 02 used search engines and peers' opinions to verify information regarding beauty products:

“It depends on the content. If we talk about ads, for some products, I might need to read about other people's opinions. For example, if my favourite influencer talks about a make-up product, I usually Google it beforehand.” (Participant 02)

Other participants mentioned that for tangible products, they might go out deliberately and examine the product physically. For example, Participant 17 prefers to smell perfumes before buying them because people have different tastes.

“Definitely, I need to verify. For example, let us assume that my favourite influencer endorsed a certain perfume. I will not go and buy it blindly. I will actually go and smell it in the mall. It is not just about trust; people have different tastes. What works for him might not work for me.” (Participant 17)

5.5.3 Verification Status

The researcher also explored whether participants attributed any significance to SMIs' verification status (denoted by a blue checkmark on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter or a yellow star on Snapchat) and whether this influenced their verification behaviour. Unexpectedly, none of the participants indicated that verification status influenced their perception of SMIs. It was noted that participants were already aware of the purpose of verification status – namely, to confirm the authenticity of the account owner.

“No, it adds nothing to the influencer. I think it only says this influencer has a real identity according to what he claims to be.” (Participant 11)

Other participants expressed scepticism towards obtaining verification status, as they believed it could be bought through unethical methods:

“Never. Literary, it means nothing because people can simply pay money to get it.” (Participant 14)

“Not at all. It means that either someone has so many followers, or someone has paid to get it.” (Participant 17)

According to Dumas and Stough (2022), followers are significantly less likely to trust verified SMIs because they associate it with celebrity status rather than authenticity. Some participants mentioned that they particularly tend to verify the information posted by verified SMIs because they are untrustworthy and only seek social recognition. Participant 15 articulated this opinion by stating:

“Nah! I actually tend to validate the information given by those verified influencers. Most of those influencers do anything for clout, even if it means buying followers to get verified. So, no, it means nothing to me.”

5.5.4 Verification Behaviour and Parasocial-relationships

The researcher asked whether having an emotional attachment in the form of PSR to an SMI would still require verification behaviour. Although some participants have formed an emotional relationship with their favourite SMI, they still asserted that the verification process remains important. The participants stated that SMIs are humans, and they sometimes make mistakes. This leads us to understand that some participants already feel attached to SMIs by creating excuses for their mistakes.

“Yes. If he posted some information that matters to me, I will still verify it. Even if I was attached, he might have made an innocent fault and was in a rush.” (Participant 07)

“This is a tough question. For [name] in general, I do not verify because I trust her. But at the end of the day, we are all humans, we do make mistakes, and we are not robots, computers, or machines.” (Participant 11)

In today's digital landscape, trust is crucial in cultivating PSRs with SMIs (Dewantara, Jin and Gardiner, 2023). However, even in the presence of strong trust and PSR, Participant 01 asserted that verification behaviour remains a wise practice. In drawing a parallel to a bridge, she drew a comparison to the idea that trust is necessary, but it is still wise to inspect the bridge before proceeding, even when the bridge is sturdy.

“Trust is important, but it does not hurt to check the bridge before crossing it, even if the bridge is strong.”

However, Participant 16 understood the power of having an emotional relationship with SMIs. The participant asserted that a heightened sense of attachment corresponded with a reduced inclination to engage in rigorous content verification. Fundamentally, this participant highlighted the notion that a stronger emotional bond generated a sense of trust, diminishing the perceived need for fact-checking the SMI's content:

“I think if I were to have an attachment, I would not go out of my way to verify information. I think of it as a real-life tangible relationship or friendship, where you take the person's word for granted. I think a lot of influencers would like to reach that level of connection with their fans because they know that these fans are more likely to support them for longer if they establish a 'real' connection. A lot of them will use words like 'family' to refer to their fans or state that they love their fans. I think all of this works to ensure a long-lasting connection”.

5.5.5 Verification Behaviour and Sharing Behaviour

Previous research has shown that when individuals seek to share content in online environments, they are responsible for evaluating the content's quality before deciding to accept and share it (Charband and Jafari Navimipour, 2016). Based on this, the researcher asked whether verification behaviour would impact the participants' sharing behaviour. Fifteen of our participants reported a tendency to verify content shared by SMIs before deciding to share it. Interestingly, this tendency was particularly pronounced when dealing with informational content, whereas there was a reduced emphasis on verification when interacting with entertainment-focused content.

“In the event that you share certain content, for example, funny situations or jokes, you do not need to verify. As for the press release

or information, I may search for its source to verify, for example, official accounts such as a ministry, a government reference, or a documented source of information.” (Participant 05)

“Depends on the content. If it were an important piece of information, I would verify it before sharing it. However, if it was something funny, I would not because it is a joke.” (Participant 10)

Participant 04 stated that he wants his peers to benefit from the content he is watching. However, he first verifies the content and then decides to share it:

“If I ever decide to share content, what matters to me is that I am satisfied with what the influencer has posted. At the same time, I share it because I want others to benefit from such information. If there were no benefits from sharing, I would not bother. Therefore, I firstly verify whatever I intend to share; if it is correct and beneficial, then I share it.”

A study by Stanger, Alnaghaimshi and Pearson (2017) revealed that social media users in Saudi Arabia exhibited a cautious approach when sharing content among friends. Notably, the content they chose to share was required to align with prevailing cultural and religious norms. In relation to this matter, Participant 18 stated that SMIs nowadays have a habit of sharing controversial content and misinformation to gain more publicity, popularity, and attract marketers. He thus urges followers to verify before sharing:

“Definitely verify. Because I know a lot of influencers abuse the fact that sharing misinformation and content that is weird to our society makes them popular and trendy because everyone will share their content and talk about it. They want to gain presence and accumulate more followers to attract sponsorships.”

When individuals consume content from a specific SMI without intending to share it, their tendency to actively verify the post diminishes, as there is no immediate influence on their online persona (Torres, Gerhart and Negahban, 2018). With respect to this issue, Participant 19 said that it is important not to share content blindly because this could potentially impact the credibility of one’s information:

“Yes, definitely because when sharing such information, which might be biased or not true, others might believe it, especially those who trust your information eligibility.”

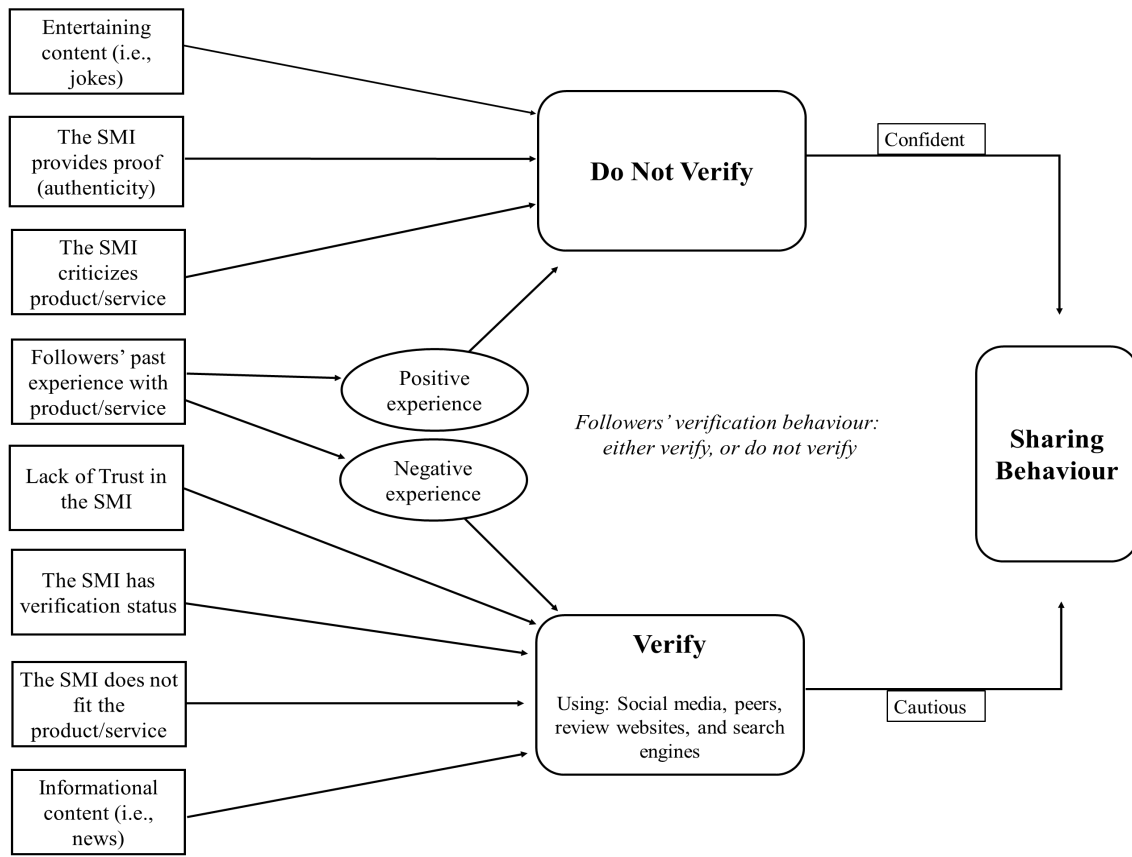
In their qualitative study, Childers and Boatwright (2021) indicated that followers sometimes stated that they felt “scammed” or “tricked” by SMIs’ efforts and, hence, expressed uncertainty about the content that they see regularly in SMIs’ social media feeds. Participant 11 shared a story of a well-known SMI that shared inaccurate information regarding a charity platform. The platform was found to be a swindle. Therefore, it is important to verify what influencers acclaim to be true beforehand:

“A while ago, a very famous influencer was advertising for a charity platform. He claimed that this platform is licenced and registered. However, it turned out that it was not; it was just a scam. Although the influencer apologized and claimed he did not know, his credibility was on the line. I think he lost half of his followers too. That is why it is important to verify.”

5.5.6 Framework for Verification Behaviour

Figure 5.1 presents a framework for followers’ verification behaviour based on the above results. The framework illustrates that the importance of verification diminishes when the content posted is primarily for entertainment purposes. Also, when SMIs provide evidence and offer critiques on products or services, they foster increased confidence in sharing their posts. In contrast, the framework demonstrates that followers are more inclined to verify the content posted by SMIs when trust is lacking, the SMI possesses verification status, incongruence between the SMI and the product/service, or negative past experiences with endorsements have occurred. Lastly, the significance of verification increases when the content posted is more informational and important in nature. As a result, the followers become more cautious when intending to share SMI’s posts.

Figure 5.1: Framework for followers' verification behaviour



Source: The researcher

5.6 Refining the Original Conceptual Model

The results from the qualitative study findings contributed to the conceptual model developed based on the literature review and used in the early stages of this study. These findings confirm the following aspects:

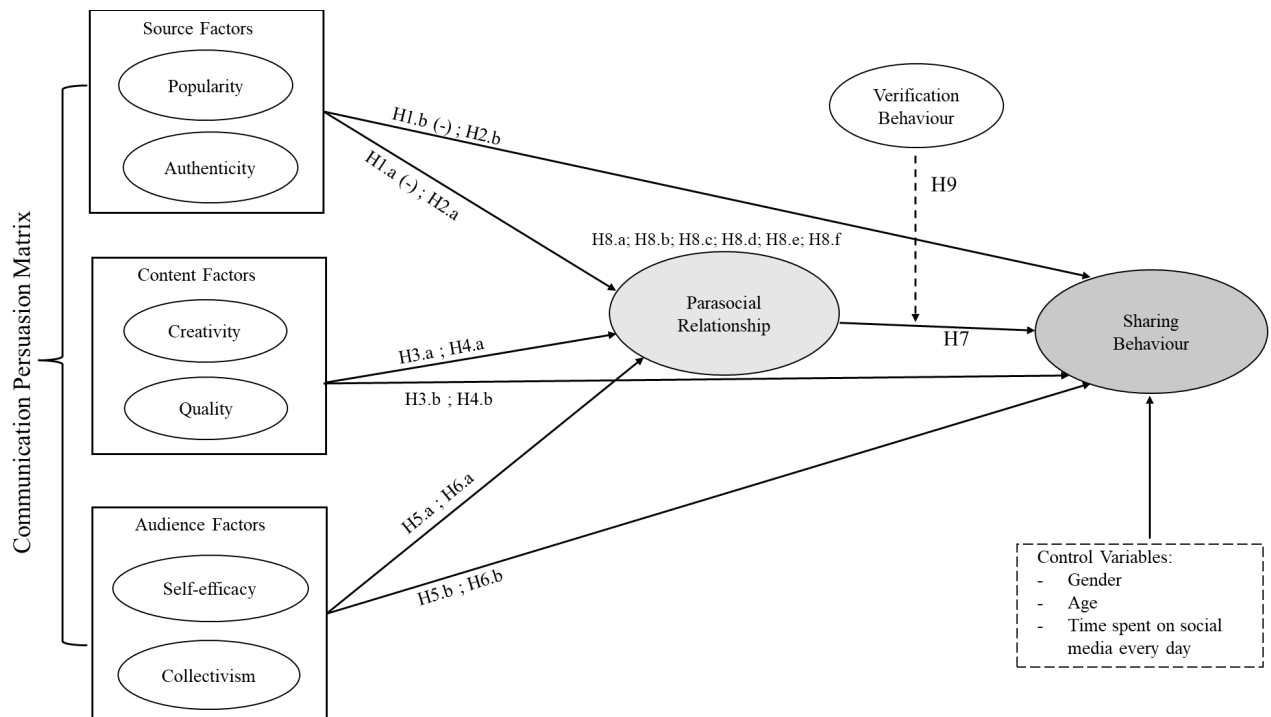
- The qualitative study identified two variables related to the audience following SMIs. First, the current study identified ‘collectivism’ referring to the participants’ values such as family, religion, interdependence, traditions, and harmony among its members. Second, the study identified ‘self-efficacy’ or the level of confidence and belief in one’s ability to use social media platforms to engage with SMIs. To our knowledge, both variables are novel to the influencer marketing literature. Thus, including them in the updated model is sensible to advance knowledge and achieve our research objectives.
- The insights provided by participants further supported the notion that followers with higher levels of self-efficacy possess a heightened awareness and ability to recognize when SMIs employ enhancement filters, like face filters, to alter their appearance. This

heightened judgment plays a role in shaping participants' decisions to engage with these SMIs. In light of this, a new item was introduced into the self-efficacy scale, aimed at capturing this specific aspect (i.e., I feel confident in my abilities to know if content posted on [app] used enhancement filters (for example, face filters)).

- Drawing from the participants' insights, followers' intention to engage in content verification will likely diminish when high PSR levels are present. This diminishing inclination to verify is tied to the trust cultivated through the emotional attachment developed through PSR. Previous misinformation research shows that if trust is present in a relationship, people may have a reduced tendency to verify the information (Majerczak and Strzelecki, 2022). Moreover, Followers at higher PSR levels are less critical of SMIs' posts (Breves *et al.*, 2021). As a consequence, the process of sharing behaviour becomes more fluid. However, the research found evidence that some participants would still engage in verification behaviour even if they established PSR with the SMI. It is known from previous research that Saudi Arabian social media users tend to be more cautious when sharing content with their friends (Stanger, Alnaghaimshi and Pearson, 2017) and that sharing content on online platforms typically necessitates more cognitive effort in comparison to simpler engagement activities like commenting or liking (Kim and Yang, 2017). It can thus be assumed that high verification behaviour will diminish the impact of PSR on sharing behaviour. To capture this specific aspect, one item has been added to the verification scale (i.e., I would still verify [name]'s content, even if I was attached to them). Therefore, the moderating role of verification behaviour is yet to be empirically tested in the second phase (the survey study).

Accordingly, as seen in Figure 5.2, the initial conceptual model is updated based on the findings of the qualitative study and the literature review. In addition, the findings from the qualitative study led to the development of four new hypotheses, as shown in Table 5.6.

Figure 5.2: The proposed conceptual framework



Note: Hypotheses 8.a, 8.b, 8.c, 8.d, 8.e, and 8.f suggest mediation effects between IVs and outcome variable.

Table 5.6: Development of new hypotheses from the qualitative study.

H5	Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on (a) PSR and (b) sharing behaviour.
H6	Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on (a) PSR and (b) sharing behaviour.
H8	PSR will mediate the effect of (e) self-efficacy and (f) collectivism on followers' sharing behaviour.
H9	A high level of verification behaviour will weaken the effect of PSR on sharing behaviour.

5.7 Summary

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative study, which yielded several noteworthy outcomes. Firstly, it contributed to refining the initial conceptual framework by introducing two audience-specific factors: collectivism and self-efficacy. Consequently, the research framework now encompasses nine variables: popularity, authenticity, creativity, quality, collectivism, self-efficacy, parasocial relationships, verification behaviour, and sharing behaviour. Secondly, the importance of verification behaviour in the sharing process has been

established. Thirdly, an expansion of the self-efficacy scale included the addition of one new item, while the verification behaviour scale was augmented with one new item. The subsequent chapter in this thesis will adopt a quantitative approach to test and validate the current research's hypotheses and reach the current study's final conceptual model.

6 Chapter 6: Quantitative Data Findings

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results and findings of this study following the use of the quantitative methodology approach. SPSS V.28 and AMOS V.28 were utilised to analyse the data. This chapter is divided into seven main sections. The chapter begins with data collection procedures for the main survey in Section 6.2, data preparation in Section 6.3, sample characteristics in Section 6.4, and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) in Section 6.5. Then, in Section 6.6, AMOS was utilised to assess the model's fit and confirm the conceptual framework's reliability and validity by undertaking Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Afterwards, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses in Section 6.7. Finally, Section 6.8 concludes with a chapter summary.

6.2 Data Collection Procedures for the Main Survey

In the pilot study phase of this research, the survey was distributed with the assistance of two SMIs. However, to prevent overlap with respondents who were already familiar with the research objectives and to mitigate potential biases arising from specific followers, the main study survey was distributed using a different approach, mainly utilizing various social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Instagram). By leveraging the broader reach of social media platforms, this research can tap into a larger population of potential respondents who may have different demographic characteristics and social media preferences compared to the followers of a single SMI, thus enhancing the diversity and representativeness of the sample.

6.3 Data Preparation

Data preparation is vital in the research process as it ensures data quality for subsequent statistical analyses (Hair *et al.*, 2019). This crucial step involves several key procedures to ensure the collected data is clean and suitable for further examination. This includes data cleaning, testing for non-response bias, presenting measurement items descriptives, normality assessment, and multicollinearity evaluation.

6.3.1 Data Cleaning

The data collection took place between May and June 2023, resulting in 567 responses. To prepare the data for analysis, they were screened and cleaned. All respondents answered the screening questions successfully. The screening questions, including whether participants were

Saudi citizens, above the age of 18, and followed at least one SMI, helped determine eligibility to participate in the study. Therefore, no deletion of these initial responses was required.

The next round of data cleaning involved handling incomplete questionnaires. While force response validation was applied to the survey questions to avoid missing data problems, many incomplete questionnaires were detected, which caused excessive missing data. Most of the incomplete questionnaires were grouped towards the end of the survey, which may indicate that the length of the questionnaire was the main reason for incomplete responses. Notably, listwise deletion, which is the most frequently used method for handling missing data, is considered a reasonable strategy if there is a large enough sample, which was the case in this study (Kang, 2013). In listwise deletion, any case with missing values in any of the variables of interest is entirely excluded from the analysis. The primary advantage of listwise deletion is that it allows all analyses to be conducted on the same number of cases (Kline, 2015). This results in a complete dataset for the variables under consideration, allowing for straightforward analysis without the need to handle missing values. Therefore, 23 incomplete responses were identified. After the deletion of these incomplete questionnaires, a total of 544 responses were identified.

The following round of data cleaning involved selecting respondents who answered the attention question correctly. Question 10 in the questionnaire was designed to filter out careless respondents (i.e., “What was this study about? Dogs, Lions, Tigers, Social Media Influencers”). Respondents who did not answer the attention question correctly were excluded from the questionnaire. Accordingly, 11 non-applicable Respondents were detected and eliminated, leaving us with 533 responses.

The final phase of data cleaning focused on addressing outliers. Outliers are cases with unreasonable characteristics that make them distinctively different from other observations in the dataset (Hair et al., 2019). The Mahalanobis distance test was employed to assess multivariate outliers, evaluating each observation’s position relative to the centroid of all observations on a set of variables (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). It is recommended that “a very conservative probability estimate for a case being an outlier, say, $p < .001$ for the Chi-square value, is appropriate with Mahalanobis distance” (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019, p. 64). Consequently, Mahalanobis distance was calculated for all records using the SPSS Linear function, with Mahalanobis selected in the Distances box from the Save option, resulting in a new variable named MAH_1 in the dataset. Subsequently, the probability that a value from the

Chi-square distribution with 9 degrees of freedom would be lower than the corresponding Mahalanobis distance was computed using the equation $[1 - \text{CDF.CHISQ}(\text{MAH_1}, 9)]$, where 9 signifies the degrees of freedom or the number of variables in this study. Any observation below the targeted p-value of 0.001 was considered a potential multivariate outlier (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). As shown in Table 6.1, 26 cases had a p-value below 0.001 and were consequently removed from the dataset, resulting in a total of 507 responses. A thorough examination reveals a consistent pattern among most of these responses—they consistently selected the same answer (e.g., 1) across all questions, suggesting a lack of seriousness.

Table 6.1: Mahalanobis Distance for outliers

ID	Mahalanobis Distance	p
55	47.16515	.0000
7	45.63488	.0000
62	43.54261	.0000
4	42.24352	.0000
19	42.04111	.0000
3	40.94241	.0000
109	37.95439	.0000
31	37.12039	.0000
12	36.71493	.0000
82	36.56109	.0000
13	33.24928	.0001
14	32.46039	.0002
48	31.72808	.0002
114	31.72590	.0002
22	31.33561	.0003
163	31.14712	.0003
98	30.74910	.0003
20	30.13954	.0004
15	29.98722	.0004
176	29.72852	.0005
32	29.68230	.0005
458	29.57924	.0005
17	29.50300	.0005
351	28.42504	.0008
25	28.36755	.0008
190	28.17139	.0009

Based on the above, the final number of respondents was 507, with a response rate of 89.4%, calculated as $(507/567) \times 100 = 89.4\%$. The sample size for the current study meets the assumption of sufficient sample size to conduct multivariate data analysis. In general, a

minimum sample size of 200 is required to conduct SEM (Kline, 2015). More specifically, Hair et al. (2019) suggest that the sample size for performing multivariate data analysis should be at least 10 observations for each variable. Based on this suggestion, the sample size for the current study should be at least 410 (41 variables * 10). Moreover, similar to the works of Chen, Lin, and Shan (2021), the sample size calculator by Qualtrics was used with the Saudi population size of 32.2 million, a 95% confidence level, and a 5% margin of error. The results indicated that the minimum sample size should be 385 responses. Therefore, the effective sample of 507 respondents is well above the advised size and suitable for the data analysis. Table 6.2 summarizes the data-cleaning process.

Table 6.2: Data cleaning and selecting

Category	Number of responses	Decision	Justification
Incomplete	23	Removed from analysis	Incomplete responses
Attention question	11	Removed from analysis	Did not answer the attention question correctly
Outliers	26	Removed from analysis	Extreme data point that deviates significantly from the rest of the dataset
Applicable	507	Used in the analysis	Valid responses
Total responses initially recorded in Survey Monkey			567

6.3.2 Nonresponse Bias Test

Nonresponse bias arises when the survey's response rate is less than 100%, and respondents who choose not to respond may have provided different answers compared to those who did respond, resulting in biased results that do not accurately reflect the population of interest (Maitland *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, due to the non-completion of the survey by some respondents, it becomes necessary to examine and test for the presence of nonresponse bias.

Various methodological techniques have been developed to identify and assess nonresponse bias. Extrapolation is a widely utilised technique which assumes that late respondents share greater similarities with non-respondents. This assumption arises from the notion that late respondents invest more effort and time in formulating their responses (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). This technique typically follows a particular pattern: sample units who submit their responses prior to the survey deadline and fall within the first quartile/half of respondents

or correspond to an identifiable response wave are compared to those who respond after these events or belong to the last quartile/half or subsequent waves. If no statistically significant differences are observed between these groups of respondents, it is inferred that the study has not been adversely affected by nonresponse bias (Wagner and Kemmerling, 2010). Comparing early and late respondents is a common practice to tackle non-response bias in the influencer marketing literature (e.g., Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022; Wang, Huang and Davison, 2021; Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).

The current study assessed non-response bias using Armstrong and Overton's (1977) approach, which suggests comparing early 25% and late 25% responses on all variables. Accordingly, the total sample of 567 respondents was divided into quartiles to check if there were significant differences between the respondents placed in the first quartile and those placed in the third quartile. An independent samples t-test was conducted on all variables, including demographics. As shown in Table 6.3, the results show no statistically significant difference between the early and late respondents, suggesting that non-response bias does not pose a threat to the study. These findings, thus, minimized concerns about non-response bias.

Table 6.3: Non-response bias test

Variable	Response type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig (2-tailed)
Gender	Early	142	1.45	.499	.636
	Late	142	1.48	.501	
Age	Early	142	1.49	.568	.535
	Late	142	1.54	.579	
Time	Early	142	5.19	.891	.680
	Late	142	5.15	.833	
Education	Early	142	2.56	.903	.410
	Late	142	2.46	.965	
Occupation	Early	142	2.14	1.042	.814
	Late	142	2.11	.976	
Favourite Platform	Early	142	1.30	.753	.871
	Late	142	1.32	.708	
POP	Early	142	4.72	1.085	.055
	Late	142	5.01	1.431	
AUT	Early	142	5.94	.934	.080
	Late	142	5.70	1.316	
CRE	Early	142	5.95	.952	.219
	Late	142	5.81	.899	
QU	Early	142	5.02	1.959	.140

	Late	142	5.36	1.846	
SE	Early	142	5.68	1.269	.190
	Late	142	5.45	1.624	
CV	Early	142	5.13	1.177	.197
	Late	142	4.93	1.479	
VB	Early	142	5.79	1.021	.145
	Late	142	5.59	1.276	
PSR	Early	142	5.52	1.511	.188
	Late	142	5.31	1.166	
SB	Early	142	5.55	1.605	.159
	Late	142	5.30	1.325	

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; VB- Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour.

6.3.3 Measurement Items Descriptions

To enhance comprehension of the available data, a descriptive analysis was conducted on all the measurement items. Table 6.4 displays each measurement item's minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation values. The mean values ranged from 4.26 to 6.07, and the standard deviations ranged from 0.774 to 2.142. In addition, the table demonstrates the absence of any missing values in the data, as indicated by the consistent count of 507 observations for each of the nine measurements.

Table 6.4: Descriptive statistics of the study's variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
POP_1	507	1	7	5.89	1.393
POP_2	507	1	7	5.90	1.365
POP_3	507	1	7	5.80	1.472
POP_4	507	1	7	5.83	1.425
AUT_1	507	1	7	5.86	1.500
AUT_2	507	1	7	5.76	1.438
AUT_3	507	1	7	5.80	1.485
AUT_4	507	1	7	5.64	1.420
CRE_1	507	1	7	5.79	1.172
CRE_2	507	1	7	5.81	1.202
CRE_3	507	1	7	5.67	1.321
CRE_4	507	1	7	5.70	1.217
QU_1	507	1	7	5.26	2.142
QU_2	507	1	7	5.28	2.113
QU_3	507	1	7	5.34	2.040
QU_4	507	1	7	6.06	1.613
SE_1	507	1	7	5.83	1.268

SE_2	507	1	7	5.79	1.295
SE_3	507	1	7	5.78	1.266
SE_4	507	1	7	5.70	1.330
CV_1	507	1	7	5.33	.992
CV_2	507	1	7	5.26	1.020
CV_3	507	2	7	5.29	.897
CV_4	507	1	7	5.28	.913
CV_5	507	1	7	5.23	.940
CV_6	507	1	7	5.25	.994
CV_7	507	1	7	5.17	.981
CV_8	507	1	7	5.21	.931
VB_1	507	1	7	5.62	1.473
VB_2	507	1	7	5.48	1.449
VB_3	507	1	7	5.71	1.334
VB_4	507	1	7	5.59	1.387
PSR_1	507	2	7	5.85	1.155
PSR_2	507	1	7	4.26	.774
PSR_3	507	1	7	6.01	1.301
PSR_4	507	1	7	5.97	1.283
PSR_5	507	1	7	6.07	1.228
SB_1	507	1	7	5.81	1.222
SB_2	507	1	7	5.79	1.243
SB_3	507	1	7	5.86	1.266
SB_4	507	1	7	5.78	1.250

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality, SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; VB: Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour

6.3.4 Normality

In statistical analysis, assessing the normality of data is crucial as it provides insights into the distribution of variables and enables researchers to make appropriate inferences (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Skewness and kurtosis are two commonly used measures that aid in evaluating the departure of a dataset from a normal distribution (Kline, 2015). Skewness measures the asymmetry of the data distribution, indicating whether it is skewed to the left or right. On the other hand, Kurtosis examines the shape of the distribution's tails, determining whether they are lighter or heavier than a normal distribution. By examining these measures, researchers can determine the extent to which their data deviates from normality, allowing them to choose appropriate statistical tests and make valid interpretations (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Scholars have suggested that univariate normality assessment is appropriate when the sample size is large (Kline, 2015; Hair *et al.*, 2019). A large sample produces less concern with regard to irregular

or strange data because large samples tend to reduce the detrimental effects of abnormality (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, “with large samples, the significance level of skewness is not as important as its actual size (worse the farther from zero) and the visual appearance of the distribution. In a large sample, the impact of departure from zero kurtosis also diminishes.” (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019, p. 70).

When assessing univariate normality, researchers have suggested that the value of skewness and kurtosis should be within the range of -2 to +2 (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). However, Kline (2015) and West, Finch and Curran (1995) suggested that the acceptable absolute values for skewness and kurtosis can be between -3 and +3. According to Griffin and Steinbrecher (2013), SEM is a fairly robust analytical method, so small deviations may not represent major violations of assumptions. Moreover, Hair *et al.* (2019) stated that with a large sample size (more than 200), normality assumptions do not pose a threat. Table 6.5 shows the results of skewness and kurtosis, which indicate that the current study’s data is normally distributed and does not exceed the thresholds of ± 3 for skewness and kurtosis.

However, one specific item, namely PSR2, stands out with a kurtosis value of 4.817, surpassing the threshold of +3. Given its significantly high kurtosis, it is recommended to exclude this item from further analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2019). To ensure the appropriateness of excluding PSR2 from the analysis, an assessment of the internal consistency reliability of the measurement scale of PSR was conducted using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient (i.e., $\alpha = 0.861$). The results indicated that the scale demonstrated higher reliability when the item PSR2 was deleted (i.e., $\alpha = 0.888$). Furthermore, PSR2 showed a communality value of 0.441, which is below the threshold of 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, based on these findings, it was determined that removing PSR2 would be appropriate.

Table 6.5: Test for normality

	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
POP_1	507	-1.759	.108	2.934	.217
POP_2	507	-1.710	.108	2.860	.217
POP_3	507	-1.741	.108	2.863	.217
POP_4	507	-1.748	.108	2.942	.217
AUT_1	507	-1.848	.108	2.951	.217
AUT_2	507	-1.773	.108	2.965	.217
AUT_3	507	-1.825	.108	2.905	.217
AUT_4	507	-1.663	.108	2.726	.217

CRE_1	507	-1.444	.108	2.731	.217
CRE_2	507	-1.533	.108	2.933	.217
CRE_3	507	-1.491	.108	2.066	.217
CRE_4	507	-1.479	.108	2.554	.217
QU_1	507	-1.694	.108	1.654	.217
QU_2	507	-1.637	.108	1.496	.217
QU_3	507	-1.416	.108	.718	.217
QU_4	507	-1.618	.108	1.407	.217
SE_1	507	-1.699	.108	2.991	.217
SE_2	507	-1.571	.108	2.545	.217
SE_3	507	-1.550	.108	2.497	.217
SE_4	507	-1.479	.108	1.926	.217
CV_1	507	-1.718	.108	2.863	.217
CV_2	507	-1.624	.108	2.539	.217
CV_3	507	-1.585	.108	2.881	.217
CV_4	507	-1.504	.108	2.863	.217
CV_5	507	-1.484	.108	2.574	.217
CV_6	507	-1.624	.108	2.950	.217
CV_7	507	-1.529	.108	2.930	.217
CV_8	507	-1.496	.108	2.967	.217
VB_1	507	-1.456	.108	1.550	.217
VB_2	507	-1.230	.108	1.070	.217
VB_3	507	-1.509	.108	1.916	.217
VB_4	507	-1.480	.108	1.999	.217
PSR_1	507	-1.365	.108	2.001	.217
PSR_2	507	-1.561	.108	4.817	.217
PSR_3	507	-1.679	.108	2.588	.217
PSR_4	507	-1.609	.108	2.684	.217
PSR_5	507	-1.681	.108	2.685	.217
SB_1	507	-1.486	.108	2.917	.217
SB_2	507	-1.520	.108	2.906	.217
SB_3	507	-1.577	.108	2.853	.217
SB_4	507	-1.507	.108	2.950	.217

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; VB- Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour.

6.3.5 Multicollinearity

Hair et al. (2019) express multicollinearity as a correlation among more than two independent variables. Multicollinearity occurs when there is a high correlation between any independent variable and the other set of independent variables (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). The current study examined multicollinearity for the independent variables using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). Normally, multicollinearity does not exist when the predictor variable's VIF is below 10 and the tolerance value is larger than 0.1 (Pallant, 2020). The VIF recommendation

of 10 corresponds to the tolerance recommendation of .10 (i.e., $1/0.10=10$). In other words, the tolerance value should be above 0.1 and close to 1 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The data in Table 6.6 confirms no indication of multicollinearity problems.

Table 6.6: Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) test of multicollinearity

	Tolerance	VIF
POP	.909	1.100
AUT	.833	1.200
CRE	.682	1.467
QU	.986	1.015
SE	.931	1.074
CV	.775	1.290
VB	.826	1.211

Dependent variable: SB

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; VB- Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour.

6.4 Sample Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the respondents from the main test are presented in Table 6.7. The sample revealed that 55.4% of the respondents were males and 44.6% were females. This result is fairly similar to the latest Saudi demography survey, which finds that 50.8% of the Saudi population is male and 49.2% are female (General Authority for Statistics, 2021). Moreover, the highest proportion of the sample is devoted to those aged between 26 and 35 years old (53.6%). This is close to the figure given in a recent report showing that the majority of the population of Saudi Arabia is between 25 and 54 years old, and the median age of the population is 32.4 years (GMI, 2023). In addition, 32.5% of the sample were between 18 and 25, 12.4% were between 36 and 45 years old, and 1.8% were between 46 and 55 years old. As for education, the majority of the respondents (48.1%) earned a bachelor's degree, followed by high school or less (18.3%), a graduate degree (17.7%), and an associate degree (15.7%). For occupation, the majority of the respondents (52.5%) worked full-time, followed by students (28.8%), worked part-time (14.6%), and (4.2%) were unemployed. Moreover, respondents spent an average of 4 hours and 1 minute per day on their favourite social media platform. More specifically, the sample revealed that 27.4% spend 1-2 hours, 23.3% spend 30 minutes-1 hours, 16% 2-3 hours, 16% more than 3 hours, 13.2% 15-30 minutes, 3% 5-15 minutes, and 1.2% 5 minutes or less.

Table 6.7 also reports followers' most popular social media platforms used to follow their favourite SMI. Snapchat sits at the top of the list, used by 80.5% of the 507 respondents. This result is no surprise due to the popularity of Snapchat in Saudi Arabia and its dominant position among social media platforms (Statista, 2022a). For instance, in 2021, Saudi Arabia had one of the biggest Snapchat audience reach in the world (Statista, 2021b). The second most used platform was Instagram (10.3%), followed by TikTok (5.9%) and YouTube (3.4%).

Table 6.7: Demographic profile of the study's sample

Sample Size		507	
		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	281	55.4%
	Female	226	44.6%
Age	18-25 years old	165	32.5%
	26-35 years old	272	53.6%
	36-45 years old	63	12.4%
	46-55 years old	7	1.4%
Education	High school or less	93	18.3%
	Associate degree (e.g., diploma, technical school)	80	15.7%
	Bachelor's degree	244	48.1%
	Graduate degree	90	17.7%
Occupation	Student	146	28.8%
	Part-time employee	74	14.6%
	Full-time employee	266	52.5%
	Unemployed	21	4.2%
Social media platform used to follow favourite SMI	Snapchat	408	80.5%
	Instagram	52	10.3%
	TikTok	30	5.9%
	YouTube	17	3.4%
Time spent on favourite social media platform per day	Five minutes or less	6	1.2%
	Five to 15 minutes	15	3.0%
	Fifteen to 30 minutes	67	13.2%
	Thirty minutes to 1 hour	118	23.3%
	One to 2 hours	139	27.4%
	Two to 3 hours	81	16.0%
	More than 3 hours	81	16.0%

6.4.1 Respondents' Favourite SMIs

The next step was to identify respondents' favourite SMIs. The analyses were conducted based on their responses to the survey's question: "In the box below, please name your favourite influencer that you have been following for more than three months". As mentioned in Chapter 4 – section 4.8.3, the assumption underlying the time frame of three months is that it provides sufficient duration to establish and reinforce a positive PSR with a specific SMI (Hsu, 2020; Bi and Zhang, 2022). Respondents' favourite SMI was automatically embedded into the rest of the survey questions.

The respondents provided a total of 282 different names, which include SMIs such as Fayeze Almalki (4.3 million followers, mentioned 37 times), Abdulrahman Almutari (unknown number of followers, mentioned 28 times), Hind Alqahtani (9.1 million followers, mentioned 26 times), and others. The most frequently mentioned SMI was Fayeze Almalki, a Saudi Arabian SMI and actor. He is well known for supporting charitable and humanitarian work in Saudi society. It should be noted that on Snapchat, SMIs can hide the number of followers on their public profiles, leading to some entries being labelled as "hidden". Table 6.8 includes the names of 20 SMIs mentioned by at least three respondents.

Table 6.8: Most mentioned SMIs

Name	Frequency	Number of followers	Percent
Fayeze Almalki	37	4.3 million	7.3%
Abdulrahman Almutari	28	Hidden	5.5%
Hind Alqahtani	26	9.1 million	5.1%
Yazeed Alrajhi	21	Hidden	4.1%
Rahaf Alqahtani	20	Hidden	3.9%
Yara	16	56k	3.1%
Ali Almslmani	16	50k	3.1%
Suler	11	209k	2.1%
Bk Positive Energy	11	55k	2.1%
Yosha Alsyari	9	Hidden	1.7%
Aisha	8	109k	1.5%
Hassan Bin Mahfouz	7	1.5 million	1.3%
Rawan Abdullah	6	954k	1.1%
Fahad Alyahya	5	194k	0.98%
The Abbas Vlog	5	338k	0.98%
Enad Almutari	5	34k	0.98%
Sul6an	4	47k	0.78%
Ghazi Abousaleh	3	17k	0.6%
Abu Aqeel	3	1.2 million	0.6%
Sultan Alfaisal	3	662k	0.6%

6.5 Exploratory Factor Analysis

This section explains the significant procedure utilised in this study to perform the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) technique, including Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test, communalities, factor extraction and rotation, plot test, and factor loading. EFA is generally recommended for scale development, and it might not be necessary when adopting a valid and reliable measurement scale from the existing literature (Netemeyer, Bearden and Sharma, 2003). However, while this study adapted scales from prior research to measure the constructs, they were translated and modified to fit the context, and some measurement items were newly developed. Therefore, EFA was conducted to confirm that each measurement item was loaded into its respective construct (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

When conducting EFA, there are several techniques for factor extraction. The most widely adopted technique is Principal Component Analysis (PCA) (Hair *et al.*, 2019). PCA is primarily a dimensionality reduction technique that transforms the original variables into a smaller set of uncorrelated variables known as principal components. This helps to simplify the data structure and identify the key underlying factors (Abdi and Williams, 2010). Moreover, PCA aims to preserve as much variability as possible and prioritizes capturing the overall variability in the data, which can be beneficial for understanding the underlying structure of the variables (Jolliffe and Cadima, 2016).

In addition to factor extraction, factor rotation is used in EFA to identify which variables to bundle together. A popular rotation technique is the Varimax rotation. The Varimax rotation is an orthogonal rotation that aims to maximize the variance of the squared loadings within each factor while keeping the loadings for each variable as distinct as possible (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). In addition, Varimax rotation tends to create more distinct and easily understandable factors with higher loading values for each variable on a single factor and lower loading values on other factors (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). PCA and Varimax rotation is widespread in the influencer marketing literature (e.g., Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023; Ki, Park and Kim, 2022). Thus, this study utilized PCA and Varimax rotation when conducting EFA.

6.5.1 Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test

In EFA, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test are commonly used to assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Specifically, the KMO test is used to find out about the suitability and accuracy of factors within a provided sample, while Bartlett's Test of

Sphericity aims to assess whether the observed variables in the dataset correlate significantly with each other, indicating the appropriateness of factor analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The range of the KMO statistics is from 0 to 1. The KMO values greater than 0.6 are acceptable; otherwise, values below 0.6 are inappropriate (Hair *et al.*, 2019). This could be because either extra data should be collected or a decision about the variables to be included should be made (Field, 2018). Besides, values between 0.6 and 0.7 are average, values between 0.7 and 0.8 are relatively good, and above 0.8 are considered excellent. Hair *et al.* (2019) also stated that Bartlett's test required having a p-value less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). As presented in Table 6.9, the research results indicated a KMO value of 0.889, and Bartlett's p-value test was significant (0.000; $p < 0.05$). For this reason, the results were greater than the required minimum values and indicated the suitability of the data for performing factor analysis.

Table 6.9: KMO and Bartlett's test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.891
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	14640.180
	df	780
	Sig.	.000

6.5.2 Communalities

According to Hair *et al.* (2019), communality is the entire amount of variance the original variable shares with the other variables involved in the analysis. A high communality value close to 1 suggests that a large proportion of the variable's variance is captured by the common factors, indicating a good fit between the variable and the underlying factors (Pallant, 2020). On the other hand, a low communality value suggests that the variable's variance is not well explained by the common factors, and it might be less suitable for inclusion in the factor model (Pallant, 2020). If a particular variable is low (lower than 0.5), the variable might struggle to load to any other factor significantly (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Thus, a cut-off value of 0.5 is acceptable (Hair *et al.*, 2019). As shown in Table 6.10, all items included in the current study are above 0.5. Therefore, no items were removed since none were below the recommended value.

Table 6.10: Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
POP_1	1.000	.848

POP_2	1.000	.842
POP_3	1.000	.867
POP_4	1.000	.845
AUT_1	1.000	.831
AUT_2	1.000	.877
AUT_3	1.000	.888
AUT_4	1.000	.724
CRE_1	1.000	.603
CRE_2	1.000	.717
CRE_3	1.000	.745
CRE_4	1.000	.765
QU_1	1.000	.550
QU_2	1.000	.737
QU_3	1.000	.753
QU_4	1.000	.746
SE_1	1.000	.842
SE_2	1.000	.820
SE_3	1.000	.845
SE_4	1.000	.780
CV_1	1.000	.725
CV_2	1.000	.682
CV_3	1.000	.685
CV_4	1.000	.589
CV_5	1.000	.626
CV_6	1.000	.600
CV_7	1.000	.594
CV_8	1.000	.629
VB_1	1.000	.841
VB_2	1.000	.746
VB_3	1.000	.780
VB_4	1.000	.837
PSR_1	1.000	.671
PSR_3	1.000	.806
PSR_4	1.000	.797
PSR_5	1.000	.770
SB_1	1.000	.755
SB_2	1.000	.750
SB_3	1.000	.766
SB_4	1.000	.782

Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis.

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; VB- Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour.

6.5.3 Factor Extraction and Rotation

Eigenvalues are related to a variance, which shows the significant importance of a specific factor. An estimation of the number of factors can be attained quickly from the size of the eigenvalues. Hair et al. (2019) indicate that a component of less than 1 eigenvalue is insignificant as the component variable contributes to 1 or more. Table 6.11 shows that 9 components had an eigenvalue greater than 1, which means that these components are significantly important. The first factor had a high eigenvalue, followed by successively smaller eigenvalues for the remaining components.

Table 6.11: Total variance explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	10.132	25.331	25.331	10.132	25.331	25.331	5.276	13.191	13.191
2	3.523	8.808	34.139	3.523	8.808	34.139	3.503	8.758	21.949
3	3.160	7.900	42.038	3.160	7.900	42.038	3.354	8.384	30.333
4	3.029	7.573	49.612	3.029	7.573	49.612	3.319	8.299	38.632
5	2.688	6.720	56.332	2.688	6.720	56.332	3.233	8.082	46.713
6	2.386	5.965	62.297	2.386	5.965	62.297	3.100	7.749	54.462
7	2.203	5.506	67.803	2.203	5.506	67.803	2.787	6.968	61.431
8	1.539	3.847	71.650	1.539	3.847	71.650	2.785	6.962	68.393
9	1.397	3.491	75.142	1.397	3.491	75.142	2.700	6.749	75.142
10	.651	1.629	76.770						
11	.625	1.563	78.334						
12	.551	1.378	79.711						
13	.520	1.299	81.011						
14	.499	1.247	82.258						
15	.485	1.212	83.469						
16	.466	1.165	84.635						
17	.445	1.113	85.748						
18	.407	1.019	86.767						
19	.389	.972	87.739						
20	.385	.962	88.701						
21	.359	.897	89.598						
22	.336	.840	90.438						
23	.315	.788	91.226						
24	.301	.753	91.978						
25	.287	.718	92.697						
26	.281	.703	93.399						
27	.275	.687	94.087						
28	.266	.665	94.752						
29	.254	.635	95.387						
30	.227	.568	95.955						

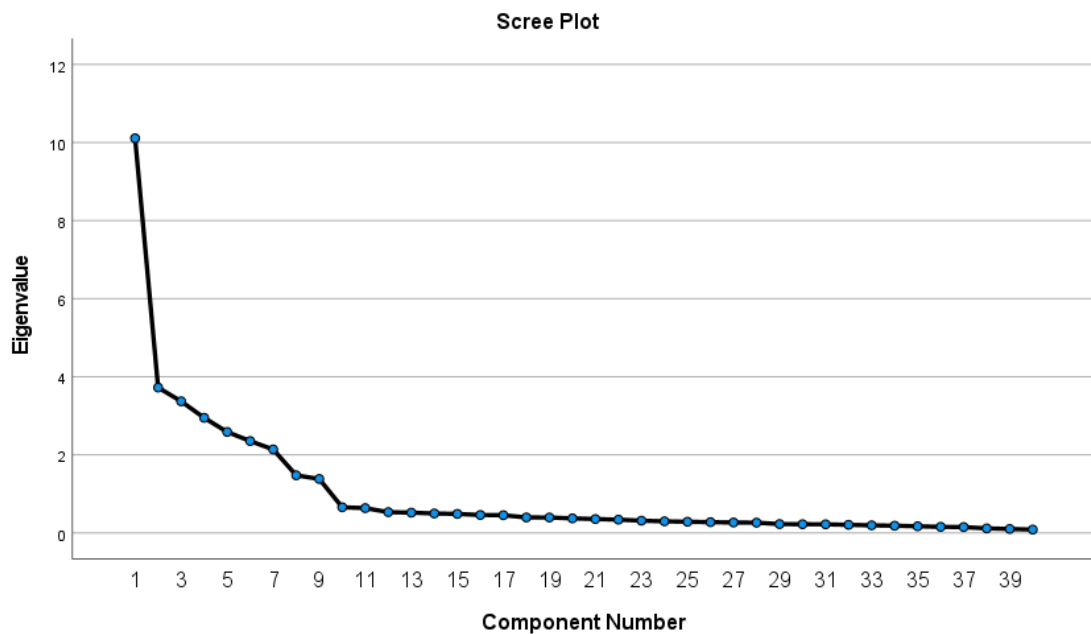
31	.217	.543	96.498						
32	.214	.536	97.034						
33	.208	.521	97.555						
34	.182	.454	98.009						
35	.172	.431	98.440						
36	.159	.398	98.838						
37	.151	.378	99.217						
38	.119	.299	99.515						
39	.104	.259	99.775						
40	.090	.225	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

6.5.4 Plot Test

Another criterion is the scree plot, which confirms the extracted factors by eigenvalues. The scree plot test graphs the eigenvalue versus the factor number, and the slope is always shown on a downward curve. The slope of the curve within the plots determines the factors that should be generated (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Only factors with eigenvalues more than 1 are considered because this indicates that those components are significantly important. It can be seen in Figure 6.1 that the curve started to tail off after the ninth point, which means that the first nine components are significantly important.

Figure 6.1: Plot test



6.5.5 Factor Loading

Factor loading measures the extent to which a variable contributes to a specific factor. Higher factor loading scores indicate that the dimensions of the factors are more effectively explained or represented by the variable (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Table 6.12 summarises the pattern matrix utilizing PCA and varimax rotation. According to the results, all 40 items loaded dominantly on their respective factors. In addition to loading on a single component, the factor loadings were satisfactory (> 0.50), which validated that our constructs' structure was organized well.

Table 6.12: Rotated component matrix

	Component								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
POP_1		.902							
POP_2		.891							
POP_3		.917							
POP_4		.897							
AUT_1			.858						
AUT_2			.916						
AUT_3			.907						
AUT_4			.787						
CRE_1									.622
CRE_2									.780
CRE_3									.788
CRE_4									.797
QU_1							.733		
QU_2							.855		
QU_3							.862		
QU_4							.858		
SE_1				.908					
SE_2				.900					
SE_3				.907					
SE_4				.870					
CV_1	.792								
CV_2	.758								
CV_3	.777								
CV_4	.726								
CV_5	.761								
CV_6	.734								
CV_7	.757								
CV_8	.782								
VB_1					.896				
VB_2					.806				
VB_3					.847				

VB_4					.885				
PSR_1								.657	
PSR_3								.809	
PSR_4								.808	
PSR_5								.784	
SB_1						.815			
SB_2						.811			
SB_3						.831			
SB_4						.828			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; VB- Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour.

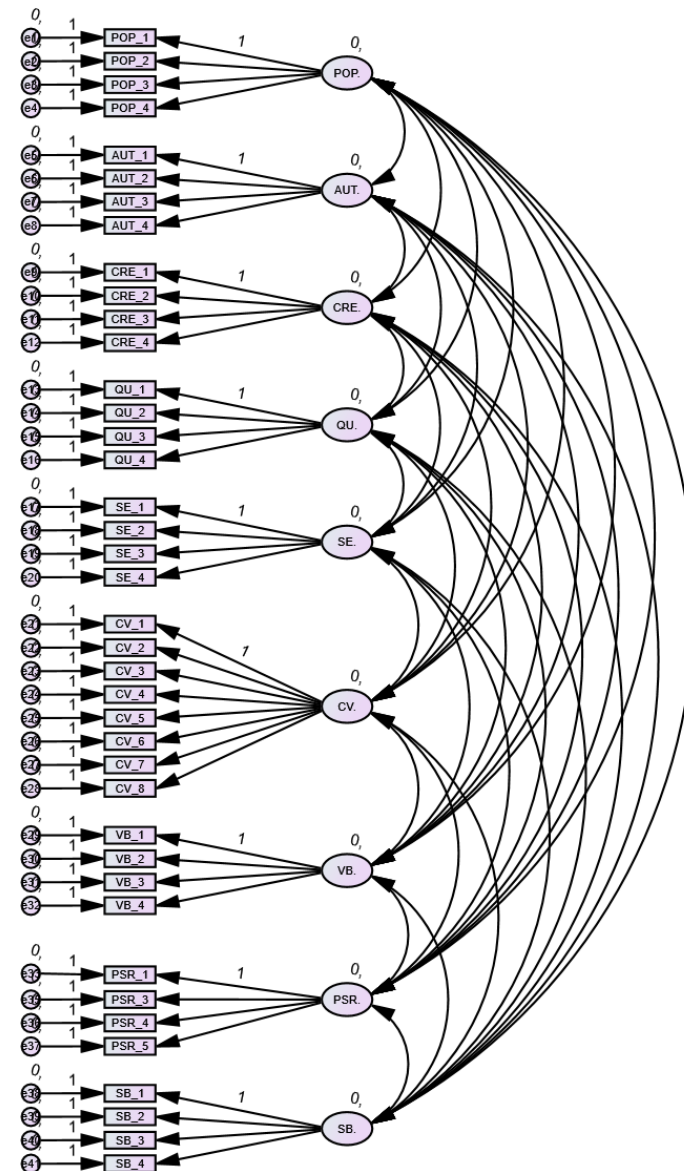
6.6 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) concentrates on the relationships between a set of observed and latent variables (Schumacker and Lomax, 2016). CFA can further be used to identify scale items that cross-load on other constructs in the conceptual framework (Bollen, 1989). CFA is part of SEM's two key stages: measurement model evaluation and structural model evaluation (i.e., hypotheses testing). CFA is referred to as a measurement model because it is concerned with how and to what extent the observed variables are linked to their fundamental latent factors (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the major interest mainly lies in the strengths of the regression structure paths, from factors to the observed variables. In the current study, CFA has been applied to the study's constructs mainly by examining three statistical issues: goodness-of-fit indices (model fit), validity, and reliability.

6.6.1 Measurement Model for Overall Constructs

The Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) results were used as input for the CFA model. The model was drawn in AMOS V.28. Figure 6.2 illustrates the final measurement model for the overall constructs, including 9 latent variables and 40 observed indicators. The 9 constructs are popularity, authenticity, creativity, quality, self-efficacy, collectivism, verification behaviour, parasocial relationship, and sharing behaviour. All latent variables were associated together with covariance drawn among them. The final measurement model will be used in the following stage of SEM analysis.

Figure 6.2: Measurement model for overall constructs



Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; VB- Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour.

6.6.2 Assessing Model Fit

To assess a model's fit, goodness-of-fit indices (GOF) must be inspected. GOF indices show the extent to which the observed and estimated covariance matrices are similar (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Closer values of the estimated covariance matrix with the observed one suggest a better model fit. Therefore, in a perfect research theory, the estimated and observed covariance matrices will be the same. Running the above model shown in Figure 6.2 allows for evaluating the overall model fit, which is important in such an analysis.

In assessing model fit, there is no standard rule for using GOF indices to conclude whether a model has a good or poor model fit across all situations (Hair *et al.*, 2019). However, researchers are advised to report multiple indices representing different kinds of GOF (Lei and Wu, 2007). Using three or four measures of fit indices delivers adequate proof of the model fit (Hair *et al.*, 2019). A researcher must also consider a model's complexity, the number of indicators used and the sample size. More specifically, stricter evaluation should be imposed on simple models with small sample sizes compared to complex models with large sample sizes. A review of SEM-based influencer marketing studies in leading marketing journals revealed that model fit in these studies was mostly concluded based on absolute, incremental, and parsimonious fit indices such as χ^2/df , GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, IFI, NFI, and RMSEA (e.g., Liu, Liu and Zhang, 2019; Ki *et al.*, 2020; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022). Therefore, this study will report three absolute indexes, four incremental, and one parsimonious fit index.

In the present study, eight fit indices representing three different kinds of GOF indices were reported to conclude the model's fit, as summarized in Table 6.13. Specifically, this study reports three absolute indexes (i.e., χ^2/df , GFI, and RMSEA), four incremental indexes (i.e., CFI, TLI, IFI, and NFI), and one parsimonious fit index (i.e., AGFI). It should be noted that for absolute fit indices, χ^2 statistic is very sensitive to sample size and is no longer relied upon as a basis for acceptance or rejection (Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger and Müller, 2003; Vandenberg, 2006). Hence, an adjusted χ^2 (χ^2 / df ; where df = degree of freedom) is recommended as a better-fit metric (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

Table 6.13: Goodness-of-Fit measures

Goodness-of-Fit Measure	Description	Acceptable Level
1. Absolute fit indices		
Normed Chi-Square (χ^2/df) or Chained Multilateral Index Number / Degree of Freedom (CMIN/DF)	A simple ratio of the Chi-square (χ^2) divided by the degree of freedom (df)	Between 1 and 3
Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI)	Used to calculate the ratio of the sum of the squared differences between the observed and reproduced matrices to the observed variances	≥ 0.90
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	How well the model, with unknown but optimally chosen parameter estimates, will fit the populations' covariance	< 0.08

	matrix. In other words, it measures the badness of fit in a model relative to a perfect model	
2. Incremental Fit		
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	Measures goodness of fit by examining the level of discrepancy between the estimated model and the independence model	≥ 0.90
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	Measures a comparison of alternative models or a proposed model against a null model. It adjusts NFI by considering degrees of freedom	≥ 0.90
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	Addresses sample size and parsimony issues associated with NFI and the variability of TLI values	≥ 0.90
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	Examines the level of discrepancy between the estimated model and the independence model	≥ 0.90
3. Parsimonious fit indices		
Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI)	Aims to consider the varying levels of model complexity. It achieves this by adjusting the GFI based on the ratio between the degrees of freedom used in a model and the total degrees of freedom available	> 0.80

Source: Hair et al. (2019), Byrne (2016), Kline (2015), Browne and Cudeck (1992), Vandenberg and Lance (2000), Schumacker and Lomax (2016), and Hu and Bentler (1999)

As shown in Table 6.14, the initial overall measurement model with 9 constructs measured by 40 items in total was subjected to CFA. The CFA findings indicated a good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.130$, RMSEA = 0.047, GFI= 0.871 , AGFI= 0.850, CFI = 0.945, TLI = 0.939, IFI=0.945, NFI=0.901) except for GFI which was below the threshold of ≥ 0.90 . The researcher decided to take additional measures to test whether an improved model fit can be achieved. Therefore, some modifications in the model were taken to generate a model that better fits the data.

Table 6.14: Initial Goodness-of-Fit measures

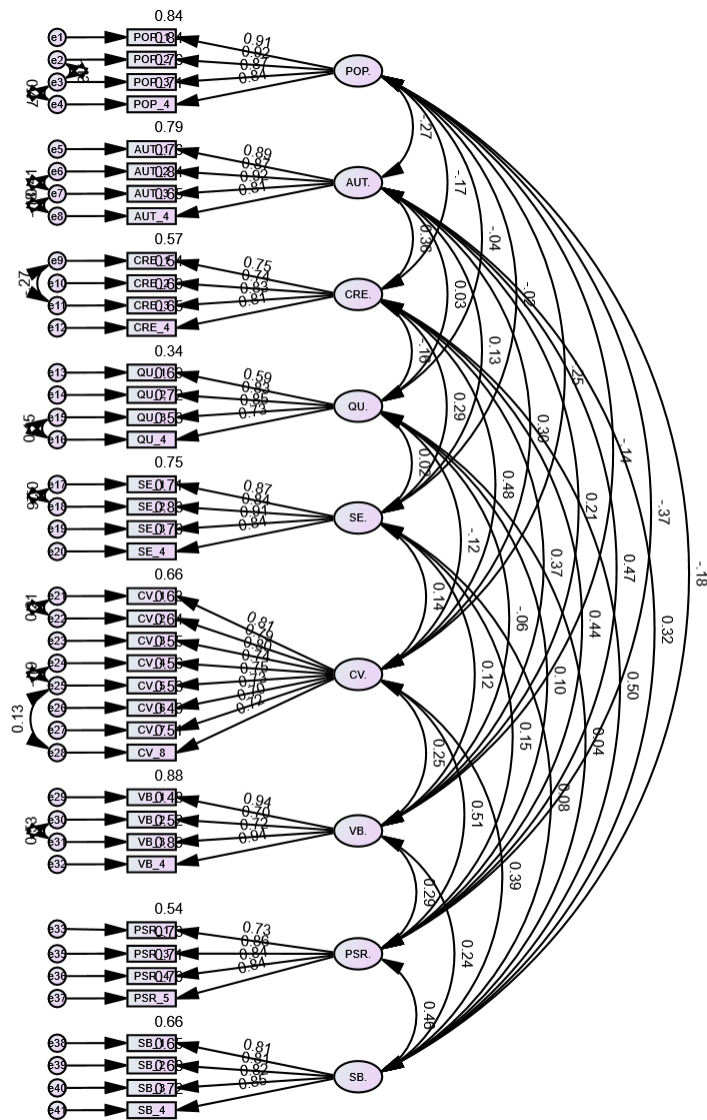
Goodness-of-fit indices	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	CFI	TLI	IFI	NFI
Acceptable level	Between 1-3	<0.08	≥ 0.90	> 0.80	$\geq .90$	$\geq .90$	$\geq .90$	$\geq .90$
First Run	2.130	0.047	0.871	0.850	0.945	0.939	0.945	0.901

6.6.2.1 Model Fit Improvement

In order to improve the model's fit, areas of misfit need to be identified. A thorough examination of the factor loadings and modification indexes was conducted. The factor loadings, which indicate the strength of the relationships between the observed variables and their corresponding latent factors, exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.5, affirming the satisfactory representation of the constructs in the model (Hair *et al.*, 2019). However, several modification indexes raised concerns regarding potential areas of model misfit. High modification indices, in conjunction with high parameter change values, signify a misfit (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, modification indices were checked for any potential redundant items or cross-loadings. The largest modification indices were identified first before addressing the more minor ones (Byrne, 2016). The modification indices suggested covariance between the error terms belonging to the same construct. Thus, very high modification indices were detected between several pairs of error terms relating to items of the same constructs, such as VB2 and VB3 (MI= 135.607); POP3 with POP4 (MI= 48.180); and CV1 with CV2 (MI= 38.347). Accordingly, these error terms were allowed to correlate as long as they were associated with items measuring the same aspect.

The analysis was then performed one more time. The resulting CFA measurement model in Figure 6.3 showed an adequate model fit, as presented in Table 6.15. All of the values of the model fit indices are higher than the acceptable levels. Specifically, χ^2/df decreased from 2.130 to 1.677, RMSEA decreased from 0.047 to 0.037, GFI increased from 0.879 to 0.900, AGFI increased from 0.850 to 0.881, CFI increased from 0.945 to 0.967, TLI increased from 0.939 to 0.963, IFI increased from 0.945 to 0.968, and NFI increased from 0.901 to 0.923. Therefore, the results confirm that the model is well-fitted to the observed data.

Figure 6.3: Overall final measurement model



Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; VB: Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour.

Table 6.15: Final Goodness-of-Fit measures

Goodness-of-fit indices	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	CFI	TLI	IFI	NFI
Acceptable level	Between 1-3	<0.08	≥ 0.90	> 0.80	$\geq .90$	$\geq .90$	$\geq .90$	$\geq .90$
First Run	2.130	0.047	0.871	0.850	0.945	0.939	0.945	0.901
Final Model	1.677	0.037	0.900	0.881	0.967	0.963	0.968	0.923

6.6.3 Assessment of the Reliability and Validity of the Measurement Model

After the full measurement confirmation, the assessment of validity and reliability for full measurement models is required before modelling the structural model (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, the scales were evaluated for reliability and validity to define how well the scales represented the constructs. The following sections establish both the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

6.6.3.1 Reliability of Scales Using Cronbach's Alpha

The reliability of a scale refers to the internal consistency of a multi-item scale or construct (Hair *et al.*, 2019). A scale is reliable when it produces consistent outcomes under similar or the same conditions. The most commonly used measure for reliability is Cronbach's alpha (α). As per Hair *et al.* (2019), the following criteria are used for measuring a construct's reliability: (1) excellent reliability is achieved if the value of Cronbach's alpha is ≥ 0.90 ; (2) high reliability is achieved if the value of Cronbach's alpha is between 0.70 and 0.90; (3) A moderate reliability is achieved if the value of Cronbach's alpha is between 0.50 and 0.70; and (4) A low reliability is achieved if the value of Cronbach's alpha is ≤ 0.50 . Using SPSS, Table 6.16 shows Cronbach's Alpha of all the constructs employed in the current study. All internal consistency reliabilities based on Cronbach's alpha are high and acceptable since they are more than 0.50.

Table 6.16: Reliability of scales using Cronbach's alpha

Variable	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Popularity	4	0.941
Authenticity	4	0.929
Creativity	4	0.854
Quality	4	0.849
Self-efficacy	4	0.926
Collectivism	8	0.914
Parasocial relationship	4	0.888
Verification behaviour	4	0.911
Sharing behaviour	4	0.893

Another criterion for reliability is Composite Reliability (CR), which will be elaborated upon in the following section.

6.6.3.2 Convergent Validity

According to Hair *et al.* (2019), convergent validity means that the indicators that measure selected constructs demonstrate a high percentage of variance. This study applied convergent

validity by computing factor loading, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As per Hair et al. (2019), factor loadings (standardized regression weight) should be greater than 0.50, CRE should be higher than 0.70, and AVE should be higher than 0.50.

CR is used to measure the reliability of the measurement model. In contrast to Cronbach's alpha, CR does not assume equally weighted indicator loadings (Hair *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, CR considers the actual factor loadings in a CFA model, which allows for the incorporation of different weights for each indicator based on their contribution to the latent construct. When SEM is used with reflectively measured constructs, CR is considered a more suitable criterion of reliability than Cronbach's Alpha. The equation used to calculate CR is shown below:

$$CR = \frac{(\sum_{i=1}^n Li)^2}{(\sum_{i=1}^n Li)^2 + (\sum_{i=1}^n ei)}$$

Where Li is the standardized factor loading for the i the item in the factor. ei is the error variance for the i item in the factor.

Hair et al. (2019) describe AVE as “a summary measure of convergence among a set of items representing a reflectively measured latent construct. It is the average percentage of variation explained (variance extracted) among the items of a construct” (p. 659). AVE can be computed either as a total of squared factor loadings or squared standardized regression divided by the number of items in the factor, as shown in the equation below:

$$AVE = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n Li^2}{n}$$

Where Li is the standardized factor loading for the items in the factor, and i relates to the items in the factor.

The factor loading values were estimated using AMOS, while the CR and AVE were extracted using the Master Validity AMOS plugin developed by Gaskin and Lim (2019). The results of the convergent validity are presented in Table 6.17.

Table 6.17: Convergent validity results for the measurement model

Construct	Items	Factor loading	CR	AVE
Acceptable level		≥ 0.5	≥ 0.7	≥ 0.5
Popularity	POP1	0.914	0.936	0.787
	POP2	0.918		
	POP3	0.873		
	POP4	0.84		
Authenticity	AUT1	0.89	0.927	0.761
	AUT2	0.872		
	AUT3	0.919		
	AUT4	0.806		
Creativity	CRE1	0.753	0.863	0.613
	CRE2	0.737		
	CRE3	0.831		
	CRE4	0.807		
Quality	QU1	0.587	0.839	0.571
	QU2	0.828		
	QU3	0.851		
	QU4	0.728		
Self-efficacy	SE1	0.865	0.923	0.749
	SE2	0.841		
	SE3	0.913		
	SE4	0.84		
Collectivism	CV1	0.812	0.914	0.572
	CV2	0.792		
	CV3	0.8		
	CV4	0.742		
	CV5	0.75		
	CV6	0.726		
	CV7	0.703		
	CV8	0.717		
Verification behaviour	VB1	0.941	0.899	0.695
	VB2	0.696		
	VB3	0.723		
	VB4	0.943		
Parasocial relationship	PSR1	0.734	0.890	0.67
	PSR3	0.855		
	PSR4	0.841		
	PSR5	0.838		
Sharing behaviour	SB1	0.812		
	SB2	0.806		

	SB3	0.823	0.893	0.677
	SB4	0.848		

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; VB- Verification behaviour; PSR- Parasocial relationship; SB- Sharing behaviour.

From the table above, it can be shown that the standardised regression weights (loadings) were greater than 0.5 for each item in the scale. More particularly, the lowest standardised regression weight value is [QU1 = 0.563], and the largest is [AUT3 = 0.947]. As for CR, all measurement variables were within the acceptable level of ≥ 0.7 . The lowest CR value is for Quality [QU = 0.839], while the largest is for Popularity [POP = 0.936]. Lastly, regarding AVE, all of the measurement variables were within the acceptable level of ≥ 0.5 . More particularly, the lowest value of AVE is for Quality [QU= 0.571], and the largest value of AVE is for Popularity [POP=0.787].

To sum up, all three key measures essential to achieving convergent validity were applied and showed adequate evidence that the latent constructs have an acceptable convergent validity. Therefore, based on the evaluation of the factor loading, the CR, and the AVE, it can be concluded that the convergent validity of the measurement model was acceptable.

6.6.3.3 Discriminant Validity

In questionnaire survey research, it is essential to ensure that a construct is truly distinct from other constructs in the questionnaire. Discriminant validity (also known as divergent validity) is the extent to which a latent variable is accurately distinct from other latent variables (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In other words, the degree of distinction between two conceptually similar concepts.

A commonly used analysis is Fornell and Larcker's (1981) discriminant validity test, which examines the AVE for each latent variable against the shared variances of other latent variables. The shared variance is the amount of variance a construct can explain in another construct and is represented by the square of the correlation between any two constructs or the squared structural path coefficient between two constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The test requires that the AVE for an individual construct should be greater than the shared variance between the individual construct and the other constructs. Table 6.18 shows that the square roots of the AVE (in bold) for each construct are higher than the correlations between each construct and the other constructs, suggesting that these constructs have good discriminant validity and can be used for testing the structural model.

Table 6.18: Discriminant validity between the measurement's constructs

	POP	AUT	CRE	QU	SE	CV	VB	PSR	SB
POP	0.887								
AUT	-0.265	0.872							
CRE	-0.166	0.360	0.783						
QU	-0.039	0.026	-0.160	0.756					
SE	-0.024	0.132	0.288	0.021	0.865				
CV	-0.250	0.296	0.478	-0.125	0.141	0.756			
VB	-0.139	0.211	0.366	-0.056	0.117	0.252	0.834		
PSR	-0.367	0.471	0.437	0.096	0.146	0.515	0.287	0.818	
SB	-0.176	0.315	0.500	0.043	0.081	0.393	0.241	0.455	0.822

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; VB: Verification Behaviour; PSR- Parasocial relationship; SB- Sharing Behaviour.

6.7 Common Method Bias (CMB)

While our CFA results have demonstrated good model fit, reliability, and validity, conducting an additional check for CMB before proceeding to SEM was imperative. CMB refers to a bias in the dataset due to something external to the measures that may influence the response given. Specifically, CMB refers to the “variance that is attributable to the measurement method rather than to the constructs the measures represent” (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003, p. 879). It is particularly a concern when data on variables are collected from the same sources (Podsakoff, Mackenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). The presence of CMB can lead to a measurement error that could affect the validity of relationships between measures (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, assessing CMB at this stage ensures our findings’ robustness by addressing potential measurement biases that may affect the accuracy of relationships between latent constructs.

Both procedural and statistical methods were used in this study to address the issue of CMB. First, since the data were collected through an online survey, a question randomization option was used that showed questions to each respondent in a shuffled manner. Specifically, the items were mixed up to prevent respondents’ ability to predict the relationships among the measures. Moreover, an attention check question was added to the questionnaire. Respondents who failed to accurately select the specified option were excluded from the analysis. The survey also

assured respondents of their anonymity, confirming that there are no right or wrong answers. In addition, based on the pilot study, ambiguous and unfamiliar terms were replaced by clear and familiar terms. Second, using SPSS, Harman's single factor test was employed, where all the variables presented in the model are loaded as a single factor and forced so there is no rotation (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). If the value of the variance was above 50%, then CMB might be present. As seen in Table 6.19, the test revealed that less than the majority (25.285%) was explained by one factor, confirming that CMB had a minimal impact on the study results.

Table 6.19: Common method bias test using Harman's single factor test

Total Variance Explained						
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	10.114	25.285	25.285	10.114	25.285	25.285
2	3.616	9.040	34.325			
3	3.369	8.423	42.748			
4	2.916	7.290	50.038			
5	2.711	6.777	56.815			
6	2.363	5.907	62.721			
7	2.139	5.347	68.068			
8	1.459	3.647	71.716			
9	1.353	3.383	75.099			
10	.661	1.652	76.751			
11	.656	1.641	78.392			
12	.535	1.337	79.729			
13	.532	1.329	81.058			
14	.502	1.256	82.314			
15	.489	1.223	83.538			
16	.461	1.151	84.689			
17	.457	1.141	85.830			
18	.400	1.001	86.831			
19	.399	.996	87.827			
20	.377	.942	88.770			
21	.362	.904	89.674			
22	.343	.858	90.532			
23	.318	.795	91.327			
24	.300	.750	92.077			
25	.290	.726	92.803			
26	.279	.697	93.500			
27	.269	.673	94.174			
28	.265	.663	94.837			
29	.231	.577	95.414			
30	.227	.569	95.983			

31	.224	.559	96.542			
32	.211	.526	97.068			
33	.198	.494	97.562			
34	.185	.463	98.026			
35	.172	.431	98.457			
36	.157	.392	98.848			
37	.152	.379	99.228			
38	.119	.296	99.524			
39	.103	.259	99.783			
40	.087	.217	100.000			

Finally, although Harman’s single factor test is widely used to assess CMB, this method has received criticism and is being used less frequently by researchers due to several limitations (Guide and Ketokivi, 2015). Indeed, Podsakoff et al. (2003) note that “despite the fact this procedure is widely used, we do not believe it is a useful remedy to deal with the problem.” (p. 889). Hence, it was decided to conduct one additional test known as the Common Latent Factor (CLF) technique, which has been employed in influencer marketing studies, providing a justifiable approach for its utilization (e.g., Trivedi and Sama, 2020). This technique involves creating a common latent factor and connecting it to all observed items in the measurement model (figure 6.4). Then, the standardized regression weights of all items are compared for models with and without CLF (Gaskin, 2023a). If the differences in these regression weights were found to be bigger than 0.2, then CMB might be present (Archimi *et al.*, 2018; Trivedi and Sama, 2020). As seen in Table 6.20, the difference in regression rate was smaller than 0.2 for all observed items, indicating that CMB may not be a critical issue in the current study.

Figure 6.4: Common method bias test using CLF

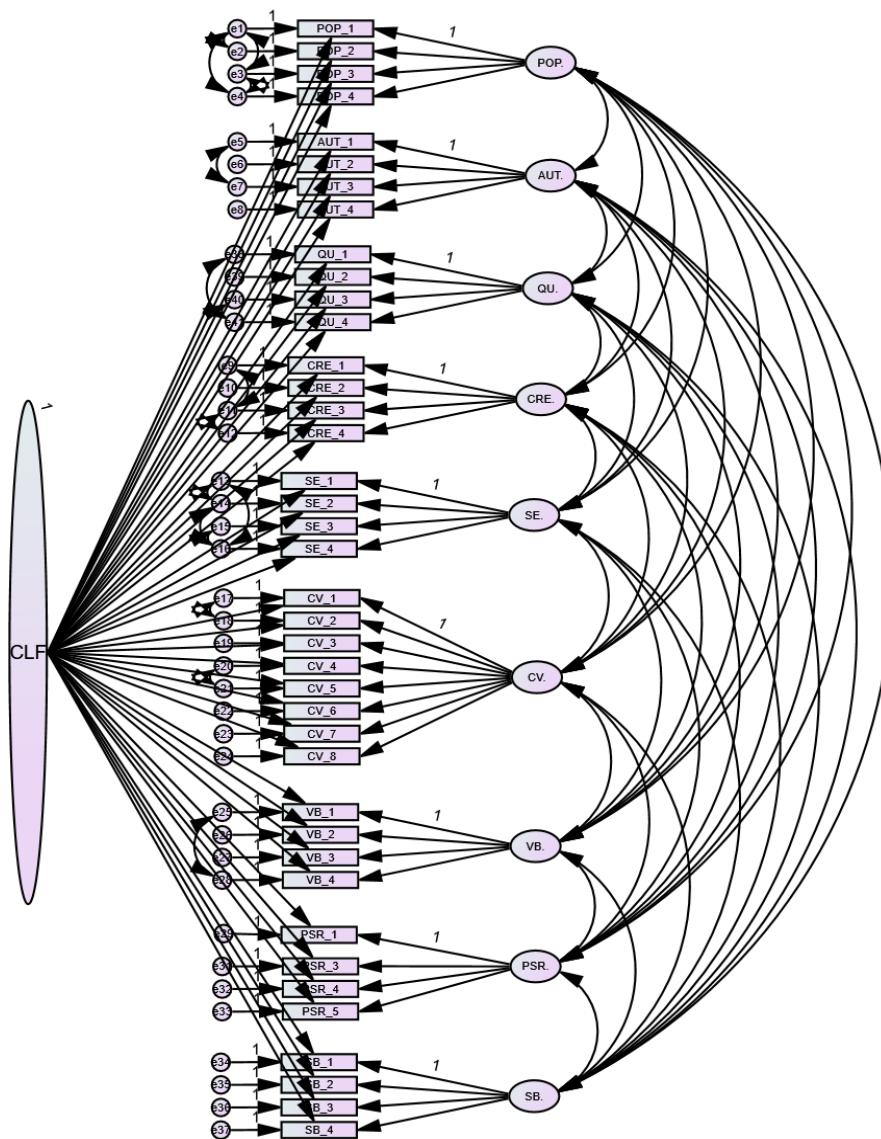


Table 6.20: Standardized regression weights with and without CLF

Standardized Regression Weight			Estimate without CLF	Estimate with CLF	Delta (< 0.2)
POP_1	<---	POP	0.914	0.907	0.007
POP_2	<---	POP	0.918	0.905	0.013
POP_3	<---	POP	0.873	0.862	0.011
POP_4	<---	POP	0.84	0.822	0.018
AUT_1	<---	AUT	0.89	0.804	0.086
AUT_2	<---	AUT	0.872	0.844	0.028
AUT_3	<---	AUT	0.919	0.861	0.058
AUT_4	<---	AUT	0.806	0.737	0.069

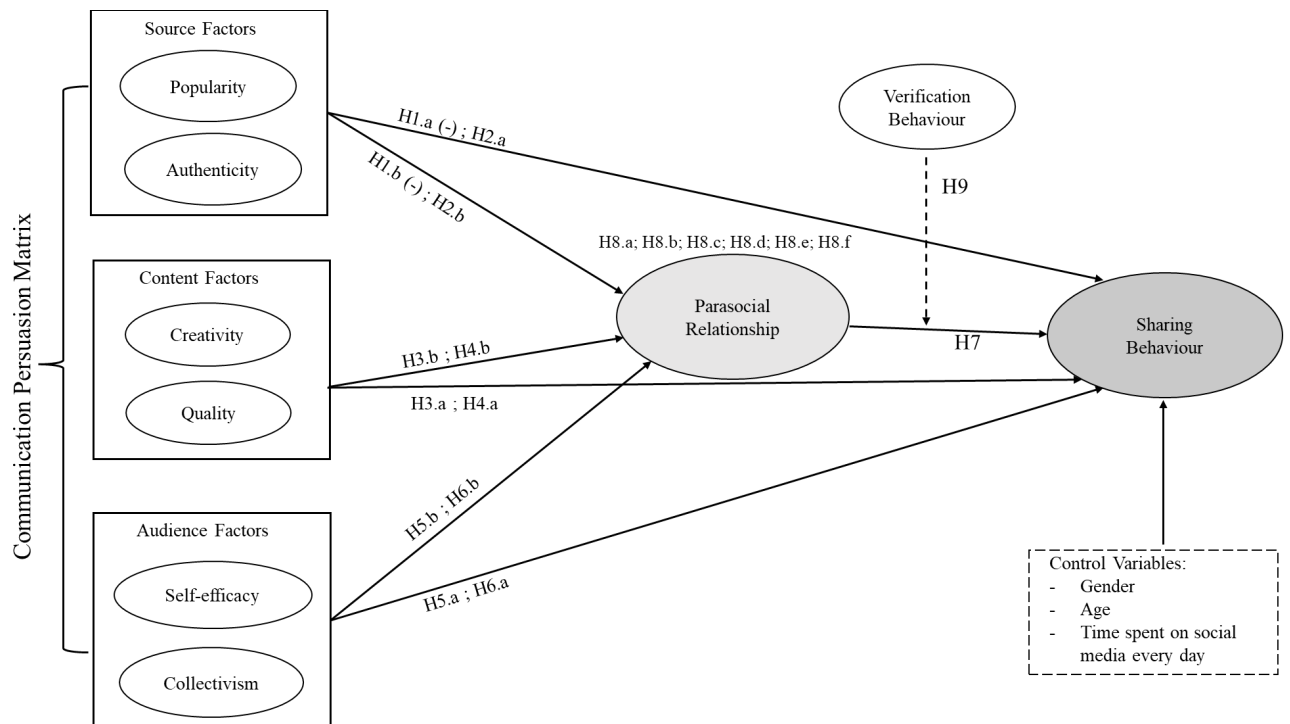
CRE_1	<---	CRE	0.753	0.586	0.167
CRE_2	<---	CRE	0.737	0.715	0.022
CRE_3	<---	CRE	0.831	0.698	0.133
CRE_4	<---	CRE	0.807	0.727	0.08
QU_1	<---	QU	0.587	0.578	0.009
QU_2	<---	QU	0.828	0.829	-0.001
QU_3	<---	QU	0.851	0.839	0.012
QU_4	<---	QU	0.728	0.71	0.018
SE_1	<---	SE	0.865	0.821	0.044
SE_2	<---	SE	0.841	0.813	0.028
SE_3	<---	SE	0.913	0.877	0.036
SE_4	<---	SE	0.84	0.79	0.05
CV_1	<---	CV	0.812	0.698	0.114
CV_2	<---	CV	0.792	0.647	0.145
CV_3	<---	CV	0.8	0.716	0.084
CV_4	<---	CV	0.742	0.652	0.09
CV_5	<---	CV	0.75	0.645	0.105
CV_6	<---	CV	0.726	0.619	0.107
CV_7	<---	CV	0.703	0.631	0.072
CV_8	<---	CV	0.717	0.673	0.044
VB_1	<---	VB	0.941	0.896	0.045
VB_2	<---	VB	0.696	0.563	0.133
VB_3	<---	VB	0.723	0.62	0.103
VB_4	<---	VB	0.943	0.846	0.097
PSR_1	<---	PSR	0.734	0.566	0.168
PSR_3	<---	PSR	0.855	0.787	0.068
PSR_4	<---	PSR	0.841	0.741	0.1
PSR_5	<---	PSR	0.838	0.756	0.082
SB_1	<---	SB	0.812	0.721	0.091
SB_2	<---	SB	0.806	0.673	0.133
SB_3	<---	SB	0.823	0.693	0.13
SB_4	<---	SB	0.848	0.698	0.15

6.8 Structural Equational Modelling and Hypothesis Testing

After establishing the validity and reliability of the measurement model, the hypotheses are tested. This section includes developing the structural model to evaluate the relationship between latent variables and testing the conceptual framework proposed in Chapter Three and Chapter Five. According to Hair et al. (2019), the structural model differentiates between independent variables (exogenous variables) and dependent variables (endogenous variables). Conversely, the measurement model does not have this difference between variables, as all variables are considered independent (exogenous) variables.

This study used SEM in AMOS V.28 to test the hypotheses. Hypothesis testing requires changing the final measurement model into a final structural model by drawing causal paths from independent variables (IV) to dependent variables (DV), as well as placing an error term to DVs (Byrne, 2016). The data was analysed using the Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) method, which is particularly suitable for large sample sizes and data that are reasonably normally distributed (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). MLE is widely recognized as the most frequently employed estimation method in statistical analysis (Kline, 2015; Byrne, 2016). The final and developed framework consists of six independent variables/exogenous variables (i.e., popularity, authenticity, creativity, quality, self-efficacy, and Collectivism), one mediator (i.e., parasocial relationship), one moderator (i.e., verification behaviour), and one outcome variable (i.e., sharing behaviour). The final testable model is depicted in Figure 6.5, and the 20 proposed hypotheses are presented in Table 6.21.

Figure 6.5: Final testable model



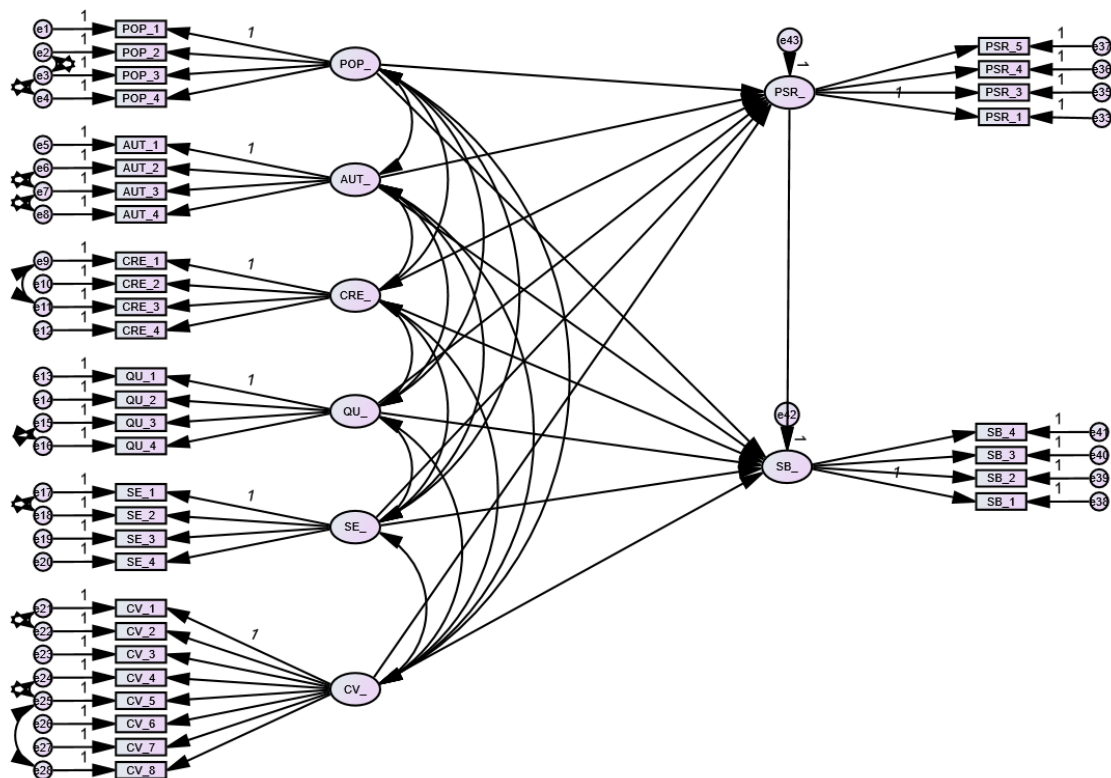
Note: Hypotheses 8.a, 8.b, 8.c, 8.d, 8.e, and 8.f suggest mediation effects between IVs and outcome variable.

Table 6.21: Summary of research hypotheses

Direct effect	
H1	Source popularity will have a negative effect on (a) sharing behaviour, (b) PSR
H2	Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on (a) sharing behaviour, (b) PSR
H3	Content creativity will have a positive effect on (a) sharing behaviour, (b) PSR
H4	Content quality will have a positive effect on (a) sharing behaviour, (b) PSR
H5	Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on (a) sharing behaviour, (b) PSR
H6	Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on (a) sharing behaviour; (b) PSR
H7	PSR will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour
Mediation effect	
H8	PSR will mediate the effect of (a) source popularity, (b) perceived influencer authenticity, (c) content creativity, (d) content quality, (e) self-efficacy, (f) collectivism on followers' sharing behaviour
Moderation effect	
H9	A high level of verification behaviour will weaken the effect of PSR on sharing behaviour

In this study, the final model will be assessed in two stages: the first stage will test all hypotheses (i.e., H1-H8), excluding the consideration of moderation (i.e., H9). Subsequently, the second stage will exclusively examine the presence of moderation. Further elaboration on this approach will be provided in section 6.8.5. The initial structural model, devoid of moderation effects, was constructed in AMOS and is presented in Figure 6.6.

Figure 6.6: Initial structural model (without moderation)



Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT-Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; SB- Sharing Behaviour, e- error term.

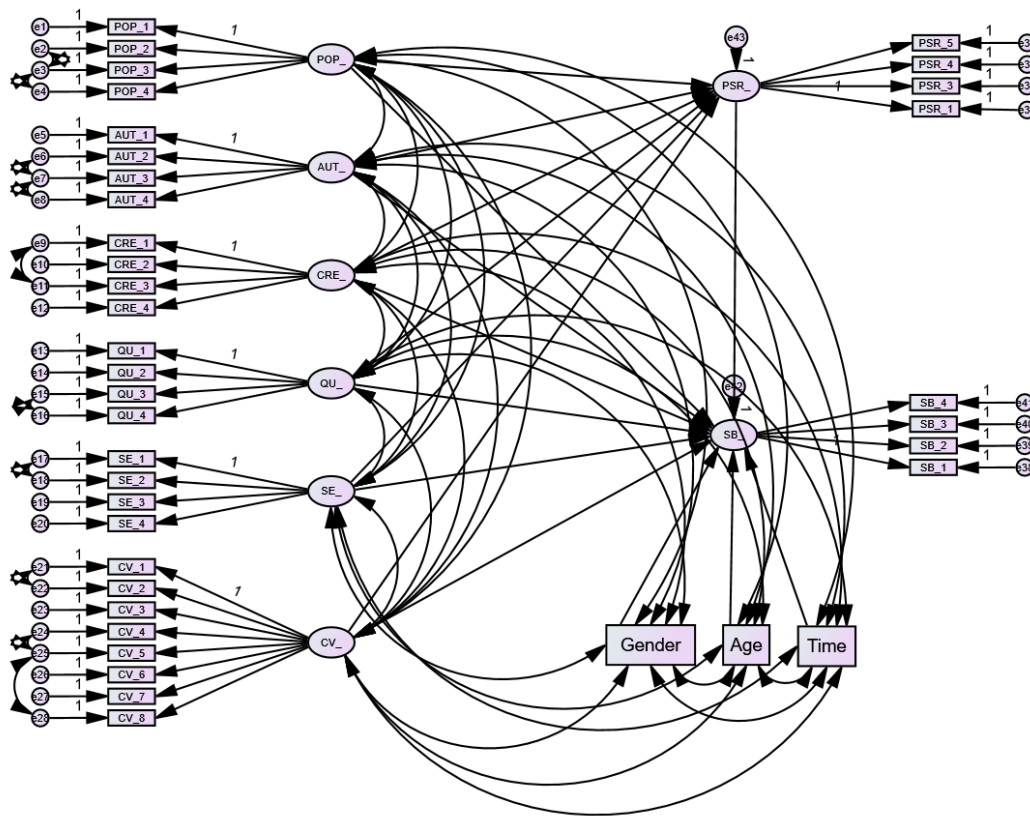
6.8.1 Control Variables

To account for potential confounding factors and enhance the robustness of the results, the final structural equation model includes control variables (a summary of the coding for the control variables can be found in Appendix 16). The control variables selected for inclusion in the model are gender, age, and time spent on social media every day. Specifically, demographic factors that are crucial variables for classifying social media users, such as gender and age, have been shown to impact followers' engagement with SMIs (e.g., Lou and Yuan, 2019; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Boerman, 2020; Hudders and De Jans, 2021; Chetioui *et al.*, 2023).

Moreover, the decision to include time spent on social media as a control variable was motivated by the understanding that individuals who dedicate more time to social media are likely to have greater exposure to SMIs and, consequently, exhibit higher levels of engagement with them (Cao *et al.*, 2021; Hu *et al.*, 2020).

The model included These variables as predictors, with arrows drawn only to the outcome variable (i.e., SB) rather than other dependent variables (i.e., PSR). Based on the study's focus and assumptions, the decision was made to include control variables for the outcome variable (SB) only and not for the other dependent variables (PSR). The study's primary aim was to examine the direct effects of the independent variables on SB while considering PSR as a mediating variable. Therefore, controlling for potential confounding factors related to the outcome variable (SB) was deemed appropriate. By including control variables for SB, the analysis aimed to isolate and better understand the factors influencing followers' engagement with SMIs without unnecessarily complicating the model with control variables that may not have direct theoretical relevance to the outcome variable. This focused approach allowed for a more targeted analysis and interpretation of the direct effects on SB. The initial structural model, including the control variables, is shown in Figure 6.7.

Figure 6.7: Initial structural model with control variables



Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT-Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; SB- Sharing Behaviour, Time- Time spent on social media every day; e- error term.

6.8.2 Fit of the Structural Model

The fit of the final and developed framework can be evaluated in a similar way used to evaluate the fit of the measurement model for overall constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2019). According to Hair *et al.* (2019), evaluating the structural model fit requires comparing the structural model goodness-of-fit with the measurement model goodness-of-fit. The closer the structural model goodness-of-fit comes to the measurement model, the healthier the structural model fit. The goodness-of-fit indices for the structural model were achieved, suggesting a close alignment with the measurement model (i.e., $\chi^2/df=1.710$, RMSEA =0.037, GFI =0.901, AGFI =0.880, CFI=0.968, TLI =0.964, IFI=0.969, NFI =0.928). Accordingly, the SEM results revealed that the structural model fitted the data and introduced a good-fit model. Table 6.22 presents the results of the fit parameters of the structural model.

Table 6.22: Summary of the fit parameters of the structural model

Goodness-of-fit indices	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	CFI	TLI	IFI	NFI
Acceptable level	Between 1-3	<0.08	≥ 0.90	> 0.80	$\geq .90$	$\geq .90$	$\geq .90$	$\geq .90$
Structure model	1.710	0.037	0.901	0.880	0.968	0.964	0.969	0.928

The results of testing the hypothesised relationships will be presented in the following sections, which include 20 hypotheses categorized into direct relationships, indirect relationships, and the moderating effect of verification behaviour (VB).

6.8.3 Direct Relationships

The results of the direct hypothesis testing of the structural model are presented in Table 6.23. Eight out of thirteen of the direct proposed hypothesised relationships (H1b, H2b, H3b, H4b, H6b, H3a, H4a, and H7) were supported ($p < 0.05$), and five hypotheses (H5b, H1a, H2a, H5a, and H6a) were rejected ($p > 0.05$). The results of hypothesis testing supported the significant and positive relationship between content factors (i.e., CRE and QU) on SB. Yet, no support was found for source factors (i.e., POP and AUT) and audience factors (i.e., SE and CV) on SB. In addition, the results support the negative influence of POP on the formation of PSR, and the significant positive influence of AUT, CRE, QU, and CV on PSR. No support was found for SE on PSR. Furthermore, the results confirm PSR's significant, positive, and direct effect on SB. Lastly, for control variables, neither age nor time spent on social media significantly affected SB. However, gender was shown to be a significant covariate that negatively affected followers' SB.

Table 6.23: Results of direct hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Relationship	Unstandardized estimate (B)	S.E.	C.R.	P	Results
H1.a	POP $\rightarrow$ SB	0.126	0.07	1.815	0.070	Rejected
H1.b	POP $\rightarrow$ PSR	-0.129	0.027	-4.736	***	Accepted
H2.a	AUT $\rightarrow$ SB	0.042	0.037	1.129	0.259	Rejected
H2.b	AUT $\rightarrow$ PSR	0.162	0.028	5.698	***	Accepted
H3.a	CRE $\rightarrow$ SB	0.406	0.066	6.102	***	Accepted

Hypotheses	Relationship	Unstandardized estimate (B)	S.E.	C.R.	P	Results
H3.b	CRE → PSR	0.174	0.049	3.551	***	Accepted
H4.a	QU → SB	0.19	0.089	2.128	0.033*	Accepted
H4.b	QU → PSR	0.257	0.071	3.618	***	Accepted
H5.a	SE → SB	-0.069	0.039	-1.767	0.077	Rejected
H5.b	SE → PSR	0.004	0.031	0.137	0.891	Rejected
H6.a	CV → SB	0.121	0.068	1.776	0.076	Rejected
H6.b	CV → PSR	0.344	0.052	6.605	***	Accepted
H7	PSR → SB	0.199	0.071	2.801	0.005* *	Accepted
	Gender → SB	-0.352	0.131	-2.698	0.007* *	Accepted
	Age → SB	0.089	0.118	0.755	0.450	Rejected
	Time → SB	-0.077	0.092	-0.837	0.402	Rejected

***: Significant at less than 0.001

**: Significant at less than 0.010

*: Significant at less than 0.050

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; SB- Sharing behaviour; Time- Time spent on social media every day; S.E.: Standard Error; C.R.: Critical Ratio; p: Probability.

The standardized regression weights are shown in Table 6.24. This table shows that for every unit increase in POP, SB increases by 0.163, and PSR is expected to decrease by 0.195 units. When AUT increases by 1, SB increases by 0.056, and PSR increases by 0.254. When CRE increases by 1, SB increases by 0.363, and PSR increases by 0.182. When QU increases by 1, SB increases by 0.098, and PSR increases by 0.154. When SE increases by 1, SB decreases by 0.077, and PSR increases by 0.006. When CV increases by 1, SB increases by 0.098, and PSR increases by 0.326. Finally, When PSR increases by 1, SB increases by 0.170.

Table 6.24: Standardized regression weights

Relationship			Standardized Estimate (β)
POP	→	SB	.163
POP	→	PSR	-.195
AUT	→	SB	0.056
AUT	→	PSR	0.254
CRE	→	SB	0.363
CRE	→	PSR	0.182
QU	→	SB	0.098
QU	→	PSR	0.154
SE	→	SB	-0.077
SE	→	PSR	0.006
CV	→	SB	0.098
CV	→	PSR	0.326
PSR	→	SB	0.170

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; SB- Sharing behaviour.

Examining the results presented in Tables 6.23 and 6.24, the factors that have the most substantial impact on followers' SB can be identified. CRE leads the way ($\beta = 0.363$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating the most significant influence. It is followed by QU ($\beta = 0.098$, $p < 0.050$), which also contributes significantly to SB. On the other hand, the remaining factors, including POP ($\beta = 0.163$, $p > 0.050$), CV ($\beta = 0.098$, $p > 0.050$), SE ($\beta = -0.077$, $p > 0.050$), and AUT ($\beta = 0.056$, $p > 0.050$), do not exhibit a statistically significant effect on SB. Therefore, it can be concluded that only content-related factors, namely CRE and QU, play a role in stimulating followers' SB, while there is no substantial evidence to support the impact of source factors (POP and AUT) and audience factors (CV and SE). On the other hand, when evaluating the factors that influence the formation of PSR with the SMI, it was found that CV ($\beta = 0.326$, $p < 0.001$) emerges as the most influential, followed by AUT ($\beta = 0.254$, $p < 0.001$), POP ($\beta = -0.195$, $p < 0.001$), CRE ($\beta = 0.182$, $p < 0.001$), and QU ($\beta = 0.154$, $p < 0.001$). No support was found for SE ($\beta = 0.154$, $p > 0.050$). As a result, except for SE, all these factors

contribute to explaining PSR, with CV standing out as the strongest factor shaping the formation of PSR with the SMI.

The researcher also examined the explanatory power of the model by inspecting the squared multiple correlations (R^2) for structural equations, which indicate the amount of variance in the dependent (endogenous) variable accounted for by the independent (exogenous) variable. It was found that POP, AUT, CRE, QU, SE, and CV explained 45.9% of the variance in PSR. CV had the strongest effect on PSR. In addition, POP, AUT, CRE, QU, SE, and CV explained 35.6% of the variance in SB. CRE had the strongest effect on SB. Falk and Miller (1992) recommended that R^2 values should be equal to or greater than 0.10 for the variance explained by a particular endogenous construct to be deemed adequate. Moreover, Cohen (1988) suggested R^2 values for endogenous latent variables are assessed as follows: 0.26 (substantial), 0.13 (moderate), 0.02 (weak). Therefore, based on the recommended thresholds, the model's R^2 values of PSR= 0.459 and SB= 0.356 indicate that our model performs well in explaining the variation in the endogenous latent variables and are considered to have high explanatory power for consumer behaviour studies (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). This suggests that the independent variables can account for a significant proportion of the variability in the dependent variable. The results of squared multiple correlations for endogenous variables are presented in Table 6.25.

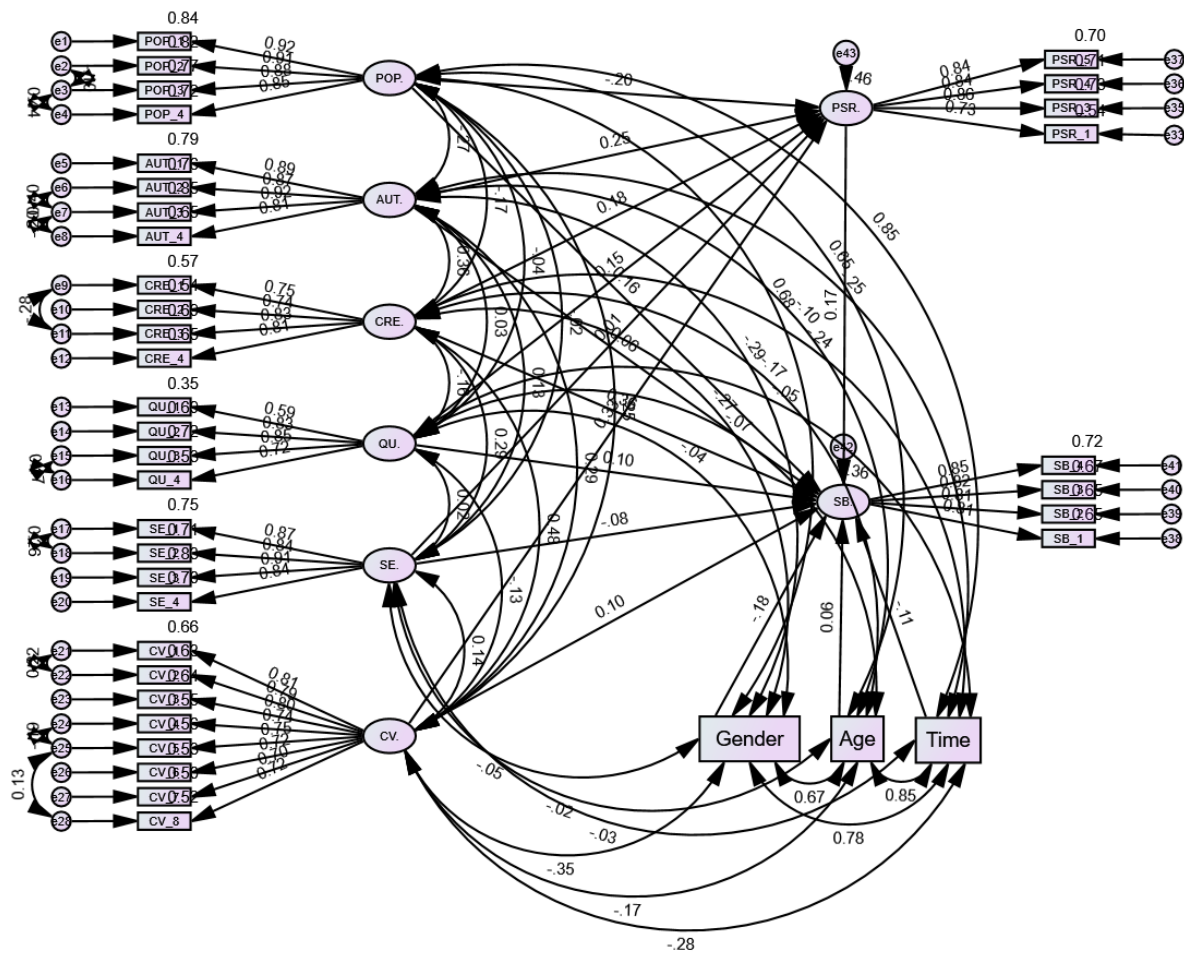
Table 6.25: Squared multiple correlations

Construct	R^2
PSR	0.459
SB	0.356

Legend: R^2 - Squared multiple correlations; PSR- Parasocial relationship; SB- Sharing behaviour.

The results of direct hypotheses, including standardized estimates and R^2 , are depicted in Figure 6.8.

Figure 6.8: Hypotheses testing results of direct hypotheses



6.8.4 Indirect Relationships

Mediation -or indirect effect- refers to a third variable's involvement as a mediator between two related constructs. It plays a pivotal role in governing the relationship between an exogenous construct (independent variable) and an endogenous construct (dependent variable) by elucidating the underlying mechanism and process (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The S-O-R model assumes that the Organism (O) mediates the effect of Stimulus (S) on Response (R) (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982). With this in mind, the present study hypothesises that PSR mediates the relationship between the antecedents of PSR (i.e., POP, AUT, CRE, SE, and CV) and SB. Thus, the indirect effect of PSR was examined. In line with previous studies in the field (e.g., AlFarraj *et al.*, 2021), indirect effects were analysed via bootstrapping ($n = 5000$) with a 95% confidence interval via AMOS V.28 and were calculated using the Indirect Effects Estimand by Gaskin and Lim (2018).

According to Hair et al. (2019), three basic types of mediation can be observed in data analysis: complete, partial, and no mediation. *Complete* (or full) mediation occurs when the mediating variable fully explains the relationship between IV and DV. In other words, the direct effect between IV and DV is non-significant, but an indirect effect through the mediating variable does have a significant relationship. *Partial* mediation occurs when the mediating variable explains a portion of the relationship between the IV and DV. However, there is still a significant direct effect of the IV on the DV, even after accounting for the influence of the mediating variable. In this case, both the direct and indirect effects (mediation effects) are present and contribute to the relationship between the IV and DV. Lastly, *no mediation* is observed when the inclusion of the mediating variable does not significantly explain or influence the relationship between the IV and DV. In this case, the direct effect of the IV on the DV remains significant, while the mediating variable has no significant impact on the relationship.

Based on the given result in Table 6.26, it can be interpreted that PSR fully mediates the relationship between source factors (i.e., POP and AUT) and SB. Specifically, the p-value of 0.027 indicates a significant negative mediating effect of PSR between POP and SB. This means that when controlling for PSR, the direct effect of POP on SB becomes non-significant (p-value = 0.070), suggesting that the mediating role of PSR fully explains the influence of POP on SB. Similarly, the direct effect of AUT on SB, with a p-value of 0.259, suggests a non-significant relationship. However, when PSR is included in the analysis, the direct effect becomes significant (p-value = 0.022), indicating that PSR fully mediates the influence of AUT on SB. This implies that PSR plays a crucial role in explaining the relationship between source factors and SB. In addition, PSR fully mediates the relationship between CV and SB. Specifically, it was found that the direct effect of CV on SB is non-significant, with a p-value of 0.076. However, the direct effect becomes significant by including PSR as a mediator (p-value = 0.03). Hence, PSR fully mediates the relationship between POP, AUT, and CV.

PSR was also found to partially mediate the relationship between content factors (i.e., CRE and QU) and SB. In particular, the direct effect of CRE on SB is significant, indicating a direct influence of CRE on SB. Additionally, the mediating effect of PSR is also significant (p-value = 0.025), suggesting that PSR partially mediates the relationship between CRE and SB. Similarly, the direct effect of QU on SB is significant, indicating a direct influence of QU on

SB. Also, the mediating effect of PSR is significant (p-value = 0.018), suggesting that PSR partially mediates the relationship between QU and SB.

As for SE, the analysis revealed no mediating effects observed between SE and SB when considering the mediating role of PSR. Specifically, SE demonstrated a non-significant direct impact on SB (p-value= 0.077). Similarly, when PSR was included as a mediating variable, the direct effect of SE on SB was still non-significant (p-value= 0.689). Thus, it can be concluded that PSR has no mediating effects between SE and SB.

To this end, the indirect results confirm five hypotheses (i.e., H8.a, H8.b, H8.c, H8.d, and H8.f) and reject one hypothesis (i.e., H8.e). Thus, it can be concluded that PSR plays a mediating role in explaining the relationship between POP, AUT, CRE, QU, and CV. However, no indirect effects were found between SE and SB via PSR.

Table 6.26: Results of indirect hypothesis testing

Label	Indirect Path	Standardized Estimate (direct)	p-value (direct)	Unstandardized Estimate (indirect)	Lower	Upper	P-Value	Standardized Estimate (indirect)	Result
H8.a	POP → PSR → SB	0.163	0.070	-0.026	-0.054	-0.006	0.027	-0.033*	Full mediation
H8.b	AUT → PSR → SB	0.056	0.259	0.032	0.009	0.07	0.022	0.043*	Full mediation
H8.c	CRE → PSR → SB	0.363	***	0.035	0.007	0.09	0.025	0.031*	Partial mediation
H8.d	QU → PSR → SB	0.098	0.033*	0.051	0.014	0.123	0.018	0.026*	Partial mediation
H8.e	SE → PSR → SB	-0.077	0.077	0.001	-0.008	0.018	0.689	0.001	No mediation
H8.f	CV → PSR → SB	0.098	0.076	0.068	0.014	0.157	0.03	0.056*	Full mediation

*: Significant at less than 0.050

Legend: POP- Popularity; AUT- Authenticity; CRE- Creativity; QU- Quality; SE- Self-efficacy; CV- Collectivism; PSR- Parasocial relationship; SB- Sharing behaviour.

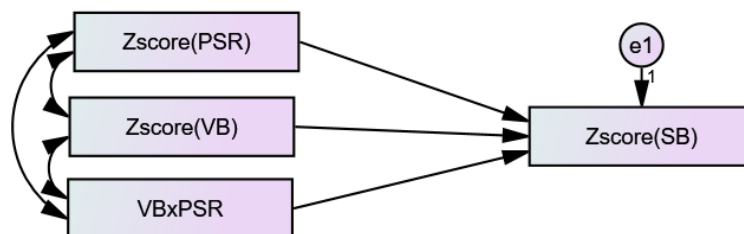
6.8.5 Moderating Effect of Verification Behaviour

Moderation analysis focuses on understanding how the strength or direction of the relationship between the predictor and outcome variables changes depending on the level of the moderator variable (Hair *et al.*, 2019). In other words, moderation is when a construct directly influences the association between the exogenous and the endogenous latent factors. The current study investigates the moderating effect of followers' verification behaviour (VB) on the relationship between PSR and SB and whether this relationship can be strengthened or diminished when including VB (Hypothesis 9).

The moderation analysis was conducted on a separate model. Separating the analyses into two models can simplify the model structure, making it easier to interpret and understand the relationships when including a moderator (Frazier, Tix and Barron, 2004) and gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the variables are influenced (Muller, Judd and Yzerbyt, 2005).

To assess the presence of moderation in our research model, the study followed a standardized approach using SPSS to transform our variables of interest into Z-scores, as recommended by Gaskin (2023b). Specifically, the Z-scores for three key variables—VB, PSR, and SB—were computed. Subsequently, the interaction effect was calculated by multiplying the Z-scored PSR variable with the Z-scored VB variable. This interaction term was incorporated into the structural model constructed in AMOS, as illustrated in Figure 6.9. This approach allowed us to explore the potential moderating influence of the interaction effect on the relationships within our model.

Figure 6.9: Moderated structural model



Legend: PSR- Parasocial relationship; VB: Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour; Zscore- standardized or centred; PSRxVB- interaction effect between PSR and VB; e1- error term

As shown in Table 6.27, VB had a negative significant moderation effect between PSR and SB ($P < 0.001$), supporting H9. Specifically, when VB increases, the effect of PSR on SB is diminished. On the contrary, when VB is low, the relationship between PSR and SB is stronger.

Table 6.27: Results of moderating hypothesis testing

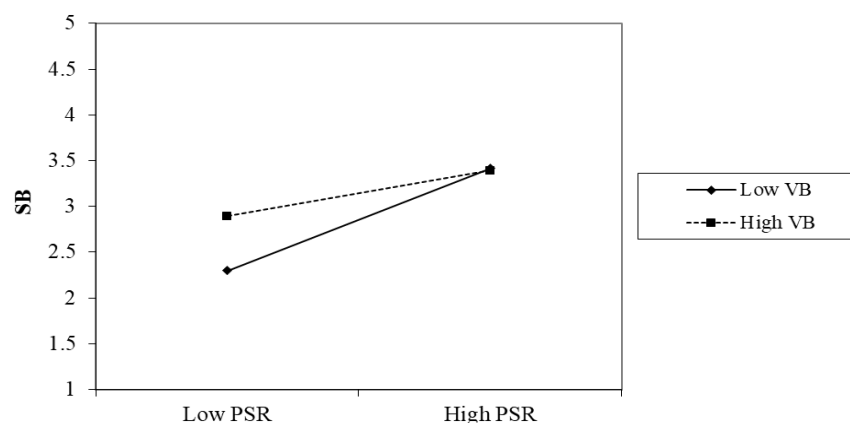
Relationship	Unstandardized estimate	Standardized estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label	Result
PSR x VB → ZSB	-.110	-.155	.029	-3.831	***	H9	Accepted
ZVB → ZSB	.144	.144	.040	3.621	***		
ZPSR → ZSB	.404	.404	.041	9.859	***		

***: Significant at less than 0.001

Legend: PSR- Parasocial relationship; VB: Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour; Z- standardized or centred; PSRxVB- interaction effect between PSR and VB.

Additionally, Dawson's (2014) Two-Way Interactions template in Office Excel was used to visualize the moderating effect of VB on the relationship between PSR and SB. In Figure 6.10, the plot demonstrates that when VB is low, the slope between PSR and SB becomes steeper, indicating a stronger positive relationship between PSR and SB. On the other hand, when VB is high, the relationship between PSR and SB becomes weaker, with a flatter slope. This suggests that PSR's effect on SB depends on the level of VB, providing evidence to support hypothesis H8.

Figure 6.10: Interpretation of the interaction results of PSR x VB



Legend: PSR- Parasocial relationship; VB: Verification behaviour; SB- Sharing behaviour

6.8.6 Summary of Hypotheses Testing

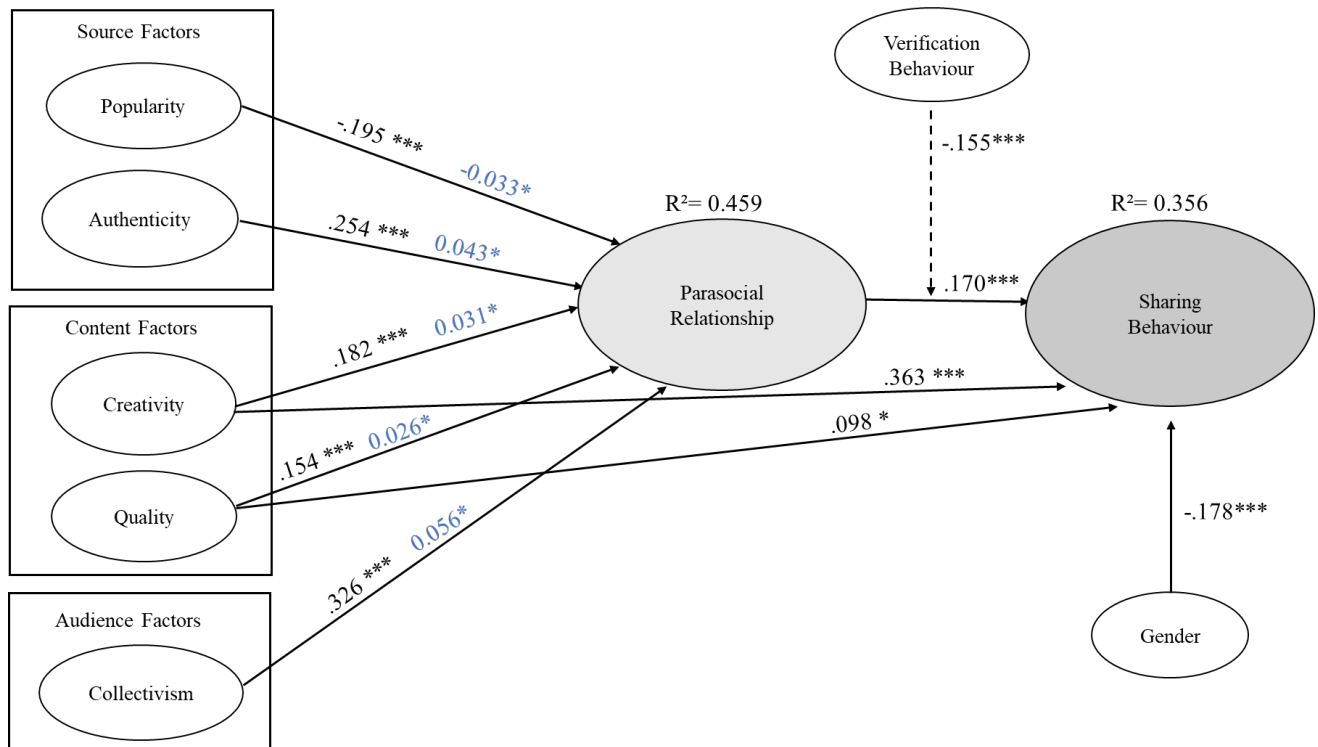
Table 6.28 exhibits a summary of the hypotheses tested in the study. The data show that 14 out of 20 hypotheses were supported. Figure 6.11 presents the revised framework, clarifying the significant relationships between the research framework's constructs.

Table 6.28: Summary of hypotheses testing

Label	Direct effect	Result
H1.a	Source popularity will have a negative effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Supported
H1.b	Source popularity will have a negative effect on sharing behaviour	Not supported
H2.a	Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Supported
H2.b	Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Not supported
H3.a	Content creativity will have a positive effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Supported
H3.b	Content creativity will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Supported
H4.a	Content quality will have a positive effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Supported
H4.b	Content quality will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Supported
H5.a	Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Not supported
H5.b	Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Not supported
H6.a	Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Supported
H6.b	Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Not supported
H7	A parasocial relationship with the influencer will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Supported
Label	Mediation effect	Result
H8.a	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of source popularity on followers' sharing behaviour	Supported
H8.b	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of perceived influencer authenticity on sharing behaviour	Supported
H8.c	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of content creativity on sharing behaviour	Supported
H8.d	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of content quality on sharing behaviour	Supported
H8.e	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of self-efficacy on sharing behaviour	Not supported

H8.f	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of collectivism on sharing behaviour	Supported
Label	Moderation effect	Result
H9	High verification behaviour will weaken the effect of parasocial relationship with the influencer on sharing behaviour	Supported

Figure 6.11: Revised framework of the hypothesized relationships



Note: *Black solid lines* indicate direct relationships. *Black dotted lines* indicate a moderated relationship. *Blue text* indicates significant indirect relationships through Parasocial Relationship.

Unsupported hypotheses are ignored.

6.9 Summary

This chapter has shown the analytical procedures to test the study's proposed hypotheses. In total, 507 responses were subjected to a set of statistical tests using SPSS version 28.0 and SEM based on AMOS version 28.0.

This chapter commenced with an explanation of the data collection procedures for the main survey. The collected survey data underwent a thorough cleaning and preparation process to remove any missing, irrelevant, or outlier data. Later, data was tested for non-response bias. The findings indicate that non-response bias may not be a major concern in this study. Besides,

the number of observations, the average value, and the standard deviation were presented. Afterwards, the normality test was examined, and the results demonstrated that the data was normally distributed. Furthermore, multicollinearity was tested, and the results confirmed no indication of multicollinearity problems. Moving on, a description of the participants' demographic profiles was subsequently provided. This includes characteristics such as gender, age, education level, occupation, favourite social media platform used to follow favourite SMIs, and time spent on that platform.

After preparing the data, EFA was conducted using SPSS V28.0. First, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test were conducted. KMO value is acceptable (0.889), and Bartlett's test was significant ($p < 0.001$). Second, the communality outcome confirms that all items included in the current study are above the cut-off point (i.e., 0.5). Third, the factor extraction and rotation output were presented, and the results showed that 9 components had eigenvalue greater than 1. The scree plot test confirms the eigenvalue result as the curve started tailoring off after the ninth point. Moreover, a summary of item factor loading was presented in the current chapter.

After EFA, CFA was conducted using AMOS. This section started with the measurement model for overall constructs and the model's goodness-of-fit. The results were within the cut-off point. Afterwards, the values of Cronbach's alpha suggested that all constructs are reliable, as they achieved a score greater than 0.70. CFA was also performed to evaluate the convergent validity. The results of factor loadings of the items, CRE, and AVE confirmed the convergent validity of the measures. Additionally, the analysis supported the discriminant validity of the measurement scales. Next, CMB was tested using both Harman's single factor test and CLF. The results were satisfactory, confirming that CMB had a minimal impact on the study results. Finally, structural models using AMOS were run to test all proposed hypotheses. The research findings revealed that 14 out of 20 hypotheses were supported. The subsequent chapter will discuss the results generated from this part, providing a link between these results and previous findings.

7 Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

With our statistical analysis and the resulting findings in hand, this chapter is devoted to a comprehensive discussion of the key factors that aid us in understanding the underlying mechanisms behind follower sharing behaviour. Specifically, this chapter discusses the findings of the hypothesised relationships presented in the proposed conceptual framework developed based on the literature review and the findings from the qualitative study. In this chapter, significant and non-significant results are discussed and compared with the existing evidence in the literature.

The findings are discussed with a list of the research questions and their related hypotheses. An overview of the study is first presented. Following this, the findings of the hypothesis testing are reviewed and discussed. Initially, the direct influences exerted by the antecedents of sharing behaviour are discussed (i.e., popularity, authenticity, creativity, quality, self-efficacy, and collectivism) as well as the direct influences of the antecedents of PSR (i.e., popularity, authenticity, creativity, quality, self-efficacy, and collectivism). Following this, the direct influence of PSR on sharing behaviour is clarified. Thereafter, the mediating effect of PSR in the relationship between source, content, and audience factors and sharing behaviour is discussed. Afterwards, the moderating role of verification behaviour in the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour is explained. Next, the results of the control variables are presented. In the final section, a summary of the chapter is presented.

7.2 Overview of the Current Study

Drawing on the S-O-R framework, this study developed a conceptual model that explores the underlying mechanisms behind follower sharing behaviour. Utilizing three key aspects of the CPM: source (popularity and authenticity), content (creativity and quality), and audience factors (self-efficacy and collectivism) – as stimuli, the study explored how these factors influence sharing behaviour as the response via PSR as the organism. The research examined both direct and indirect links between stimuli, organism, and response. Additionally, the study investigated followers' verification behaviour as a moderator in the link between stimuli and organism.

As outlined in the first chapter, the overarching aim of this study is divided into three research questions, which were divided into three objectives. Lastly, these objectives led to the

formulation of twenty hypotheses. To address the research's aim, questions, and objectives, this study adopted a mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) approach. The first phase involved conducting in-depth interviews with 21 Saudis who follow SMIs. These interviews aimed to gain insights into sharing behaviour, verification behaviour, and audience factors relevant to Saudi society. The interviews identified two audience variables, self-efficacy and collectivism, while other concepts of interest were extracted from existing literature. Subsequently, a conceptual framework was developed, and 20 hypotheses were formulated, which included 13 direct hypothesised relationships, 6 indirect hypothesised relationships, and 1 moderation-hypothesised relationship. The conceptual framework was then tested using a sample of 507 Saudi followers. The results of the hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 7.1, revealing that 14 of the 20 hypotheses were supported.

Table 7.1: Summary of hypotheses testing

Label	Direct effect	Result
H1.a	Source popularity will have a negative effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Supported
H1.b	Source popularity will have a negative effect on sharing behaviour	Not supported
H2.a	Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Supported
H2.b	Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Not supported
H3.a	Content creativity will have a positive effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Supported
H3.b	Content creativity will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Supported
H4.a	Content quality will have a positive effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Supported
H4.b	Content quality will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Supported
H5.a	Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Not supported
H5.b	Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Not supported
H6.a	Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on parasocial relationship with the influencer	Supported
H6.b	Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Not supported
H7	A parasocial relationship with the influencer will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour	Supported
Label	Mediation effect	Result

H8.a	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of source popularity on followers' sharing behaviour	Supported
H8.b	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of perceived influencer authenticity on sharing behaviour	Supported
H8.c	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of content creativity on sharing behaviour	Supported
H8.d	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of content quality on sharing behaviour	Supported
H8.e	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of self-efficacy on sharing behaviour	Not supported
H8.f	Parasocial relationship with the influencer mediates the effect of collectivism on sharing behaviour	Supported
Label	Moderation effect	Result
H9	High verification behaviour will weaken the effect of parasocial relationship with the influencer on sharing behaviour	Supported

7.3 Discussion of the Findings from the Hypothesis Testing

This section is devoted to discussing the findings from hypothesis testing. Both significant and non-significant findings are discussed in light of the existing literature. Additionally, to enrich the discussion, selected participant excerpts from the qualitative findings were incorporated, offering more insight into our discussion. This discussion is organised into four subsections; the first subsection addresses the direct relationships linking source, content, and audience factors to sharing behaviour and PSR, respectively, while also discussing the direct relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour. The second subsection tackles the indirect role of PSR as a mediating variable between source, content, and audience variables, and sharing behaviour. The third subsection discusses the moderating role of verification behaviour in the effect of PSR on sharing behaviour. The last discusses the results of the control variables.

7.3.1 Direct Relationships

The statistical analysis (see Chapter Six, Section 6.8.3) suggested thirteen direct relationships discussed in this section. This section is divided into three subsections: antecedents of sharing behaviour, antecedents of PSR, and the direct relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour.

7.3.1.1 *Antecedents of Sharing Behaviour (SB)*

This section discusses the results of direct relationships between the proposed antecedents of sharing behaviour. Specifically, our *first* research question was to investigate how followers' sharing behaviour is stimulated by six key antecedents in the context of influencer marketing:

source (popularity and authenticity), content (creativity and quality), and audience factors (self-efficacy and collectivism). Accordingly, each hypothesis is explored individually, shedding light on its direct influence on the formation of sharing behaviour.

7.3.1.1.1 Source Popularity (POP)

H1a: Source popularity will have a negative effect on sharing behaviour. (Not supported)

It was hypothesized that SMIs' with lower levels of popularity would directly stimulate their followers' sharing behaviour. Contrary to our expectation, the effect was positive and insignificant ($p > 0.05$). Thus, there was no support for this hypothesis. Although our hypothesis is not supported, the positive relationship between popularity and sharing behaviour indicates that the higher the popularity of the SMI, the more likely their content is to be shared. This positive relationship is explained by referring to the concept of opinion leadership. SMIs with large numbers of followers derive their persuasive power from perceived opinion leadership (Conde and Casais, 2023). An SMI who is popular and seen as an opinion leader is likely to be perceived as valid and credible in the minds of their followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). Therefore, followers might be tempted to share content from SMIs' with large numbers of followers because they are seen as opinion leaders with established credibility. To further explain our insignificant result, since our study mainly examines sharing behaviour, it can be argued that sharing demands more cognitive effort than other engagement activities, such as commenting or liking (Kim and Yang, 2017); hence, the popularity of the SMI becomes irrelevant, while the content becomes relevant. One should note that the literature presents conflicting views on the influence of popularity and its impact on engagement with SMIs. Some studies (e.g., Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Borges-Tiago, Santiago and Tiago, 2023) suggest that followers are willing to engage with less popular SMIs. Conversely, others argue that popular SMIs, due to their large following, are more likely to foster engagement (e.g., Leung *et al.*, 2022; Conde and Casais, 2023). While our findings align with the idea that popular SMIs can generate more engagement among their followers, the lack of statistical significance in our results necessitates further evidence to fully explain the role of popularity in shaping engagement and sharing behaviour. One should also note that popularity can have unfavourable effects if not mediated by positive experiences, such as PSR (Chung and Cho, 2017). Consequently, it can be inferred that popularity, in isolation, does not emerge as a significant antecedent of sharing behaviour in our framework.

7.3.1.1.2 Perceived Source Authenticity (AUT)

H2a: Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour. (Not supported)

Our hypothesis posited that perceived source authenticity would be associated with increased sharing behaviour, in line with previous research indicating that SMIs perceived as more authentic tend to evoke higher levels of engagement from their followers. However, our research did not provide support for this hypothesis ($p > 0.05$), which contradicts previous studies (e.g., Syrdal *et al.*, 2023; Cascio Rizzo *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, it was found that authenticity had the weakest impact among all the six antecedents examined. This can be clarified by considering that, particularly within the context of influencer marketing, followers often prioritize the usefulness and value of the content provided by SMIs, placing less emphasis on the SMI's perceived authenticity when deciding whether to share the content they post. Another plausible explanation is that when followers lack an established or pre-existing connection with the SMI, the perceived authenticity of the SMI may lose some of its relevance. This is mainly because, in the absence of a prior relationship or connection, authenticity might not establish a strong enough bond to stimulate engagement and content sharing. Thus, the authenticity of the SMI does not necessarily become a significant factor without a pre-existing relationship with the follower. Additionally, to further explain this finding, the definition of authenticity within the SMI context is considered, which refers to the perception that an SMI acts in accordance with their genuine self (Moulard, Garrity and Rice, 2015; Audrezet, de Kerviler and Guidry, 2018; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). This means that if people do not share content much because it does not feel authentic, it could be because they prefer content that shows the real and natural side of everyday SMIs. They might like posts that are genuine and not too much like advertisements. In other words, followers who follow SMIs usually want fun and useful content, not just advertisements (Chen, Yan, and Smith, 2023). Hence, relying solely on perceived authenticity, at least on its' own, is insufficient for sharing decisions. In summary, since both source popularity and authenticity failed to predict sharing behaviour, our results are consistent with Chan, Hung, and Tse (2023), who suggested that source factors do not predict sharing behaviour.

7.3.1.1.3 Content Creativity (CRE)

H3.a: Content creativity will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour. (Supported)

In this hypothesis, it was postulated that the creativity of the content shared by SMIs would positively impact their followers' sharing behaviour. The empirical findings not only confirmed this hypothesis but also revealed content creativity to be the most influential factor among all the six antecedents examined ($p < 0.001$). In the dynamic realm of social media, followers often find themselves in an environment flooded with abundant information and a vast array of SMIs. To capture their attention and establish a distinctive presence, SMIs employ a powerful strategy – crafting original and creative content that bears their unique voice and style (Leung *et al.*, 2022). When SMIs showcase their creative ability, they become noticeable and earn recognition as knowledgeable and professional individuals with whom followers are inclined to engage (Ki and Kim, 2019). Besides, creative content can also be aesthetically pleasing, which motivates followers to engage with the content (Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022). Our finding resonates with prior studies in the context of influencer marketing (e.g., Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a), which consistently emphasize the capacity of creativity to enhance followers' engagement with SMIs. Furthermore, this alignment extends beyond the SMI domain to studies that explore the broader dynamics of viral content sharing (e.g., Dobeles *et al.*, 2007; Tellis *et al.*, 2019; Peters, Kashima and Clark, 2009). These studies suggest that messages tend to go viral when they incorporate an element of surprise, a fundamental component of creativity. A noteworthy revelation from a recent study in Saudi Arabia adds weight to the significance of creativity – approximately 59% of Saudis follow SMIs specifically because of the creative content they produce (Alzughhaibi and Khan, 2021). This indicates that creativity serves as a stimulator, drawing followers into the engaging world of SMIs and fostering active participation in the form of sharing their content. Some of the quotes from the semi-structured interviews presented in Chapter 5 are consistent with the significance of content creativity:

“A lot of influencers are just clones. Some influencers are creative and come up with new ideas. However, there are only a few of them.”
(Participant 19)

“I think those influencers that work with the same media agencies all have similar content, but those working separately are more creative. I believe this is because the media agencies control every piece of content posted, whereas the other influencers are on their own and have more freedom. If they all lacked creativity and were doing the

exact same things, it would be extremely boring, and I would not be interested in following their content anymore.” (Participant 13)

7.3.1.1.4 Content Quality (QU)

H4.a: Content quality will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour. (Supported)

Our hypothesis postulated that content quality would positively impact sharing behaviour, suggesting that high-quality content would serve as a stimulus, encouraging followers to share. As expected, our analysis supported this hypothesis, revealing a statistically significant link between content quality and sharing behaviour ($p < 0.05$). It was observed that followers placed importance on the quality of the content shared by SMIs, making it the second most influential antecedent. This suggests that the greater followers emphasize higher content quality, the more inclined they become to share that content. To explain this finding, previous research suggests that when attempting to share content online, it is the duty of each user to assess the content's quality before deciding to accept and share it (Charband and Jafari Navimipour, 2016). Therefore, followers are more likely to share content that is not only creative but also accurate, reliable, and updated. Engaging with content that followers recognize as high quality can signal the SMI's dedication and competence, which suggests that followers find the content both compelling and persuasive (Lou and Yuan, 2019). This aligns with a recent study by DRC (2023), which found that 77% of Saudi Arabian followers prioritize the content provided by SMIs. Our finding also aligns with the work of Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy (2022) and Cheung et al. (2022a), indicating that followers are more inclined to engage and share their content if they perceive it as high quality. Additionally, our study resonates with the research conducted by Magno (2017), which demonstrates that the quality of blog content positively influences reader engagement with the blog. Furthermore, our findings extend beyond influencer marketing, as they concur with studies exploring sharing behaviour in other domains. For instance, high-quality content can increase the motivation to share brand-related content (Rohm, Kaltcheva and Milne, 2013), while content virality occurs when the content is perceived as useful and interesting (Berger and Milkman, 2012). Based on the preceding discussion, it is evident that content quality has emerged as the second most influential content factor in promoting sharing behaviour. Two excerpts from the semi-structured interviews are presented to further illustrate the significance of content quality:

“I love her makeup tutorials; they are so useful. I feel like I learned a lot of tips and tricks from her... Maybe if the influencer provides

something useful, then I will start to pay more attention to them."
(Participant 11)

"I love knowledge. Accepting others' opinions is some sort of knowledge... I am starving for knowledge. What matters to me is to grow intellectually. Therefore, when I follow an influencer, what matters to me is the quality of information he provides. Otherwise, what is the point of sharing?" (Participant 03)

In summary, since both content creativity and quality had a positive and significant influence on sharing behaviour, our results are consistent with Chan, Hung, and Tse (2023), who suggested that content factors predict sharing behaviour.

7.3.1.1.5 Audience Self-efficacy (SE)

H5a: Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour. (Not supported)

It was hypothesized that self-efficacy influences sharing behaviour; however, our analysis did not support this hypothesis ($p > 0.05$). This outcome is particularly unexpected considering participants' noteworthy emphasis on this factor during our initial qualitative phase. Another unexpected result was the negative effect, indicating that individuals with higher self-efficacy were less likely to engage in sharing behaviour with SMIs. This result is somewhat counterintuitive, as one might expect that higher self-efficacy would lead to more active engagement. As such, self-efficacy does not seem to be an influential factor for a follower sharing behaviour. Therefore, our results do not resonate with previous studies indicating that self-efficacy influences news sharing among internet users (Lee and Ma, 2012), knowledge sharing in employee weblogs (Papadopoulos, Stamati and Nopparuch, 2013), YouTube video sharing (Chiang and Hsiao, 2015), and Facebook tourism-experiences sharing (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). However, it should be noted that although these studies found significant relationships, it is important to note that self-efficacy is context-dependent. It is possible that the widespread adoption of social media platforms has led to high levels of savviness (Ki *et al.*, 2020) and self-efficacy among users, which could explain why no significant effect was observed in our study. With the increasing integration of social media into Saudi society, where 79.3% of the total population are social media users (GMI, 2023), individuals may have developed a sense of normal confidence in their ability to navigate and engage with these platforms. This aligns with the statement made by participant 8:

“I feel more confident using social media, so engaging with influencers is natural for me. It is like having a conversation with someone I know.”

Additionally, social media platforms have evolved to become more user-friendly over the years. This might make it easier for followers, regardless of their self-efficacy, to engage with SMIs. The ease of use might overshadow differences in self-efficacy. As a result, the variance in self-efficacy levels among our study respondents may have been limited, making it difficult to identify a significant impact on sharing behaviour. The prevalence of social media may have also led to a ceiling effect (Frey, 2022) in self-efficacy, where most individuals already possess a high degree of confidence in using these platforms, leaving little room for variation in the predictor variable. In addition, there could be other direct influential factors that override the impact of self-efficacy. For example, the influence of content creativity and quality on sharing behaviour makes self-efficacy a less influential factor. Yet, further research is warranted to delve deeper into the concept of self-efficacy and explain this negative relationship.

7.3.1.1.6 Audience Collectivism (CV)

H6a: Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour. (Not supported)

It was hypothesized that collectivism would positively influence sharing behaviour among followers of SMIs. However, the results of our statistical analysis revealed no statistically significant relationship ($p > 0.05$), which is notably unexpected, given the attention participants dedicated to this factor during our initial qualitative phase. Our finding seems to diverge from prior research conducted in similar cultural orientations, positing that collectivistic individuals tend to exhibit higher engagement and content sharing (e.g., Goodrich and de Mooij, 2014; Tsai and Men, 2017; Gvili and Levy, 2021). Such studies suggested that collectivism contributed positively to the act of sharing. However, it is worth mentioning that these studies were conducted in varying contexts, such as engagement with branded content, which may account for the differences in our findings. The Saudi Arabian culture, deeply rooted in the principles of collectivism (Jiang, Garris and Aldamer, 2018; Sheikh *et al.*, 2017), emphasizes the importance of group cohesion and harmony (Al-Ghathami, 2005). Within such a context, the act of sharing content might be anticipated to align with the values of collectivism, as it signifies communal involvement and mutual interest. Nevertheless, our findings appear to challenge this conventional wisdom, indicating that the relationship between collectivism and sharing behaviour might be more indirect than direct. It is possible that collectivism might

influence how followers consume content rather than their willingness to share it. In simpler terms, collectivism may shape how followers engage with content, but it might not be a strong driver for whether they decide to share it with others. In addition, the content created by SMIs may align with collectivist values and interests, fostering a strong emotional connection with the SMI. However, when it comes to sharing, followers may consider various factors such as the perceived quality of the content, the personal connection they have with the SMI, or even the rise of individualism within a collectivist framework (Kitirattakarn, Araujo and Neijens, 2019). These diverse stimuli can blur the direct impact of collectivism on sharing behaviour. However, conclusive evidence remains elusive until further research is conducted, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia.

7.3.1.2 *Antecedents of Parasocial Relationships (PSR)*

In this section, the focus is on discussing the direct relationships between the proposed antecedents of PSR. Specifically, our *second* research question was aimed at understanding the factors that stimulate followers to establish PSR with SMIs, encompassing source (popularity and authenticity), content (creativity and quality), and audience factors (self-efficacy and collectivism). Consequently, each hypothesis will be addressed individually, providing insights into its direct impact on the development of PSR.

7.3.1.2.1 Source Popularity (POP)

H1b: Source popularity will have a negative effect on PSR. (Supported)

Our hypothesis posited that lower levels of popularity would result in higher levels of PSR. This hypothesis received significant support ($p < 0.001$), confirming that there is indeed a negative impact of popularity on PSR. Our results are in line with Aw and Chuah (2021) and Yuan et al. (2021), who found that popularity exerts a negative influence on PSR, challenging the conventional belief that popularity is positively associated with likability (e.g., De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). The observed negative relationship between popularity and PSR implies that SMIs with lower popularity, particularly micro-influencers, have a unique ability to foster a sense of closeness with their followers (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023). This fosters an environment where the SMI is seen more as a friend rather than a stranger to their followers (Sokolova and Perez, 2021). This is mainly because micro-influencers attract a niche audience with highly specific interests, making it easier to build stronger connections based on shared passions. In addition, they are often perceived as relatable, approachable, and may have more time and motivation to actively engage with their followers, making followers feel valued

and appreciated (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). In contrast, popular SMIs, such as macro- and mega-influencers, tend to maintain more distant relationships with their extensive follower bases (Kay, Mulcahy and Parkinson, 2020). Those SMIs can certainly have higher reach but also a weak influencer-follower relationship (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023). The practical constraints of managing a large follower base may limit their capacity to establish personal connections and respond to followers individually. This could lead to followers perceiving a lack of genuine personal connection, a focus on acquiring more followers over fostering relationships, and that the SMI is mainly seeking commercial collaborations (Ren *et al.*, 2023; Viral Nation, 2023). In conclusion, this study provides convincing evidence that lower popularity levels in SMIs lead to higher levels of PSR.

7.3.1.2.2 Perceived Source Authenticity (AUT)

H2b: Perceived source authenticity will have a positive effect on PSR. (Supported)

Our hypothesis postulated that perceived source authenticity would lead to a positive PSR. Our analysis provided substantial support for this hypothesis, revealing a significant positive relationship between perceived SMI authenticity and PSR ($p < 0.001$). Authenticity was also identified as the second most influential factor in explaining PSR, following collectivism. Our study strongly resembles the findings of Lee and Eastin (2021), who emphasized that perceived authenticity is the primary source of persuasiveness in SMIs. Our findings are also consistent with the work of Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016), who asserted that perceived authenticity leads to emotional attachment, suggesting that followers who perceive SMIs as authentic individuals are more likely to develop intimate and meaningful connections with them, akin to the relationship between friends. In particular, the authenticity of SMIs allows followers to see them as real, ordinary people who share their lives and values, which, in turn, plays a crucial role in forming a strong PSR (Ilicic and Webster, 2016). Much like real-life relationships where authenticity and genuine interactions are key factors, the same holds true for the imaginary world of PSR. In both cases, authenticity plays a pivotal role in establishing trust, emotional connection, and a sense of relatability between individuals. This concept highlights the fundamental human need for sincerity and authenticity in our interactions, whether they occur face-to-face or in the digital realm of influencer-follower dynamics (Marwick, 2013). Whether we are building connections with people we meet in person or forming imaginary bonds with SMIs we follow online, authenticity remains a driving force in nurturing these relationships. In essence, our study provides evidence that the authenticity perceived in SMIs significantly

contributes to the development of PSR, highlighting the valuable role authenticity plays as a source factor.

7.3.1.2.3 Content Creativity (CRE)

H3.b: Content creativity will have a positive effect on PSR. (Supported)

A link between content creativity and PSR was proposed. Upon conducting our analysis, a positive and statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.001$) was found. This finding suggests that creativity is pivotal in fostering PSR among SMIs and their followers. To expand on this positive and significant relationship, it is essential to delve into the mechanisms underlying this phenomenon. Previous research has noted that providing users with the means to express their creativity is linked to heightened positive emotions, including pleasure, excitement, and enjoyment (Hampton-Sosa, 2017). Specifically, creative content is known for its ability to evoke positive emotions and elicit emotional engagement (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021). In the context of PSR, when SMIs generate innovative and surprising content, it profoundly impacts their followers. Such content captures the followers' attention, resonates with their interests, and ignites their curiosity (Lee and Hong, 2016). Furthermore, creative content often surprises and delights followers, making it memorable and shareable. It stands out in the flood of information that followers encounter on social media, leaving a lasting impression. Moreover, creative content might be perceived as exclusive or premium. Followers may feel privileged to have access to such content, which might achieve differentiation in followers' minds (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021). This, in turn, contributes to a deeper connection between the SMI and their followers, mirroring the principles of PSR (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956). By drawing similarities to prior studies such as Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021) and Cheung et al. (2022a), the relevance of creativity in shaping PSR is further underlined. These studies have already established the impact of creative content on enhancing positive emotions and strengthening the bond between SMIs and their followers. The research extends this understanding to the realm of PSR, offering valuable insights into how creativity fosters these one-sided relationships. In conclusion, the study reaffirms the significance of creativity as a driving force behind the development of PSR.

7.3.1.2.4 Content Quality (QU)

H4.b: Content quality will have a positive effect on PSR. (Supported)

Our hypothesis anticipated that content quality would positively impact PSR, proposing that high-quality content serves as a stimulus, motivating followers to cultivate strong PSR with their favourite SMI. Our empirical analysis has supported this hypothesis, finding a statistically significant link between content quality and PSR ($p < 0.001$). Higher content quality is needed to gain the attention of followers (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019; Venciute *et al.*, 2023) and plays a considerable role in driving relationships between SMIs and followers (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). In essence, followers are more likely to feel attached and develop PSR with SMIs who consistently deliver accurate, reliable, and up-to-date content. To delve deeper into the explanation, followers are motivated to develop intimate relationships with SMIs who provide valuable and meaningful information, as they actively seek such information to fulfil their need for competence. Specifically, high-quality content is more likely to be accurate and well-researched (Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021). Additionally, Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018) identified that the quality of posts is a pivotal factor in the development of opinion leadership. Therefore, when followers perceive the SMI as a reliable source of information who is genuinely committed to their audience, they are more likely to form a strong PSR. As a result, our findings align with previous studies demonstrating that content quality has been shown to strengthen PSR between followers and SMIs (Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). Furthermore, our findings are consistent with the research of Tsai and Men (2013), who have shown that high-quality blog content has the potential to foster emotional connections among readers. In summary, our findings underscore the significance of content quality as a facilitator of PSR, affirming its role in fostering intimate connections between followers and SMIs.

7.3.1.2.5 Audience Self-efficacy (SE)

H5b: Audience self-efficacy will have a positive effect on PSR. (Not supported)

Our hypothesis suggested that audience self-efficacy would positively influence PSR, indicating that followers with high self-efficacy would be more skilful at forming stronger emotional connections with their favourite SMIs. It was alleged that followers with high self-efficacy possess the necessary skills and knowledge of using specific social platforms (Aw and Agnihotri, 2023), allowing them to distinguish genuine SMIs who seek personal connections from those who seek commercial collaborations and rely heavily on image-enhancing filters to twist reality. In essence, these followers with higher self-efficacy were expected to grasp SMIs' true personalities better, thus fostering stronger PSR. However, our analysis revealed no statistically significant relationship between self-efficacy and PSR ($p > 0.05$). It is possible that

in the context of influencer marketing, self-efficacy may not be as influential as initially thought for several factors. First, the ability to foster PSR relies more on the quality and nature of interactions with SMIs (Hu *et al.*, 2020) rather than the technical skills of using social media platforms. Second, followers may be more drawn to source and content factors rather than focusing on their skills. Lastly, social media use has become increasingly normalized, and most people are well-acquainted with various platforms, possessing a high degree of self-efficacy in navigating these platforms. In the case of Saudi Arabia, 79.3% of the total population are social media users (GMI, 2023), so it is possible that there is a relatively homogeneous level of self-efficacy in using social media platforms, which can lead to non-significant results. Moreover, it can be assumed that identifying SMIs who apply beautification face filters to enhance their appearance (Javornik *et al.*, 2022), which was thought to be associated with high self-efficacy, does not necessarily influence how followers develop PSR. As a result, self-efficacy might not be a distinguishing factor, and most individuals feel equally competent. Further research is needed to explore the complex dynamics between self-efficacy and PSR in the context of social media and SMI interactions.

7.3.1.2.6 Audience Collectivism (CV)

H6b: Audience collectivism will have a positive effect on PSR. (Supported)

Our hypothesis proposed that collectivism would positively impact PSR, and our analysis has supported this hypothesis, revealing a significant and positive relationship between collectivism and PSR ($p < 0.001$). The empirical findings not only confirmed this hypothesis but also revealed collectivism as the most influential factor among all the six antecedents examined. This implies that Saudi followers who possess a collectivist orientation, which places a high value on group cohesion, social harmony, and shared interests, are more likely to form intimate and meaningful connections with SMIs, similar to the bonds shared among friends. Collectivist individuals tend to prioritize relationships and social connections within their groups, making them more inclined to develop PSR with SMIs who share content that aligns with their cultural orientation and shared values. Moreover, PSR considers the affinity between followers and SMIs based on the perception of culture, personal values, language, and interest similarity (Conde and Casais, 2023; Sakib, Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast, 2020; Hu *et al.*, 2020). This emphasis on community and shared values ultimately enhances the sense of belonging and attachment among followers, as one participant highlighted in our qualitative study:

“I respect him for not breaking the rules once. He always acts in a modest way and speaks of how we should respect our traditions and always be proud of our culture. This is the kind of influencer that can represent us globally.” (Participant 18)

Furthermore, collectivist cultures have a desire for emotionally appealing content shared by SMIs (Silva, Farias and Silva, 2023). Specifically, when SMIs share stories involving individuals with whom they have strong personal connections, like family members, friends, or romantic partners, it often results in increased interaction from their followers (Conde and Casais, 2023). Therefore, when SMIs’ content evokes positive emotions that resonate with their followers’ cultural orientation, it deepens the emotional connection, which is a crucial component of PSR. In Saudi Arabia, due to its particular collectivist culture (Jiang, Garriss and Aldamer, 2018; Sheikh *et al.*, 2017), there is a strong emphasis on family values in the content created by SMIs. This is illustrated by Participant 10 in our qualitative study:

“The content she shares about helping others is the most touching part. So, all in all, her family content is the most important characteristic of her content. This is the main reason I engage and follow her.”

Additionally, collectivist cultures tend to have higher rates of social media addiction (Cheng *et al.*, 2021). This might be another reason they are more likely to foster PSR, as PSR is built on the foundation of repeated exposure to an SMI (Lee and Watkins, 2016). In conclusion, our findings align with previous research demonstrating that collectivist individuals tend to form PSR with media characters (Schmid and Klimmt, 2011) and brand endorsers (Tsai and Men, 2017). Our findings are also consistent with a study conducted by Silva, Farias and Silva (2023), which highlighted the tendency of collectivist followers to emphasize the emotional aspect of the SMI’s content. Hence, our findings highlight the significance of collectivism as the most influential factor in understanding the formation of PSR.

7.3.1.3 The Impact of Parasocial Relationships (PSR) on Sharing Behaviour (SB)

H7: PSR will have a positive effect on sharing behaviour. (Supported)

Our last direct relationship hypothesis, which addresses our *third* research question regarding the impact of PSR on sharing behaviour, postulated that there would be a positive relationship between the two. Our analysis confirmed this hypothesis, revealing a strong and statistically

significant relationship ($p < 0.001$). This outcome underscores PSR's pivotal role in increasing engagement and sharing behaviour with SMIs. There are several compelling explanations for this significant relationship. First, a strong PSR often signifies that followers perceive a personal connection with the SMI. They regard the SMI as similar to a friend or someone they know well (Lee and Watkins, 2016), fostering a desire to share content within their own networks, mirroring how we spontaneously share things with friends in our daily lives. Second, followers who develop a strong PSR with an SMI tend to trust and perceive the SMI as credible (Dewantara, Jin and Gardiner, 2023). This trust and credibility can lead to a higher likelihood of sharing content from the SMI because followers believe in the authenticity and quality of what is being shared. Third, emotional attachment is a key component of PSR. When followers are emotionally attached to an SMI, they may be more inclined to share content that evokes certain emotions or resonates with their personal experiences (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017), as it allows them to express their feelings or connect with their SMI on a deeper level. Lastly, followers may share an SMI's content to help support the SMI's work, acknowledging the value they derive from the relationship established and the content provided. In summary, our results are consistent with prior findings (e.g., Melnychuk, Arasli, and Nevzat, 2024; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a; Chen, Lin and Shan, 2021; Hudders and De Jans, 2021), affirming the influential role of PSR in stimulating engagement with SMIs.

7.3.2 The mediating effect of Parasocial Relationships (PSR)

Hypothesis 8a: PSR mediates the effect of source popularity on sharing behaviour. (Full mediation)

Hypothesis 8b: PSR mediates the effect of source authenticity on sharing behaviour. (Full mediation)

Hypothesis 8c: PSR mediates the effect of content creativity on sharing behaviour. (Partial mediation)

Hypothesis 8d: PSR mediates the effect of content quality on sharing behaviour. (Partial mediation)

Hypothesis 8e: PSR mediates the effect of audience self-efficacy on sharing behaviour. (Not supported)

Hypothesis 8f: PSR mediates the effect of audience collectivism on sharing behaviour. (Full mediation)

In this section, the indirect relationships are discussed, addressing our *fourth* research question, which focuses on the mediating role of PSR. Specifically, based on the S-O-R framework, the current study posited that the organism (PSR) mediates the relationship between the stimulus (source, content, and audience factors) and the response (sharing behaviour). The findings reveal that PSR fully mediates the relationship between source factors (i.e., popularity and authenticity) and sharing behaviour. Furthermore, it was observed that PSR partially mediates the relationship between content factors (i.e., creativity and quality) and sharing behaviour.

Lastly, no mediation effect was found for the first audience factor, self-efficacy, while PSR fully mediates the relationship between the other audience factor, collectivism, and sharing behaviour. Those results are discussed in the following sections.

The results suggest that PSR fully mediates the relationship between source popularity and sharing behaviour. This relationship was negative, suggesting that lower levels of popularity among SMIs are more likely to lead to sharing behaviour through the mediating effect of PSR. Simply put, SMIs with a smaller following often experience more effective engagement outcomes. This effectiveness is attributed to the positive perceptions of the SMI, resulting in a stronger PSR with their followers. The direct relationship between popularity and sharing behaviour was insignificant, indicating that popularity alone is insufficient in fostering sharing behaviour. This highlights that regardless of an SMI's popularity level, its effect on sharing behaviour is less persuasive without an established pre-existing relationship with the follower (Holiday *et al.*, 2023; Chapple and Cownie, 2017). However, when PSR is included as a mediator, the relationship between popularity and sharing behaviour is negative and significant. Therefore, PSR was able to fully mediate the relationship between source popularity and sharing behaviour.

Regarding authenticity, our results indicate that PSR fully mediates the relationship between source authenticity and sharing behaviour. The direct relationship between authenticity and sharing behaviour was insignificant, implying that perceived SMI authenticity alone does not offer sufficient power to aid sharing decisions. However, when PSR is included, it explains and enhances the impact of authenticity on sharing behaviour. The unique nature of PSR can explain this finding. When followers perceive an SMI as authentic, it tends to foster a stronger, more emotionally charged connection. This heightened connection, in turn, can drive sharing behaviour. In other words, it is not merely the authenticity of the SMI that prompts sharing behaviour but rather the emotional bond formed through the perception of authenticity. For instance, when followers feel that an SMI is genuine and true to themselves, it creates a sense of trust (Lee and Eastin, 2021). This trust enhances followers' emotional attachment to the SMI, making them more inclined to engage and share content. In essence, the perceived authenticity is the trigger, but it is the emotional connection developed through PSR that influences sharing behaviour.

Our findings reveal a partial mediation effect between content factors, specifically creativity and quality, and sharing behaviour through the mediation of PSR. These content factors play a

pivotal role in nurturing a robust PSR, enabling followers to establish a sincere and meaningful connection with SMIs. Consequently, this connection may significantly enhance their willingness to share content that resonates with their perception of the SMI. Remarkably, as the direct influence of both content creativity and content quality on sharing behaviour was statistically significant, our study provides insights into the partial mediating role of PSR. These findings lend partial support to Hypotheses H8c and H8d. Partial mediation signifies that PSR explains a portion, but not the entirety, of the relationship between content factors (creativity and quality) and sharing behaviour. To clarify this result, one plausible explanation lies in the significance of content creativity and quality in shaping followers' sharing decisions. These factors emerged as the only contributors directly linked to sharing behaviour. It is essential to acknowledge that social media is fundamentally content-driven (Lou and Kim, 2019), where the nature of content significantly influences followers' actions. In summary, within the Saudi Arabian context, content creativity and quality proved to be influential factors, promoting both sharing behaviour and the cultivation of robust PSRs. Furthermore, PSR served as a mediator, partially explaining the impact of content factors on sharing behaviour. It is worth noting that the generalizability of this relationship should be examined in diverse contexts through future studies.

Regarding the first audience factor, self-efficacy, our findings reveal that PSR does not mediate the relationship between self-efficacy and sharing behaviour. This outcome is not surprising since self-efficacy had no impact on either sharing behaviour or PSR. Self-efficacy typically reflects an individual's belief in their own abilities to perform specific tasks successfully (Bandura, 1986). If this belief does not significantly influence followers' sharing behaviour or their development of a PSR with an SMI, it makes sense that PSR has no pathway to mediate the relationship between self-efficacy and sharing behaviour. As discussed in sections 7.3.1.1.5 and 7.3.1.2.5, with the increasing integration of social media into our daily lives, individuals have naturally developed a sense of normal confidence in their ability to navigate and engage with these platforms. Additionally, social media platforms have become more user-friendly over the years, making it easier for followers, regardless of their self-efficacy levels, to engage with SMIs. This improved user-friendliness might overshadow any differences in self-efficacy, ultimately resulting in the lack of an impact on sharing behaviour and PSR. From both the direct and indirect hypotheses, it can be concluded that self-efficacy has limited relevance in influencer marketing, specifically in the context of engagement with SMIs.

Lastly, concerning the second audience factor, collectivism, it was found that PSR fully mediates the relationship between collectivism and sharing behaviour. The direct relationship between collectivism and sharing behaviour was insignificant, implying that perceived collectivism alone does not significantly influence sharing decisions. This mediation effect, however, was observed when the follower already had a positive pre-existing relationship with the SMI. Followers with a collectivist orientation may be more emotionally attached to SMIs representing their cultural values and traditions (Silva, Farias and Silva, 2023). This emotional attachment can drive them to engage more actively with the SMI's content and share it to express their emotional connection. In this context, it is necessary for followers with a collectivist orientation to channel their identification with SMIs through the path of PSR. This indirect process leads to the establishment of sharing behaviour. In other words, Saudi followers increase their PSR levels with SMIs as a result of their collectivist orientation, and this elevated PSR, in turn, positively influences their engagement with SMIs, ultimately leading to sharing behaviour. This suggests that a collectivist mindset can significantly enhance the connection between followers and SMIs when mediated by PSR, ultimately driving higher levels of engagement and sharing.

In summary, our mediation analysis sheds light on the mechanism through which source, content, and audience factors influence sharing behaviour through PSR. These findings underscore the pivotal role of PSR in elucidating the underlying processes governing the sharing decisions of Saudi Arabian followers. Except for self-efficacy, PSR effectively mediated the influence of source, content, and audience factors on sharing behaviour. This highlights the significance of PSR in stimulating increased sharing, reflecting the high value Saudi individuals place on the relationships they establish with SMIs. These results resonate with prior arguments regarding the mediating role of PSR in fostering effective engagement with SMIs (e.g., Farivar, Wang and Turel, 2022; Shan, Chen and Lin, 2020; Hudders and De Jans, 2021; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a). Additionally, our findings offer theoretical support for the mediating role of the organism, PSR, in elucidating the connection between the stimulus and the response within the S-O-R framework. Therefore, for source, content, and audience factors to effectively encourage sharing behaviour, followers must perceive the SMI as a friend with characteristics such as lower popularity, high authenticity, creative and high-quality content, and alignment with collectivist values. This emphasizes the vital role of PSR and the emotional connections it fosters in optimizing the impact of these factors on sharing behaviour.

7.3.3 Moderating Effect of Verification Behaviour (VB)

H9: A high level of verification behaviour will weaken the effect of PSR on sharing behaviour.
(Supported)

Our last research question addressed the moderating role of verification behaviour. The current study hypothesized that verification behaviour would act as a moderating factor in the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour. More specifically, it was posited that the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour would weaken when followers' verification behaviour is high. As expected, the results of our analysis supported this hypothesis ($p < 0.001$), indicating a significant and negative effect. In other words, a negative moderating effect suggests that when verification behaviour is high, the positive relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour is diminished and becomes weaker. This suggests that when followers engage in high levels of verification behaviour, the effect of PSR on sharing behaviour becomes weaker. These findings imply that followers who are more cautious and discerning in verifying the content and information shared by SMIs may have a diminished reliance on their PSR when deciding whether to share content. It suggests that high verification behaviour may shift how followers engage with SMIs' content. They might emphasise the content's factual accuracy and reliability rather than solely relying on their emotional connection and trust in the SMI. Some participants in our qualitative study exemplify this:

"Yes. If he posted some information that matters to me, I will still verify it. Even if I was attached, he might have made an innocent fault and was in a rush." (Participant 07)

"Trust is important, but it does not hurt to check the bridge before crossing it, even if the bridge was strong." (Participant 01)

To further explain the moderation effect of verification behaviour, the argument put forth by Kim and Yang (2017) can be referenced, highlighting that sharing content on online platforms typically necessitates more cognitive effort compared to simpler engagement activities like commenting or liking. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Saudi Arabian social media users tend to be more cautious when sharing content with their friends, as argued by Stanger, Alnaghaimshi and Pearson (2017). Even if followers have established a strong PSR with the SMI, they may still exhibit scepticism when sharing the SMI's content within their social networks (Jamil and Qayyum, 2022; Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020). This finding contradicts

previous misinformation research indicating that if trust is present in a relationship, people may have a reduced tendency to verify the information (e.g., Majerczak and Strzelecki, 2022). Our finding shows that verification behaviour might function differently in the SMI context, showing that high verification behaviour can weaken the influence of PSR on sharing behaviour. In summary, our findings underscore the significance of verification behaviour in the process of sharing SMIs' posts.

7.3.4 Control variables

Regarding our control variables, which include gender (Hudders and De Jans, 2021), age (Tafesse and Wood, 2021), and time spent on social media (Cao *et al.*, 2021), it was found that only gender had a significant negative influence of sharing behaviour ($p < 0.001$). Previous research shows that gender, specifically sponsored posts from a female SMI, induced more post engagement (Hudders and De Jans, 2021). Also, it has been observed that females tend to be more responsive to SMIs compared to their male counterparts (Chetioui *et al.*, 2023). However, it is important to acknowledge that an explanation for this result falls beyond the scope of our present study. Further research in this domain is warranted to gain a deeper understanding of the implications of gender's role in shaping sharing behaviour. This would shed more light on the significance of gender in the dynamics of follower-SMI interactions and their subsequent sharing behaviour.

7.4 Summary

In summary, this chapter discussed the research hypotheses, highlighting the support or rejection of each hypothesis based on prior studies. This study introduces a fresh insight into the existing literature on engagement with SMIs by incorporating three factors from the CPM -source, content, and audience factors- into the S-O-R framework to provide a better understanding of the underlying mechanism of followers' sharing behaviour. This study developed and statistically examined a conceptual framework by employing the S-O-R framework, the CPM, insights from qualitative findings, and a broad range of literature from both within and outside the influencer marketing domain. This framework advances the claim that source, content, and audience factors influence followers' sharing behaviour. More specifically, the research delves into the effects of source (popularity and authenticity), content (creativity and quality), and audience factors (self-efficacy and collectivism) on followers' sharing behaviour through the mediating role of PSR while also considering the moderating influence of followers' verification behaviour. The study's findings reveal that 14 of the 20

proposed hypotheses found support, encompassing eight direct, five indirect, and one moderating relationship. Conversely, five direct and one indirect hypothesis did not find empirical support.

This research yields interesting findings regarding the factors that directly influence sharing behaviour. Notably, it emphasizes the significance of content factors, namely creativity and quality, as stronger drivers of sharing behaviour than source and audience factors. This implies that followers are more likely to engage with an SMI that consistently provides new and valuable content. The study also reveals that, except for self-efficacy, all other factors are necessary conditions for the development of PSR. Among the factors shaping PSR with SMIs, collectivism emerges as the most influential, followed by authenticity, low popularity, creativity, and quality. Furthermore, the present investigation shows a positive direct connection between PSR and sharing behaviour. Moreover, in line with the S-O-R framework as a mediation paradigm, the study confirms indirect effects between the antecedents of PSR and sharing behaviour. This enriches our understanding of the underlying mechanisms behind follower sharing behaviour, highlighting that source and audience factors alone may not wield substantial direct influence unless there is an established PSR to stimulate sharing behaviour. However, the study does not identify any mediation effect for self-efficacy. Lastly, by including verification behaviour as a moderating variable, the research demonstrates that the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour weakens when followers exhibit high levels of verification behaviour.

The following and final chapter of this study discusses the practical and theoretical implications of the research, its limitations, and recommendations for future studies.

8 Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes this research study by presenting an overview of the study, its contributions to theory and practice, as well as the research limitations and areas of possible future research. This chapter begins with a summary of the study. Afterwards, it revisits the research aim, questions, and objectives and summarises how the study answered the research questions and met its objectives. The theoretical contributions of the study and its practical implications are then outlined, followed by policymaking implications. Next, the study's limitations and areas of possible further research are highlighted. Finally, a chapter summary is presented at the end of this chapter.

8.2 Summary of the Study

By adopting mixed methods, this study provides a conceptual model that examines the underlying mechanisms behind follower sharing behaviour in Saudi Arabia. The study began by extensively reviewing the literature. Specifically, an SLR was conducted to address the deficits in previous literature. In addition, literature outside the context of influencer marketing was also reviewed. It was found that there is a pressing need for additional research that not only focuses on engagement behaviour with SMIs (Cascio Rizzo *et al.*, 2023; Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023; Zheng *et al.*, 2023) but also on the unique feature of sharing behaviour (Chan, Hung, and Tse, 2023; Leung *et al.*, 2022; Li and Xie, 2020). Moreover, there is a need to incorporate various factors relating to the source, content, and audience to understand better the phenomena (Lou, Taylor and Zhou, 2023; Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman, 2021). In addition, the literature review aided us in identifying PSR (Chen, Lin and Shan, 2021) as a mediating variable and verification behaviour (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007) as a moderating variable in the process of sharing.

Since our study focuses on Saudi Arabia as a research setting, it was important to understand the Saudis' patterns of verification and sharing behaviour and uncover variables specific to the Saudi Arabian audience. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were chosen for their suitability in qualitative research, especially when there is limited knowledge about a specific phenomenon (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). An interview guide was prepared following the general principles of effective interview guides while remaining in accordance with other qualitative research in the field of influencer marketing. Moreover, two Saudi

Arabian SMIs with at least five years of experience in influencer marketing were invited to comment on the interview guide to ensure the questions were clear. Afterwards, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Saudis who followed at least one SMI. Thematic analysis was employed using NVivo 12. The findings indicate that self-efficacy and collectivism were two audience variables specific to the Saudi audience. In addition, one item regarding the use of beautification filters was added to the scale of self-efficacy. Moreover, the interviews shed light on their sharing behaviour and better understand how and why they attempt to engage in verification behaviour. Based on this, one item was introduced to the verification behaviour scale. Accordingly, the conceptual framework was updated to include two novel audience factors: self-efficacy and collectivism.

The conceptual framework was mainly inspired by the S-O-R framework and the CPM. At its essence, where communication forms the lifeblood of social media engagement (Xie-Carson, Benckendorff and Hughes, 2023), the integration of CPM allows for exploring persuasive communication factors underpinning engagement. Specifically, referring to the CPM helped us identify and justify the need to include source, content, and audience factors, while the S-O-R framework represented the backbone of the overall research framework. According to the S-O-R framework, source (popularity and authenticity), content (creativity and quality), and audience factors (self-efficacy and collectivism) were the stimulus (S), PSR was the organism mediating variable (O), and sharing behaviour was the response (R). In addition, the flexibility of the S-O-R framework allowed us to include verification behaviour as a moderating variable.

After developing the final conceptual framework, the hypotheses were formulated based on the literature review and insights from the study's qualitative findings. This resulted in 20 hypotheses, including 13 direct and 6 indirect hypotheses, and 1 moderating hypothesis. Most of the measurement items selected for this study were adapted from previous studies. To ensure content validity and assess the clarity and accuracy of item meanings, a pre-test was conducted with the assistance of an expert panel. The panel comprised three university lecturers in marketing and tourism management, two Saudi followers actively engaging with SMIs, and two Saudi SMIs. Following expert suggestions, minor modifications were made to the wording of some items, and one item was omitted from the sharing behaviour scale. After developing the initial items and setting the questionnaire format, the next step was administering a pilot study on a small sample of respondents before conducting a full-scale study. A survey was conducted to collect data from a convenience sample of 158 SMI followers. Based on

followers' responses and feedback, the questionnaire was again refined. During this process, a few items were reworded, and the order of some of the questions was changed. Eventually, a convenience sample of 507 respondents participated in the full-scale survey.

SPSS V.28 and AMOS V.28 were utilised to analyse the data. Data preparation was initiated to ensure the collected data was clean and suitable for further examination. This includes data cleaning, non-response bias testing, presenting measurement item descriptives, normality assessment, and multicollinearity evaluation. After preparing the data, the researcher explored the sample's characteristics. Afterwards, EFA was performed, and the data showed that all constructs were consistent with the theoretical suggestion. Later, AMOS was utilised to assess the model's fit and confirm the conceptual framework's reliability and validity by undertaking CFA. Next, SEM was conducted to test the study's proposed hypotheses. The results indicate that only content factors predict sharing behaviour, whereas PSR was predicted by source, content, and audience factors – except for self-efficacy. It was also found that PSR positively and significantly affects sharing behaviour. Moreover, PSR mediated the influence of source, content, and audience factors on sharing behaviour – except for self-efficacy. Lastly, as expected, verification behaviour negatively moderates the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour.

8.3 Meeting the Research Aim, Questions, and Objectives

This study aimed to develop a framework that investigates the underlying mechanisms of follower sharing behaviour. To align with this overarching goal, the research study was structured around formulating three pivotal research questions, each designed to address specific facets of the phenomenon. Additionally, three detailed research objectives were established to simplify the process of answering the research questions by breaking down the overarching aim into specific objectives. In light of the research findings outlined in the data analysis chapter (Chapter 6) and discussed in the discussion of findings chapter (Chapter 7), this section presents the major research conclusions concerning each research question and its related objectives.

8.3.1 Conclusion to the First Research Question

RQ1. What source, content, and audience factors directly influence followers' sharing behaviour and the development of PSR with SMIs?

Before addressing the first research question, the researcher took a preliminary step to initiate a qualitative study, detailed in Chapter 5, to identify audience variables specific to the Saudi audience. The rationale for this approach stemmed from a twofold perspective. First, our SLR in Chapter 2 revealed that audience variables, especially those relevant to influencer marketing, had received relatively limited attention in the existing literature. Hence, a qualitative approach is deemed suitable when little is known about a specific phenomenon (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Second, it was assumed that the Saudi audience might have unique variables that exert a distinctive influence on their engagement with SMIs. Out of this qualitative exploration, two prominent themes, self-efficacy and collectivism, emerged to represent two audience variables integrated into our conceptual framework.

The current research revealed that among the factors driving the sharing behaviour of followers of SMIs, only content-related factors (creativity and quality) held a significant, direct, and positive impact. Content creativity emerged as the most influential, with content quality closely followed. More specifically, sharing content mainly centres on the creativity and quality of the SMI's content, reflecting followers' active engagement in assessing and evaluating content before deciding to share it. This direct, positive, and substantial effect of creativity and quality underscores that Saudi followers emphasise the message conveyed by the SMI's content, prioritizing it above all else. Conversely, none of the source factors (popularity and authenticity) demonstrated the ability to trigger sharing behaviour directly. Additionally, while audience factors, self-efficacy and collectivism emerged as significant themes in our qualitative analysis, they did not exert a substantial influence in predicting sharing behaviour through quantitative analysis. It is important to acknowledge that while qualitative findings may underscore the perceived importance of a factor, they may not always translate into statistically significant quantitative results. Qualitative data highlights the significance of a variable but does not guarantee a quantifiable impact in subsequent quantitative analyses. In light of these findings, it was concluded that content factors serve as a basis that stimulates followers' direct sharing decisions.

The findings from our study indicate that, except for self-efficacy, all other factors play integral roles as necessary conditions in stimulating followers to build PSR with SMIs. Specifically, our empirical findings demonstrate a significant negative effect between source popularity and PSR. This suggests that SMIs with lower levels of popularity are more effective in cultivating PSR with their followers. In addition, the findings point to a significant positive effect between

perceived source authenticity and PSR. This implies that when followers perceive SMIs as authentic, it strongly contributes to forming PSR. As for content factors, both creativity and quality exhibit significant positive effects on PSR, indicating that creative and high-quality content is pivotal in nurturing these one-sided relationships. Among the audience factors, only collectivism has a significant, positive impact on PSR. It emerges as the most influential factor in shaping PSR, suggesting that followers with collectivist tendencies are more likely to develop strong connections with SMIs. However, in contrast to these influential factors, the effect of self-efficacy was deemed insignificant in our study. In other words, there was no observed association between the level of self-efficacy and the follower's inclination to build a PSR with the SMI.

The findings of this study have also illuminated a significant and positive relationship between PSR and followers' sharing behaviour. This discovery implies that individuals who cultivate stronger PSRs with SMIs are notably more inclined to actively share the content disseminated by these SMIs. Our research points to the significant role that emotional connections and the sense of identification followers establish with SMIs play in motivating them to share content within their social networks. It underscores that the strength of these one-sided relationships can be a driving force behind followers' decisions to share content. Therefore, followers who connect more deeply with SMIs are more likely to disseminate their content among their social circles. The results discussed above helped to meet the first research objective:

RO1. Identify and examine the direct effects of source, content, and audience factors on followers' sharing behaviour and the development of PSR.

8.3.2 Conclusion to the Second Research Question

RQ2. How does PSR mediate the relationship between source, content, and audience factors and sharing behaviour?

Our study unveils that PSR is a full mediator in the relationship between source factors, specifically popularity and authenticity, and sharing behaviour. Similarly, PSR emerges as a full mediator in the relationship between one of our audience factors, collectivism, and sharing behaviour. These observations enrich our comprehension of the underlying mechanisms governing sharing behaviour. What is particularly noteworthy is that these findings emphasize that source and audience factors, on their own, might not wield a substantial direct influence on sharing behaviour unless a well-established PSR with SMI exists. A robust PSR seems to

be the catalyst that stimulates sharing behaviour in response to source and audience factors. Furthermore, our research reveals that when it comes to content factors, namely creativity and quality, PSR partially mediates their relationship with sharing behaviour. This suggests that while these content elements contribute to sharing behaviour, their impact is not solely reliant on the strength of the PSR. Lastly, it is worth noting that our study found no mediation effect in the case of the first audience factor, self-efficacy. The absence of a significant mediating role for PSR between self-efficacy and sharing behaviour, coupled with the lack of a significant direct influence of self-efficacy on sharing behaviour and PSR, leads us to the assumption that self-efficacy may have limited to no effect within the context of influencer marketing. This helped to meet the following research objective:

RO2. Assess the mediating role of PSR between source, content, and audience factors and sharing behaviour.

8.3.3 Conclusion to the Third Research Question

RQ3. How does followers' verification behaviour moderate the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour?

Recognizing that verification behaviour represents a novel variable within the influencer marketing literature; it was imperative to gain an in-depth understanding of how this factor functions and influences followers' sharing behaviour. To address this need, a qualitative study was conducted (Chapter 5) to understand followers' perspectives on how verification behaviour might impact their sharing decisions. The outcomes of this qualitative investigation pointed to the potential influence of verification behaviour on followers' sharing behaviour. Consequently, it was decided to include verification behaviour as a moderating variable since our study assumes that high levels of verification would weaken the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour.

Our quantitative findings have affirmed this assumption, revealing a significant and negative moderating effect in action. In simpler terms, when verification behaviour is elevated, the previously positive relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour undergoes a noticeable reduction, weakening its strength. This implies that when followers actively engage in verification behaviour, their inclination to share content based on their PSR with SMIs diminishes. In essence, individuals who exhibit greater caution tend to rely less on their PSR when making decisions about sharing content. This interesting insight highlights the intricate

interplay between followers' verification behaviour, their emotional connections with SMIs, and the ultimate act of sharing content within the context of influencer marketing. The preceding discussion helped to meet the last research objective:

RO3. Evaluate the moderating effect of verification behaviour on the relationship between PSR and sharing behaviour.

8.4 Contributions

The originality of this study is rooted in its novel contribution and fresh perspective within the existing literature on engagement with SMIs. It accomplishes this by integrating three factors from the CPM – source, content, and audience – into the S-O-R framework, shedding light on the underlying mechanisms of follower sharing behaviour. Moreover, an original addition to the knowledge obtained came from investigating the role of verification behaviour. As a result, this research stands out as one of the few studies investigating follower sharing behaviour in influencer marketing. This study demonstrates several important contributions to knowledge at theoretical, practical, and policy levels. The theoretical contributions and practical implications are presented in the following two sections, respectively. Additionally, a third section, titled “Policymaking Implications,” outlines how these findings can inform and guide policy development.

8.4.1 Theoretical Contributions

The current study adds to the growing literature on engagement with SMIs, addressing the numerous calls for further investigation (e.g., Joshi *et al.*, 2023; Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks, 2019; Cascio Rizzo *et al.*, 2023). Unlike the majority of prior engagement research (e.g., Holiday *et al.*, 2023; Fan *et al.*, 2023; Hudders and De Jans, 2021; Tafesse and Wood, 2021), which treated engagement as a general construct without differentiating between each engagement behaviour (i.e., likes, comments, and shares), this approach is unlikely to obtain rich insights as it overlooks the views of those who engaged with SMIs in other ways (e.g., sharing). The current study is one of a few studies that differentiate these engagement behaviours by focusing specifically on sharing behaviour. This differentiation is important since each engagement behaviour serves a different purpose (Li and Xie, 2020). While sharing behaviour has received some attention in advertising and media literature, our study is one of the few that delves into the underlying processes fostering followers' sharing behaviour in the SMI literature. This allows us to account for factors specific to the SMI context, responding to

the call made by Chan, Hung, and Tse (2023) for the need to “analyze likes and shares separately” (p. 318). Therefore, our findings enrich our knowledge and offer new insights into the factors that stimulate followers’ decisions to engage and share content posted by SMIs.

Unlike the majority of previous empirical studies on follower engagement behaviour that emphasized examining the impact of either source, content, or audience factors in isolation (e.g., Tafesse and Wood, 2023; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Syrdal *et al.*, 2023; Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022; Argyris *et al.*, 2020), an integrated model that considered all three factors simultaneously was developed. As far as our knowledge extends, this study is one of the first attempts to empirically explore and investigate how follower engagement is affected by three key factors in influencer marketing: source, content, and audience factors. Thus, our research model not only adds a fresh dimension to existing studies but also extends the academic work on the antecedents of engagement with SMIs by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the roles played by each category of factors in shaping sharing behaviour. Moreover, our results provide insights that respond to Chan, Hung, and Tse’s (2023) uncertainty regarding the potential mutual exclusivity of these three strategies in influencing sharing behaviour. Our findings indicate the significant and positive role that content factors (i.e., creativity and quality) play in stimulating sharing behaviour, extending and affirming previous work that emphasizes the crucial role of content factors in engaging with SMIs (e.g., Onofrei, Filieri and Kennedy, 2022; Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a; Chan, Hung, and Tse, 2023).

Adding to our theoretical contributions, this study sets itself apart by incorporating concepts from the field of social psychology and cultural psychology. Specifically, two novel variables were introduced, self-efficacy and collectivism, to the influencer marketing literature, focusing on audience factors. In the context of influencer marketing, where the audience’s role is central (Leung *et al.*, 2022), researchers have increasingly emphasized the need to delve into follower-specific characteristics that may influence the effectiveness of SMIs (Lou and Yuan, 2019; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023). Our research answers this call by pioneering the exploration of self-efficacy and collectivism within this context, thus broadening the theoretical landscape of influencer marketing literature.

The present study integrates two distinctive theories from the communication and consumer behaviour literature into one holistic framework, the CPM (McGuire, 2001) and the S-O-R framework (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). These two theories have often been employed

independently in influencer marketing, lacking formal integration. To the best of our knowledge, this study marks the first attempt to integrate both the CPM and S-O-R frameworks into a comprehensive framework. The study's empirical findings support this theoretical integration, shedding light on the underlying mechanism that drives followers' sharing behaviour in the context of influencer marketing. In doing this, the call made by Joshi et al. (2023) to pursue theoretical integration by incorporating two or more theories within a single investigation is responded to.

This study extends a previous application of the S-O-R framework within influencer marketing research (e.g., Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Barta *et al.*, 2023; Belanche *et al.*, 2021a). In doing so, this study directly responds to the growing calls for further exploration of the S-O-R framework's applicability in the influencer marketing literature and unpack additional factors affecting behavioural responses (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). Our contribution to the S-O-R framework lies in incorporating new influential stimulus variables that have not been previously examined in extant research. These variables include popularity, authenticity, creativity, quality, self-efficacy, and collectivism. Additionally, PSR was introduced as an organism variable and sharing behaviour as a response variable, both of which represent novel additions to the S-O-R framework. The findings validate the developed conceptual model, aligned with the premises of the S-O-R framework. Moreover, this research also extends the application of the CPM in influencer marketing, expanding its scope to include not only source and content factors but also the crucial dimension of audience factors. As a result, the calls made by numerous scholars to include varied factors from the CPM (e.g., Lou and Yuan, 2019; Shamim and Islam, 2022; Li and Peng, 2021) are answered.

Scholars have advocated for further research on PSR to uncover additional antecedents and consequences (Ye *et al.*, 2021; Joshi *et al.*, 2023) and understand how PSR influences sharing behaviour (Chan, Hung, and Tse, 2023). Aligning with these calls, the results of this study expand the existing set of antecedents of PSR within the influencer marketing literature, building upon the foundations laid by previous research (e.g., Cheung *et al.*, 2022a; Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023; Shan, Chen and Lin, 2020; Aw and Chuah, 2021). Specifically, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that stimulate followers to form PSRs with SMIs. Consequently, our findings affirm the assumption that less popular SMIs, such as micro-influencers, are particularly better at eliciting PSRs. Moreover, the study validates the pivotal role of content factors, including creativity and quality, in nurturing PSRs. Furthermore, novel

factors have been identified as significant antecedents of PSR, including source authenticity and audience cultural orientation, such as collectivism. Notably, the study also reveals sharing behaviour as a consequence of PSR, thereby extending the comprehension of its effects.

The quantitative findings revealed that whilst source and audience factors (excluding self-efficacy) have no significant direct effect on follower sharing behaviour, their influence is indirect, mediated by the presence of PSR. Accordingly, in line with the S-O-R framework as a mediation paradigm, our study confirms that without the mediating role of PSR, factors like popularity, authenticity, and collectivism have no significant effect on follower engagement. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the current study is the first to investigate the impact of source, content, and audience factors on sharing behaviour through the lens of PSR. Much of the existing literature (e.g., Farivar, Wang and Turel, 2022; Shan, Chen and Lin, 2020; Hudders and De Jans, 2021; Cheung *et al.*, 2022a) confirms the significant mediating effect of PSR in providing a deeper understanding of many relationships between different constructs. Likewise, our study extends this understanding by shedding light on the mediating effect of PSR in the relationships between source, content, and audience factors and sharing behaviour. In doing so, the growing body of evidence highlighting the pivotal role of PSR as a mediating variable were reinforced.

Another theoretical contribution includes examining the moderating role of verification behaviour on followers' engagement decisions. The extent to which followers seek to verify the information provided by SMIs plays a pivotal role in moderating how PSR impact sharing behaviour. When followers actively engage in rigorous verification behaviour, they tend to examine information more accurately and, as a result, place greater emphasis on the accuracy of the content, even if they have established a PSR. This, in turn, can undermine their sharing behaviour. Recent studies (Ki *et al.*, 2020; Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav, 2023; Cabeza-Ramírez *et al.*, 2022) have underscored the need for further investigation into variables that may negatively influence followers' behaviour toward SMIs. Responding to this call, the novel concept of verification behaviour was introduced. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this marks the first attempt to introduce and integrate the notion of verification behaviour into the SMI literature. This introduction is anticipated to open up a new avenue of research, exploring its connections with various marketing and behavioural outcomes.

With regard to the research setting, as the cultural backgrounds of Saudi people are substantially different from those in Western countries (Aljasir, 2019), examining the proposed

conceptual model in Saudi Arabia provides additional theoretical and practical insights into the previous literature (Vrontis *et al.*, 2021; Fowler and Thomas, 2023). Moreover, the findings of this study can also be generalised beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia. Specifically, the results of the study can be generalised to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries that have greater cultural proximity with Saudi Arabia, particularly in terms of collectivist values (At-Twajiri and Al-Muhaiza, 1996). The GCC consists of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. Additionally, it can be argued that the results of the study hold relevance for other collectivist Muslim and Arab countries that share cultural similarities with Saudi Arabia (Am, 2017).

Regarding methodological contributions, our study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews and a survey. This approach stands as a unique feature within the field of study, as it represents one of the few instances where a mixed-method design has been utilized (e.g., Farivar, Wang and Turel, 2022; Wang and Huang, 2023). Specifically, to our knowledge, our research is the first application of a mixed-methods approach when investigating engagement with SMIs, mixing both qualitative and quantitative methods. In doing so, the overarching call from Vrontis *et al.* (2021) for increased integration of mixed methods in influencer marketing research is responded to. Furthermore, the specific request made by Pradhan, Kishor, and Gokhale (2023) to apply mixed methods when studying engagement with SMIs is directly addressed, as mixed methods provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic and robust evidence for the research outcomes. This approach offered a more holistic view of the phenomenon under investigation, enhancing the depth of our insights.

Lastly, in this study, the previous measurements available to the construct under examination were adapted in a research setting (i.e., the Saudi context), which is culturally different from the ones in which these measurements were first developed. Our findings indicate that the scales, in their original form, are generally valid within the Saudi context. However, additional items were introduced for some constructs after conducting semi-structured interviews. Specifically, one new item was included for self-efficacy and another for verification behaviour. While the number of measurement items may not match the original scales, the statistical results prove the constructs' reliability, validity, and discriminant validity. Furthermore, the model's fit indices demonstrated satisfactory results for both the measurement and structural model. Therefore, our study contributes to the existing body of literature by not

only adapting and testing measurement scales but also by doing so within a culturally distinct research setting compared to the contexts in which these measurements were initially developed.

8.4.2 Practical Implications

With the Saudi government's announcement of the 2030 vision, the future of influencer marketing in Saudi Arabia is promising (Leung, Sun and Asswailem, 2022). The current study's research findings hold value for practitioners seeking to implement and better understand how to effectively utilize influencer marketing to drive follower engagement and sharing behaviour in Saudi Arabia and other culturally similar countries across the broader Middle Eastern region. Given the limited empirical evidence available on influencer marketing in these contexts, the insights provided in this study offer preliminary guidance for practitioners, aiding them in selecting appropriate SMIs for their campaigns.

SMIs may benefit from knowing the consequences of their posts so that they can adjust content and make it more convincing to the target audience. Specifically, SMIs should know the correct type of content their followers want so that they can foster more interactive engagement with their followers in the form of shares. It is recommended that SMIs focus on crafting content that is both creative and of high quality to encourage the development of PSR with their followers and the active sharing of their content. Simultaneously, when marketing practitioners select SMIs, they should prioritize those who consistently produce highly creative and quality content. However, marketing practitioners must grant these SMIs the freedom to naturally generate content that is of genuine interest, thus avoiding conventional celebrity endorsement formulas that appear to be highly scripted (Gamage and Ashill, 2023). Audiences follow SMIs and trust their messages precisely due to the presence of creativity and quality in their content. Consequently, SMIs should have the flexibility to create content that best aligns with the preferences of their target audience while accomplishing the campaign's objectives.

While our study initially suggested that content factors alone can foster engagement behaviour, including PSR and other factors amplifies this engagement. For example, source and audience factors may not directly affect engagement behaviour, but they become significant when mediated by PSR, suggesting that marketers should not overlook these factors but should view them as indirect contributors to engagement through the lens of PSR. In reality, it is important to recognize that content factors do not exist in isolation when working with SMIs. The effectiveness of content factors is linked with the presence and influence of PSRs, source, and

audience factors. This implies that marketers should adopt a holistic and integrated approach. Considering the interplay of these factors is crucial for creating long-term relationships and achieving engaging influencer marketing campaigns.

The current study recommends that marketers prioritize working with less popular SMIs (i.e., micro-influencers) because, according to our findings, they are better at fostering PSR with their followers, eventually leading to increased engagement and sharing behaviour. The current reality is that some SMIs can be influential without having millions of followers, which is why marketers are gradually turning to less popular SMIs, or micro-influencers, as they account for 60% higher engagement rates (Childers and Boatwright, 2021). Micro-influencers are cost-effective and significantly more impactful than popular SMIs with millions of followers but limited online interaction (Ryding, Boardman and Konstantinou, 2023). Relying solely on the follower count when selecting an SMI can be misleading, as it merely represents the extent of an SMI's reach. Therefore, partnering with micro-influencers is more likely to foster enduring relationships and actively engaged followers, making it a strategic choice for long-term success.

Our qualitative findings highlight the importance of respecting the collectivist cultural orientation prevalent in Saudi Arabia and integrating it into influencer marketing strategies. Specifically, our quantitative results indicate that collectivism exerts the most significant influence on PSR, subsequently leading to increased engagement. It is recommended that SMIs respect their followers' collectivist culture and align their content with their traditions. Additionally, for practitioners seeking to reinforce emotional connections with their collectivist target audience, selecting SMIs from the same cultural orientation is the most suitable. Collectivist followers should be presented with an SMI from the same cultural orientation that aligns closely with their collectivist values and interests, thereby stimulating quality relationships. While marketers may be unable to change personal values and cultural orientation, they should remain mindful of their influence on online behavioural engagement to manage potential outcomes effectively (Marbach *et al.*, 2019). As a result, understanding followers' culture can benefit marketers in understanding how their target audience might respond and engage with SMIs, helping them tailor their marketing strategies to better reach and resonate with their target audience.

Understanding and leveraging the power of PSR can be a valuable strategy for SMIs and marketers looking to promote their content effectively on social media platforms. Specifically,

the findings concerning the mediating role of PSR provide valuable practical insights. For example, it became evident that source (i.e., popularity and authenticity) and audience (i.e., collectivism) factors do not directly increase followers' sharing behaviour, but they do so indirectly via the underlying mechanism of PSR. This implies that SMIs' persuasiveness is dependent on the presence of a well-established relationship with their followers. In other words, to enhance the SMI's effectiveness in stimulating sharing behaviour, the follower must perceive the SMI as a relatable friend. SMIs who can successfully cultivate these relationships with their followers will likely see increased engagement and sharing of their content. SMIs can use these findings to optimize their relationship with their followers. On the other hand, marketers should recognize that building strong PSRs between SMIs and their followers can enhance the impact of other factors. Therefore, marketers should strive to elicit emotional responses from followers by effectively selecting micro-influencers perceived as authentic and aligning with their followers' collectivist culture. The focus should also be on creative SMIs capable of producing high-quality content. Building connections with followers is beneficial because a strong relationship is difficult to replicate, provides a competitive advantage, and is likely to have a long-lasting effect. The management of PSR is of utmost importance, as it plays a vital role in cultivating desired engagement among followers and influencing their behaviours in ways desired by SMIs and marketers (Joshi *et al.*, 2023).

Social media has created an interactive environment, allowing the creation of emotional relationships and direct engagement with SMIs. However, followers have become more sceptical about the content created by SMIs, which leads to increased verification behaviour. Both marketers and SMIs should remain aware of the potential negative effects of followers' verification behaviour. Recognizing that certain followers might involve themselves in verification procedures can aid in strategically adjusting SMI partnerships. To address these concerns, proactive steps should be taken to mitigate this effect. As indicated in our framework for verification behaviour (see Figure 5.1 in Chapter 5), the importance of transparency and authenticity in influencer marketing is emphasised. Followers who engage in verification behaviour are likely to seek genuine and trustworthy content. Marketers should prioritize transparency in their SMI collaborations and ensure that SMI content aligns with their promoted values. This approach can mitigate verification behaviour and enhance trust. In addition, both SMIs and marketers should understand that although PSR is a powerful tool for engagement, it appears not to discourage followers from verifying information. Therefore, a

practical approach is to strike a balance that fosters PSR while also fostering trust through transparency, reducing the need for excessive verification behaviour.

The insights can help SMIs leverage new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) to enhance their influencer marketing strategies. AI tools can analyse followers' behaviour, preferences, and engagement patterns, enabling SMIs to tailor their posts to better resonate with their audience. This allows SMIs to create highly personalized content that appeals to diverse audience segments, ensuring cultural relevance and resonance. By understanding the specific needs and interests of their audience, SMIs can develop more targeted and effective content strategies. Furthermore, AI can help identify trending topics and emerging interests, allowing influencers to stay ahead of the curve and maintain their relevance. This proactive approach not only enhances engagement but also builds stronger, more meaningful connections with followers. Moreover, SMIs can also optimize their content to encourage sharing behaviour among followers. When content is highly relevant and personalized, followers are more likely to find it valuable and share it within their own networks, amplifying the reach of the SMI's messages. Additionally, understanding the times when followers are most active allows SMIs to post during peak engagement periods, further boosting visibility and the likelihood of content being shared. As a result, this strategic use of AI not only increases immediate engagement metrics but also fosters a community of active and loyal followers who are more likely to interact with and disseminate the content, thereby maximizing the overall impact of SMI campaigns.

The demographic profile of participants in both qualitative and quantitative studies indicates that Snapchat is the most commonly used platform for following SMIs in Saudi Arabia. This observation aligns with the fact that Saudi Arabia boasts one of the largest Snapchat audiences globally (Statista, 2021b), with 89% of Saudis having Snapchat accounts compared to 66% having Facebook accounts (Alghamdi, 2021). Consequently, when selecting an SMI, it is advisable for practitioners to focus on Snapchat to form follower engagement behaviour in the form of shares.

Lastly, while prior research in various contexts has emphasized self-efficacy as a predictor of sharing behaviour, our study brings to light evidence suggesting that self-efficacy may not hold the same significance as a predictor in the specific context of SMI-follower engagement. This finding allows businesses to reevaluate their resource allocation and prioritize other influential

factors in the context of SMI-follower engagement, as it becomes evident that self-efficacy may not be the primary driver of sharing behaviour or PSR in this context.

8.4.3 Policymaking Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for policymakers looking to harness the power of SMIs to enhance public engagement and communication strategies. Governmental agencies aiming to understand public opinions and preferences regarding content engagement and sharing can leverage these insights. By utilizing SMI campaigns, governmental agencies can effectively amplify their messages on health, education, and public safety. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, SMIs played a crucial role in disseminating critical health information quickly and effectively (Al Khasawneh et al., 2021; Taylor, 2020). This underscores the potential of SMIs as valuable partners in circulating critical information. Insights from this research can help governmental agencies identify strategies for engaging with SMIs to ensure that accurate, timely information reaches the widest possible audience.

As followers' verification behaviour is critical for maintaining trust in influencer marketing, there is a growing necessity for policies that support the development and integration of verification tools within social media platforms. These tools, such as content origin tracing and integrated fact-checking services, can help users verify the trustworthiness of the content shared by SMIs. Policymakers can play a crucial role by incentivizing the creation and adoption of these tools, ensuring they are effectively implemented and accessible to all users. By supporting the integration of advanced verification tools, policymakers can enhance the credibility of information disseminated on social media, mitigate the spread of misinformation, and foster a more informed and engaged user base.

Moreover, the research findings might offer insights for the General Authority for Media Regulation (GAMR, 2024), the authority responsible for overseeing SMI advertisements in Saudi Arabia, to enhance the effectiveness of influencer campaigns and maintain the integrity of information disseminated through social media platforms. For example, the insights from this study can help the Authority understand public preferences for content engagement and sharing. Moreover, the Authority can implement stringent measures against those who spread misinformation. This could include revoking the licenses of SMIs who consistently share false information and imposing fines on them. Such regulatory actions would serve as a deterrent, encouraging SMIs to verify the accuracy of their content before sharing it with their followers.

For example, SMIs could be required to disclose their sources and provide evidence for the claims they make in their posts. Failure to adhere to these guidelines could result in penalties such as fines or the suspension of their licenses to operate as SMIs.

Lastly, policymakers can leverage the findings of this study to develop robust ethical guidelines for SMIs. Establishing a comprehensive code of conduct for SMIs can help maintain high standards in influencer marketing and protect the public from deceptive practices. This code of conduct, informed by the study's findings, could outline the responsibilities of SMIs in various aspects. For instance, SMIs should commit to sharing truthful and honest content, avoiding exaggerations or false claims. Additionally, there should be guidelines on verifying the accuracy of information before sharing, particularly for sensitive topics. Moreover, policymakers should encourage respectful and meaningful interactions with followers, fostering a positive online environment. To ensure these guidelines are effective, policymakers should also consider mechanisms for implementation and enforcement. This could involve regular audits of influencer content, penalties for non-compliance, and a system for followers to report misleading or deceptive practices.

8.5 Research Limitations

The present study explored the underlying mechanisms behind follower sharing behaviour in influencer marketing. However, as with any research, this work is not without limitations. These are acknowledged below.

The first limitation is related to the sampling strategy. The target population of this study is SMI followers in Saudi Arabia. However, due to the unavailability of full details about the potential participants of this study, a non-probabilistic convenience and snowball sampling technique was utilised. This approach is criticised as not random and may have introduced bias into the research design because there is a chance that some groups in the population were not included in the sample, which further hinders generalisability (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that respondent locations, specifically the cities they originate from, were not included in our data collection. Nevertheless, given the exploratory nature of this study and the focus on sharing behaviour, collecting specific city data was not within the primary scope of the research objectives, making city-specific data collection less relevant to the research goals.

Second, for efficiency purposes, a cross-sectional approach was used to collect data at one time. Using a cross-sectional approach and collecting data at a single point in time can be limiting

because it offers only a single snapshot, making it difficult to track changes over time. Moreover, the data may not fully represent the complexity and diversity of dynamic phenomena, and findings may not generalize well to different periods or situations. In other words, it misses any important events occurring shortly before or after data collection, limiting insights into trends and developments over time.

The third limitation of this study pertains to the geographic and cultural scope of data collection. Specifically, the questionnaire was exclusively administered in a single emerging collectivist country, Saudi Arabia. As a result, the generalizability of the findings is primarily limited to participants with this specific cultural background. The narrow geographic focus may restrict the applicability of the study's results to broader international contexts, particularly those characterized by Western cultural norms and values. Therefore, caution should be exercised when extrapolating these findings to culturally diverse or distinct settings.

The Fourth limitation of this study relates to its exploratory nature. As an exploratory study, it was designed to provide an initial understanding of the factors influencing sharing behaviour related to source, content, and audience. Consequently, the study only touched on some of the basic constructs, and it is possible that other factors could influence followers' sharing behaviour. For example, this study solely focused on the collectivist cultural orientation of followers without examining the individualistic perspective.

The fifth limitation lies in the exclusive focus of our study on respondents aged 18 and above, neglecting a more detailed exploration of distinct age cohorts, such as millennials or Gen Z. Furthermore, multi-group analyses within the specified age range were refrained from, as both extend beyond the defined scope of the study.

The sixth limitation pertains to the pilot study conducted during the qualitative phase of the research. This study acknowledges the limitation of having a small sample size of only two interviews for the pilot phase. While this number was deemed sufficient for initial testing and refinement of the interview guide, a larger sample size could have provided a more robust foundation for further enhancing the interview questions.

Lastly, a potential source of bias arises from the recruitment process for the semi-structured interviews. Specifically, all 21 participants were recruited through the influence of two Saudi Arabian SMIs. This approach may have introduced bias since the entire participant pool was

channelled through these specific SMIs, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives and experiences represented in the study.

8.6 Future Research Directions

Future research could expand the scope of investigation by employing probability sampling methods to validate the current study's findings. Incorporating a probability sampling technique is recommended, as it allows for the inclusion of each population unit as part of the sample data. Moreover, future research could gain valuable insights by including a query about participants' cities of residence in Saudi Arabia. This additional information would provide a more comprehensive understanding of sharing behaviour and potential variations across different regional cities. In addition, this research relied on a cross-sectional survey to study the relationship among our research variables. Future research could pursue a longitudinal study to explore the evolution of followers' sharing behaviour over time, shedding light on the development of PSR and sharing behaviour.

Another potential direction for future research involves expanding the sample size for the pilot study in the qualitative phase. While the current study utilized a small sample size of two interviews for the pilot phase, future studies could benefit from a larger sample size. This would provide a more robust foundation for refining the interview guide, allowing for a more thorough identification of issues and comprehensive adjustments to the interview questions.

Given that this study marks the initial exploration into understanding the underlying mechanisms of sharing behaviour, it is important to recognize that other unexplored variables may also contribute to followers' sharing decisions, necessitating further research to unravel the complete landscape of these relationships. Specifically, future research is encouraged to broaden the examination of source, content, and audience factors and explore other communication factors from the CPM (e.g., the channel). Utilizing in-depth interviews as a research method can help identify additional factors, thereby enhancing our understanding of influencer marketing. Moreover, future studies can look into other engagement behaviours rather than sharing, including likes and comments. In addition, as social platforms continue to evolve, SMIs continuously seek out novel ways to engage and build their audiences. For example, some platforms offer subscription-based services for SMIs to create more personalised content and services for subscribers – in exchange for a monthly fee – whilst becoming less reliant on brand collaborations.

Our initial hypothesis posited that popularity would negatively impact sharing behaviour, but the result demonstrated a positive influence contrary to our expectations. This unexpected finding prompts an open question regarding whether SMIs with lower or higher follower counts are more effective in directly stimulating engagement. The current literature is in a debate regarding which SMI can achieve higher engagement rates regarding their popularity (Conde and Casais, 2023). Specifically, some scholars argue that micro-influencers with low popularity are more effective because of the relationships they build with their followers (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). On the contrary, other scholars believe that macro- and mega-influencers achieve higher engagement rates because they can reach more followers and have more influence (Leung *et al.*, 2022). Given this unexpected outcome, further investigation is warranted to delve into the details of how popularity, as defined by follower counts, affects sharing behaviour.

Regarding self-efficacy, our study revealed that self-efficacy exhibited no direct influence on sharing behaviour and PSR, and it did not display a mediating effect on sharing behaviour through PSR. The researcher acknowledges that these findings do not negate the potential influence of self-efficacy in other contexts or with different samples. Despite our best efforts to elucidate these unexpected outcomes, there is a pressing need for future research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role that self-efficacy plays within the context of engagement with SMIs, as it seems unlikely that the lack of skill in navigating specific platforms was the sole explanation. In addition, while this study offered respondents the flexibility to choose the social media platforms they felt most at ease with, it is important to note that group analysis was not conducted in this study. In the future, researchers could explore differences in self-efficacy across various platforms by conducting multi-group analysis. This could help understand if self-efficacy affects engagement depending on the social media platform. Finally, even though the relationship between self-efficacy and sharing behaviour was not statistically significant, it is worth noting that it exhibited a negative effect. Therefore, future research might further elucidate the reasons behind this negative effect.

The outcomes of our semi-structured interviews emphasized the significance of collectivism as a crucial audience factor. While Hofstede's (1984) conceptualization and scale for collectivism was utilized, it is important to recognize the limitations of this approach. Some scholars have pointed out that individuals may perceive their identity differently within the same national culture, and a single person can exhibit tendencies toward both collectivism and individualism (Kitirattakarn, Araujo and Neijens, 2019). There may be a growing trend toward

individualistic orientations, even in traditionally collectivist cultures, particularly among the younger generation. As such, future research is encouraged to adopt a more inclusive theoretical framework that considers both collectivism and individualism and seeks to comprehend how they jointly influence followers' engagement behaviour. This approach promises to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the complex interplay of cultural values in the context of influencer marketing.

While support was found for the moderating impact of verification behaviour, further research into this critical variable is strongly advocated. Future research could expand on this by examining the interactions between verification behaviour and various other variables, ultimately enhancing our understanding of its influence in influencer marketing. Additionally, it is worth noting that verification behaviours can vary depending on the type of information sought (Torres, Gerhart and Negahban, 2018). In this context, conducting experiments can be particularly beneficial, as they provide a controlled environment for testing causal relationships and exploring how verification behaviour interacts with different message types, such as entertaining or informative content.

The findings from this study may have relevance and applicability to countries that share a similar cultural context with Saudi Arabia. However, it is important to acknowledge that the direct transferability of these results to Western contexts might present challenges due to potential cultural variations. In light of this, it is advisable for future research to employ cross-cultural studies as a means of both testing and broadening the generalizability of the framework. By pursuing this approach, a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how cultural differences influence the dynamics of influencer marketing across various global settings can be achieved.

Although this study primarily focused on SMIs' followers, who offered valuable insights due to their experience, it is worth considering the inclusion of non-followers in future research. This expanded approach allows for group analyses that can reveal potential differences in sharing behaviour between followers and non-followers. Therefore, it is recommended that future research integrate a moderating factor into the model, distinguishing between SMIs' followers and non-followers. This differentiation could shed light on distinctions and interactions within these subgroups, enhancing our understanding of engagement dynamics in the influencer marketing context.

Our research uncovered a significant negative relationship between gender and sharing behaviour. Although the full explanation of this finding falls beyond the scope of our current study, it is recommended that future research attempts delve into the complexities of gender differences in the context of sharing behaviour. Future studies may consider incorporating gender as a moderator or conducting group analyses to discern how it affects engagement levels. Additionally, future research could explore specific age cohorts, such as millennials or Gen Z. This targeted exploration may reveal unique patterns and perspectives prevalent among different generational groups. Exploring gender and age differences can contribute to a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics and factors influencing engagement and sharing behaviour, thereby enriching our knowledge in this field.

The dynamic nature of influencer marketing continues to evolve with the advent of new technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), algorithm management, and the rise of virtual SMIs. For example, AI tools can analyse followers' behaviour, preferences, and interaction patterns, enabling SMIs to tailor their posts to resonate more effectively with their audience. Specifically, AI holds potential for personalizing content for diverse segments of the Saudi audience, ensuring cultural relevance and resonance. However, it is crucial to utilize these technologies in ways that maintain a human touch and avoid a robotic feel, as overly automated interactions may undermine the genuine connections that SMIs have built with their audiences. Future studies could investigate the extent to which SMIs' followers are genuine individuals versus automated bots, which could distort engagement metrics and the perceived influence of SMIs. In addition, social media platforms can also address followers' verification behaviour by introducing AI-driven tools designed to help followers verify the accuracy of content shared by SMIs. These tools could include content origin tracing and integrated fact-checking services, which would rely on users' digital literacy skills for effective utilization. Such advancements could enhance the credibility of influencer marketing by mitigating the spread of misinformation and fostering a more informed user base.

Future research should prioritize the investigation of algorithm management, as social media algorithms are crucial in determining the visibility and engagement of content. Specifically, studies should explore how algorithms can be optimized to promote culturally relevant content and foster positive interactions within the Saudi context, providing valuable insights into local engagement dynamics. Additionally, research should focus on the development of analytics tools that help SMIs understand engagement patterns specific to their audience segments. These

tools would enable SMIs to create more impactful content and foster deeper connections with their followers. Moreover, further research is needed to understand how algorithms can be used to identify the best times for posting, which could enhance followers' sharing behaviour and maximize visibility and engagement rates. Investigating these aspects can help SMIs optimize their content dissemination strategies. Moreover, future studies should examine how algorithms can provide insights into trending topics and emerging interests, allowing SMIs to stay relevant and engaging in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Future research should also explore the integration and impact of virtual SMIs within the influencer marketing landscape. Virtual SMIs are desirable for several reasons: they do not age, do not gain weight, and can be fully controlled by marketers, ensuring consistent branding and messaging (Xie-Carson, Benckendorff and Hughes, 2023). These characteristics make them an appealing option for long-term marketing strategies. Future studies should compare the effectiveness of virtual SMIs versus real SMIs in fostering engagement and increasing sharing behaviour. Specifically, future research can test the model developed in this study with virtual SMIs to evaluate their potential in driving engagement and sharing behaviour. Moreover, future research could examine the acceptance of virtual SMIs by different audiences, especially in emerging countries like Saudi Arabia.

Finally, given the unique designs and features of each social media platform, one may argue that marketers should design unique strategies for the platform to match the usage behaviours of platform users (Sultan, 2021b). Previous research indicates that followers' responses might vary among platforms (Sundermann and Raabe, 2019). In this study, a holistic approach was embraced by allowing participants to select their preferred platform for following SMIs. The findings indicated that Snapchat emerged as the most frequently chosen platform for engaging with SMIs in Saudi Arabia. As a result, future research endeavours may find it advantageous to emphasise investigating influencer marketing dynamics and strategies specific to the Snapchat platform, thereby delving deeper into the nuances of follower engagement within this social media context.

8.7 Summary

To conclude, this study contributes to theory and practice in several ways. For example, it is among the first to specifically focus on exploring the underlying mechanisms behind follower sharing behaviour, moving beyond a broad consideration of engagement as a whole.

Additionally, it introduces a comprehensive approach by incorporating three critical influencer marketing factors – source, content, and audience – that have traditionally been studied in isolation. The study also brings new variables into the existing literature, including self-efficacy, collectivism, and verification behaviour. For practitioners, this research provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of follower-SMI engagement, offering guidance to marketing professionals when making decisions about SMI selection, content strategies, and audience targeting in their pursuit of campaign virality. These findings can be helpful in effectively utilizing influencer marketing to drive follower sharing behaviour, not only in Saudi Arabia but also in culturally similar countries throughout the broader Middle Eastern region. Certain limitations of the study were identified, and directions for future research were discussed to assist with the development of further research.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Definitions of SMIs in Literature and Practice

Author	Definition
Freberg et al. (2011)	SMIs embody a novel category of autonomous third-party endorsers who shape audience perspectives through their contributions on blogs, tweets, and various social media channels.
De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017)	Influencer marketing is characterized as identifying and engaging influential users and motivating them to endorse a brand or specific products through their activities on social media.
Gross and Wangenheim (2018)	The term SMI pertains to individuals who have established their own audience through various social media platforms.
Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018)	An SMI is an individual who has amassed a substantial following on social media and is compensated by brands to endorse their products or services to their followers. This compensation can take the form of free products, sponsored trips, or direct payment for each promotional post.
IAB (2018)	Influencer marketing is a strategy employed by advertisers and brands wherein they collaborate with individual social media users to promote their brand messages and products.
Dhanesh and Duthler (2019)	An SMI is an individual who utilizes personal branding to establish and nurture connections with numerous followers on social media. They can inform, entertain, and potentially shape their followers' thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours.
Lou and Yuan (2019)	An SMI is a content creator possessing expertise in a particular field and garnering a substantial number of dedicated followers who hold marketing significance for brands. This is achieved through consistently producing valuable content on various social media platforms.
Breves et al. (2019)	Influencer marketing is a form of native advertising or authentic eWOM. This is because promotional posts are seamlessly integrated into the daily narratives that SMIs share with their followers.
Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019)	SMIs are ordinary people who have collected a large number of followers across social media platforms.

Jun and Yi (2020)	SMIs are content creators with many followers on various social media platforms.
Haenlein et al. (2020)	An SMI is an individual who possesses a substantial and actively engaged audience on social media platforms, typically unknown to those who do not follow or interact with them.
Sharma, Bhatt and Arora (2021)	SMIs are distinct types of independent endorsers who exert influence over the attitudes and beliefs of a particular audience through various online platforms such as blogs, tweets, and other web-based channels.
Lee et al. (2021)	An SMI is a rising star in the marketing world whose prominence and recognition have been propelled by the power of social media.
Arenas-Márquez, Martínez-Torres and Toral (2021)	An SMI is an individual who possesses the capacity to influence the viewpoints and perspectives of others, actively playing a role in sharing information within a specific community.
Aw and Chuah (2021)	SMIs are individuals who have attained a significant level of popularity through their presence and content on various social media platforms. This includes bloggers, YouTubers, and those who have garnered fame and recognition on platforms like Instagram.
Belanche et al. (2021b)	Influencer marketing is a form of marketing communications where SMIs utilize their own social media platforms to promote a brand's products or services.
Delbaere, Michael and Phillips (2021)	SMIs are social media users who have attained micro-celebrity status through the cultivation of substantial followings on various social media platforms, establishing a position of influence over their audience.
Leung, Gu and Palmatier (2022)	Influencer marketing refers to a strategic approach adopted by companies where they carefully choose and incentivize online SMIs to actively engage their followers. The objective is to harness the distinctive resources these SMIs possess to promote the products or services offered by the company. The ultimate aim is to improve the firm's overall performance.
Sundermann and Munnukka (2022)	SMIs are individuals who have acquired a significant following across various social media platforms and possess the ability to influence consumer attitudes and behaviours. They hold the power to sway and impact the choices and actions of their audience.
Lou, Taylor and Zhou (2023)	SMIs are individuals who, through creating content within specific domains and sharing glimpses of their personal lives, can amass a significant number of followers on blogs and social media platforms.
Fowler and Thomas (2023)	SMIs are individuals who effectively utilize social media platforms to establish and nurture online connections with others, to expand their sphere of influence and gain social capital.
Joshi et al. (2023)	SMIs are individuals who cultivate and sustain a personal brand and a dedicated following on social media by incorporating their personality and lifestyle into posts that feature the products they endorse. As a result, they can impact their followers' behaviours, including attitudes, perceptions, preferences, choices, and decisions, either positively or negatively.

Appendix 2: Studies Included in the SLR

Authors, year	Type of Engagement	Engagement perspective	Is Engagement the only outcome?	Engagement behaviour	Antecedents (S: source, C: content, A: audience)	Mediator	Moderator	Outcome	Platform	Country	Method	Theory	Relevant Findings
Holiday et al. (2023)	Emotional & behavioural	Brand	Yes	Like, comment, views	C: facial emotional expression, textual emotion expression,	Unspecified	SMI follower count, branding of posts	Consumer engagement	Instagram	Unspecified	Web-scraped data	Social exchange theory, emotional contagion theory	Facial emotion expressiveness has a positive and significant impact on engagement. Textual emotion has a negative and significant impact on engagement.
Shuqair et al. (2023)	Unspecified	Brand	Yes	Like, comment	C: sponsorship disclosure A: persuasion resistance	Persuasion resistance	experiential (vs. material) content	Customer engagement	Instagram	Unspecified	Experiment and web-scraped data	Social exchange theory	Disclosure and persuasion resistance have a positive and significant impact on engagement. Persuasion resistance mediates the relationship between disclosure and engagement.
Syrdal et al. (2023)	Behavioural	Brand	Yes	Like, comment	C: post length, complex words, analytical language, clout language, authentic language, positive emotional language	Unspecified	Unspecified	Consumer brand engagement	Instagram	United States	Web-scraped data	Elaboration Likelihood Model	Word count and analytical thinking have a negative and significant impact on engagement. Complex words are not significant. Clout and authenticity have a positive and significant impact on engagement.
Fan et al. (2023)	Unspecified	SMI	Yes	Like, comment, share	C: length of post, type of post (picture or video)	Unspecified	Unspecified	Engagement	Sina Weibo	China	Web-scraped data	Unspecified	Length of post has a positive and significant impact on likes (not comments and shares). Type of post: pictures have a significant and negative impact on likes (not comments and shares). Nothing for videos. Posts with brand information were less likely to engage audiences.
Gupta, Mahajan, and Dash (2023)	Cognitive, emotional, & behavioural	Brand	No	Unspecified	S: credibility & similarity C: informative and entertaining	Consumer brand engagement	Unspecified	Purchase Intention	Instagram	India	Survey (N= 316)	Media system dependency theory	Credibility and similarity have a significant positive effect on all consumer brand engagement (CBE) dimensions. Informativeness positively impacts cognitive and behavioural aspects and not emotions. Entertainment only enhances emotional engagement.
Rizzo et al. (2023)	Unspecified	SMI	No	Like, comment	S: perceived authenticity C: sensory language	Perceived authenticity	Unspecified	Engagement, purchase intention	Mixed	Unspecified	Experiment and web-scraped data	Unspecified	When SMIs' posts used more sensory language, they received more engagement.

													Perceived authenticity has a positive and significant impact on engagement.
Beheshti et al. (2023)	Behavioural	SMI	No	Like, comment, share	S: level of polarization	Defensive motivated reasoning	Need for closure, SMI type	Post engagement, attitude, purchase intention	Instagram	Unspecified	Experiment (N= 382, 209, 210, 116)	Motivated reasoning theory	Polarization has a positive and significant impact on post engagement. Polarization effect on post engagement is stronger for mega (vs macro) SMIs.
Borges et al. (2023)	Cognitive, emotional, & behavioural	Brand	No	Unspecified	S: credibility, familiarity A: Involvement	Customer brand engagement	Unspecified	Customer brand engagement, brand equity	Mixed	Portugal	Survey (N= 270)	Associative-network memory theory	Credibility, involvement, and familiarity positively and significantly impact engagement. Engagement has a positive and significant impact on brand equity.
Wies, Bleier, and Edeling (2023)	Behavioural	SMI	Yes	Like, comment, mention, click	S: indegree (number of followers)	Unspecified	Content customization, brand familiarity	Post engagement	Instagram	Unspecified	Experiment and web-scraped data	Unspecified	Number of followers has a negative and significant impact on engagement. Higher content customization weakens the negative effect of the number of followers on engagement.
Ren et al. (2023)	Behavioural	Brand	No	Like, comment, views	C: informer or entertainer	Unspecified	Brand stereotype	Engagement, online sale	TikTok	China	Web-scraped data	Congruency theory	Entertainers generate more engagement than informers. Informers attract more sales than entertainers.
Buvar et al. (2023)	Behavioural	SMI	Yes	Like, comment	S: credibility A: attitudes towards the post	Credibility, attitudes towards the post	PSI	Behavioural engagement	Mixed	Hungary	Experiment (N= 365)	Unspecified	Attitude and credibility have a positive and significant impact on engagement. Congruent posts led to higher influencer credibility, more positive attitudes and higher behavioural engagement than incongruent ones.
Tafesse and Wood (2023)	Behavioural	SMI	Yes	Like, comment	S: number of followers, number of following, breadth of interest (specialization) C: content type, number of posts	Unspecified	Competition	Follower engagement behaviour	Instagram	Unspecified	Web-scraped data	Social influence theory, MAIN Model	The number of followers has a positive and significant impact on engagement, number of followers is not significant, breadth is not significant, while number of posts has a negative and significant impact on engagement. Using more photos gets more engagement than videos.
Zhao et al. (2023)	Cognitive, emotional, & behavioural	Brand	Yes	Like, share	C: image richness	Unspecified	Text length, fan number, experience vs search product	Cognitive, emotional, & behavioural engagement	Sina Weibo	China	Web-scraped data	Elaboration Likelihood Model	Image richness has a positive and significant impact on emotional engagement, while image richness has a negative and significant impact on cognitive engagement.

Chen, Yan, and Smith (2023)	Behavioural	SMI	Yes	Like, comment, share	C: SMI disclosure, video customization, subjective endorsement, brand appearance timing	Unspecified	Platform disclosure, brand-SMI fit	Viewers' total digital engagement	Bilibili	China	Web-scraped data	Unspecified	SMI disclosure and timing of brand appearance have a positive and significant impact on engagement. Video customizations and subjective endorsement have a negative and significant impact on engagement.
Cheung et al. (2022b)	Behavioural	Brand	Yes	Like, comment, share	A: wishful identification, PSR	Wishful identification, PSR	Unspecified	Consume - contribute - create	Mixed	Malaysia	Survey (N= 263)	Two-step flow theory, social influence theory, and power theory	PSR and wishful identification positively and significantly impact consumption, contribution, and creation.
Cheung et al. (2022a)	Cognitive, emotional, & behavioural	Brand	Yes	Like, comment, share	C: entertainment, information A: reward, social interaction	Unspecified	Unspecified	Consumer brand engagement	Mixed	Malaysia	Survey (N= 263)	Uses and gratification theory and observational learning theory	Entertainment and social interaction positively and significantly impact consumption, contribution, and creation.
Hudders and De Jans (2021)	Unspecified	SMI	No	Like, comment, share	S: SMI gender, similarity A: parasocial-interaction	Parasocial-interaction	Respondent gender	Brand attitude, post engagement	Instagram	Unspecified	Experiment (N= 241)	Social identity theory	Female SMI induced more post engagement (through perceived similarity and parasocial interaction). Not significant for male SMI.
Chen, Lin, and Shan (2021)	Unspecified	Brand	No	Like, comment, share	A: parasocial-identification	Engagement with branded content	Inferences of manipulative intent	Attitude toward branded content, trust in branded content	Mixed	China	Survey (N= 511)	Parasocial theory	PSI has a positive and significant impact on engagement and attitudes. Engagement has a positive and significant impact on attitudes and trust. Engagement partially mediates between PSI and trust in branded content.
AlFarraj et al. (2021)	Cognitive & emotional	SMI	No	Unspecified	S: attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness	Online engagement	Unspecified	Purchase Intention	Instagram	Jordan	Survey (N= 384)	Unspecified	Expertise and attractiveness have a positive and significant impact on engagement. Trustworthiness is not significant. Engagement has a positive and significant impact on purchase intention.
Duh and Thabethe (2021)	Unspecified	Brand	Yes	Unspecified	S: credibility (expertise, trustworthiness), attractiveness (physical attractiveness, familiarity, likeability, similarity)	Unspecified	Unspecified	Consumer brand engagement	Instagram	South Africa	Survey (n= 330)	Source credibility and source attractiveness	Trustworthiness, familiarity, and similarity positively and significantly impact engagement, while likeability has a negative and significant impact. Expertise and attractiveness were both non-significant.

Tafesse and Wood (2021)	Behavioural	SMI	Yes	Like, comment	S: follower count, followee count C: content volume	Unspecified	Domains of interest	Follower engagement	Instagram	Unspecified	Web-scraped data	Social influence theory	Follower count and content volume have a negative and significant impact on engagement, while followee count has a positive and significant impact. SMIs with a higher follower count garnered lower engagement when they had diverse domains of interest.
Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks (2019)	Cognitive, emotional, & behavioural	SMI	Yes	Like, comment	S: expertise C: hedonic value of post	Unspecified	Social media platform type, campaign advertising intent	Platform engagement	Mixed	Unspecified	Experiment and web-scraped data	Elaboration Likelihood Model	High blogger expertise is more effective in generating engagement when the advertising intent is to raise awareness versus trail awareness. Expertise fails to drive engagement when the sponsored post occurs on Facebook.
Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019)	Unspecified	SMI	No	Unspecified	S: perceived influence	Unspecified	Unspecified	Purchase Intention	Mixed	Spain	Survey (N= 280)	Media dependency theory	Perceived influence has a positive and significant impact on brand engagement in self-concept. Brand engagement in self-concept positively and significantly impacts brand expected value. Brand engagement in self-concept has a positive and significant impact on purchase intention.
Onofrei, Filieri, and Kennedy (2022)	Behavioural	SMI	No	Like, comment, share	S: credibility, homophily C: quality	Source credibility, source homophily, content quality	Unspecified	Purchase Intention, behavioural engagement	Mixed	Ireland	Survey (N= 403)	Service-dominant logic and the information adoption model	Credibility, homophily, and content quality positively and significantly impact engagement. Credibility and homophily partially mediate the relationship between SMI and engagement.
Lou, Tan, and Chen (2019)	Behavioural	SMI	Yes	Like, comment	S: source of ads C: sponsorship disclosure	Unspecified	Unspecified	Followers' engagement metrics, followers' sentiment in the comments, followers' topics in the comments	Instagram	United States	Web-scraped data	Communication persuasion matrix, persuasion knowledge matrix	SMI ads generate more engagement. The types of disclosure in SMI ads did not influence consumers' engagement activities. Brand ads elicited slightly more negative sentiment than influencer-promoted ads.
Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021)	Unspecified	SMI	No	Unspecified	C: creativity A: positive emotions	Creativity, Positive emotions	Unspecified	Affective commitment, interaction intentions	Instagram	Unspecified	Survey (N= 808)	S-O-R	Creativity and positive emotions have a positive and significant impact on engagement (intention to interact).

Shen (2021)	Unspecified	Brand	Yes	Like, comment, share	S: source credibility (active influence, influencers) C: argument quality (word count, content)	Unspecified	Unspecified	Consumer engagement	Unspecified	Ireland	Web-scraped data	Sussman and Siegal's information adoption model.	High-frequency words increase engagement. Market mavens are found to have the highest influence on consumer engagement.
Argyris et al. (2020)	Behavioural	Brand	Yes	like, comment	C: visual congruence	Followers' engagement with SMIs' posts	Unspecified	Followers' engagement with the brand's posts	Instagram	Unspecified	Web-scraped data	SAM: similarity attraction model	Visual congruence has a positive and significant impact on engagement with SMIs' posts. Engagement with SMIs' posts has a positive and significant impact on engagement with branded posts.
Valsesia, Proserpio, and Nunes (2020)	Behavioural	SMI	Yes	like, retweet	S: number of following perceived influence	Perceived influence	Number of followers	Engagement (likes, retweets)	Twitter	United States	Experiment and web-scraped data	Unspecified	Less number of following has a negative and significant impact on engagement, while perceived influence has a positive and significant impact.
Leung et al. (2022)	Unspecified	SMI	Yes	Share	S: elasticity	Unspecified	SMI, message, and follower factors	Engagement	Sina Weibo	China	Web-scraped data	Lasswell Communication Model	SMIs who post more original content, have a high number of followers, have a mixture of positive and negative content and post more links to sponsor brands are more effective senders because they increase engagement elasticity.

Appendix 3: Categories of SMIs

Author	Micro-influencer	Macro-influencer	Mega-influencer
Ismail (2018)	Has higher levels of engagement, expertise, and costs less than other categories. They usually have close relationships with their followers.	Useful for certain market niches but can still reach a considerable number of followers.	More famous than influential. Relationships with followers are distant. They provide a lot of reach in one hit. They are very expensive to collaborate with.
SanMiguel, Guercini and Sádaba (2019)	1k-10k followers. Generate new needs. Can change opinion based on a piece of advice.	10k-1M followers. Generate new needs. Can change opinions based on some advice. Can be the most inspirational.	1M+ followers. Can be inspirational. Can help discover new brands.
Influencer Marketing Hub (2020)	10k-100k followers. Relatable with a highly engaged audience and high engagement rates.	100k-1M followers. They probably have relatively low engagement rates, but they are better at reaching a large number of audiences.	1M+ followers. The audience that follows them is very broad. Need a heavy budget to be able to hire them. The best for developing brand awareness.
Ladhari, Massa and Skandrani (2020)	Have a fan base of between 10,000 and 200,000 followers. They are more engaged with their community and more targeted to their followers or audiences.	Have a fan base between 200,000 and 900,000 followers. They are well-known for their expertise in a specific category of products and services.	Have millions of followers across different social networks. They are new celebrities in the social media network.
Glenister (2021)	13k-133k followers. Highly engaged with their followers and build personal relationships with their community.	133k-1.8M followers. A mid-tier SMI with a strong community.	
Yesiloglu and Costello (2021)	Have a strong relationship with their audience. Focus on a specific niche. They post sponsored content less often. They usually generate higher word of mouth.	100k-1M followers. They are perceived as opinion leaders. They have a loyal fan base.	Millions of followers. They have celebrity status. High costs for collab. They can boost a product even with a short campaign.
Dimitrieska and Efremova (2021)	82% of respondents said they were highly likely to follow a micro-influencer' recommendation.		

	Having a smaller audience allows micro-influencers to bond with those who follow them.		
Marques, Casais and Camilleri (2021)	Small number of followers. They are similar to common people and are often perceived as authentic and genuine. This can result in higher engagement in the number of visits, likes, and comments.	A large number of followers. They can persuade consumers' buying attitudes and trigger behavioural changes. Can result in higher engagement in terms of number of followers.	
Vidani and Das (2021)	Highest engagement rates and can alter consumers' attitudes. They have a niche segment of consumers and maintain them through constant communication.	High levels of engagement can drive audience purchase decisions.	Very low engagement rates. Despite best in impression and awareness, they do not drive the audience towards the desired action of purchasing the product, service, or brand.
Conde and Casais (2023)	Are Perceived as credible by their followers. They have a loyal fanbase and high engagement rates. Their recommendations are similar to eWOM from peers. However, they have a lower reach.	Diverse follower base in comparison to micro-influencers. Higher reach in specific markets and reasonable return on investment. They have lower engagement rates than micro-influencers.	Extremely famous, similar to traditional celebrities. They can reach a massive number of followers. However, they charge a high premium and offer low engagement rates.

Appendix 4: Antecedents, Outcomes, and Relevant Findings of Parasocial-relationships

Author	Antecedents	Outcomes	Relevant findings	Mediation findings
Xiang et al. (2016)	Similarity, expertise, and likability.	Impulse buying tendency and Perceived enjoyment.	PSI has a positive and significant impact on impulse buying tendency and perceived enjoyment. Similarity, expertise, and likability all determine PSI.	Unspecified
Lee and Watkins (2016)	Attitude homophily, physical attractiveness, and social attractiveness.	Luxury brand value, brand-user-fit, brand luxury, and purchase intention	All antecedents positively relate to PSI. PSI positively influence all outcomes.	Unspecified
Ledbetter and Redd (2016)	Posting frequency.	Credibility.	Posting frequency has a positive and significant impact on PSI.	PSI significantly mediated the extent to which posting frequency predicted perceived credibility.
Gong and Li (2017)	Attractiveness.	Attitudes towards advertising, attitudes towards product, and purchase intention.	Attractiveness is a strong predictor of PSI. PSI positively and significantly impacts attitudes towards product and purchase intention, but not attitudes towards advertising.	PSI serves as a mediator of the effect of source attractiveness on endorsement effectiveness.
Hwang and Zhang (2018)	Empathy, loneliness, and low self-esteem.	EWOM intention and purchase intention.	Empathy and low self-esteem positively influenced PSR, but not loneliness. PSR affected purchase and eWOM intentions.	Second model: PSR moderates the paths between persuasion knowledge and purchase intentions and between persuasion knowledge and eWOM intentions.
Liu, Liu and Zhang (2019)	Physical attraction, social attraction, entertainment motive, relationship motive, and time spent on media.	Perceived brand quality, brand affection, and brand preference.	All antecedents have a positive and significant impact on PSI. PSI has a positive and significant impact on all outcomes.	PSI mediated the interaction between antecedents and outcomes.

Lou and Kim (2019)	Source credibility (attractiveness, trustworthiness, similarity, and expertise), information value, entertainment value, active mediation, and restrictive mediation.	Materialism and purchase intention.	Entertainment, attractiveness, similarity, trustworthiness, and expertise are positively related to the formation of PSR. PSR is positively associated with materialism and purchase intentions.	PSR mediated the interaction between entertainment and materialism, trustworthiness and materialism, attractiveness and materialism, similarity and materialism, entertainment and purchase intention, expertise and purchase intention, trustworthiness and purchase intention, attractiveness and purchase intention, similarity, and purchase intention.
Kim (2020)	Information seeking, entertainment, interpersonal utility, and passing time.	Purchase intention.	Entertainment and interpersonal utility motivations have a positive and significant impact on PSR. Information seeking and passing time motivations have a negative and non-significant impact on PSI.	PSI fully mediated entertainment and interpersonal utility motivations to affect purchase intent; however, PSI did not mediate the information-seeking motivation and passing time.
Hu et al. (2020)	Identity similarity, distinctiveness, and prestige.	Stickiness and wishful identification.	All antecedents are positively and significantly related to PSR. PSR had a significant and positive impact on stickiness and wishful identification.	PSR had a complete mediation effect between identity distinctiveness, prestige, and wishful identification.
Zafar, Qiu and Shahzad (2020)	Passing time, enjoyment, information seeking, and self-presentation.	Urge to buy impulsively and impulse buying.	Passing time, enjoyment, and information seeking significantly impact PSR but not self-presentation. PSR has a significant impact on the urge to buy impulsively and impulse buying.	Unspecified
Sakib, Zolfagharian and Yazdanparast (2020)	Credibility, homophily, physical attractiveness.	Consumer readiness and compliance intention.	Credibility and physical attractiveness positively and significantly impact PSI, but not homophily. PSI have a positive and significant impact on consumer readiness and compliance intention.	Unspecified
Sokolova and Kefi (2020)	Attitude homophily, physical attractiveness, and social attractiveness.	Purchase intention.	Attitude homophily and social attractiveness have a positive and significant impact on PSI. Physical attractiveness shows a negative relationship with PSI. PSI has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention.	Unspecified
Lim et al. (2020)	Wishful identification and emotional engagement.	Repeated viewing	Wishful identification and emotional engagement attractiveness positively and significantly impact PSR. PSR has a positive and significant impact on repeated viewing.	PSR fully mediates the effect of wishful identification and emotional engagement on repeated viewing.

Yılmazdoğan, Doğan and Altıntaş (2021)	Trustworthiness and expertise.	Travel intention.	Trustworthiness and expertise have a positive and significant impact on PSI. PSI had a positive and significant impact on travel intention.	PSI mediated the relationship between trustworthiness and expertise with purchase intention.
Sokolova and Perez (2021)	Exposure, attractiveness, and credibility.	Intention to exercise and intention to watch video.	Attractiveness has the strongest impact on PSR, followed by credibility, then exposure. PSR has a positive and significant impact on the intention to watch the video. No relationship is confirmed between PSR and intentions to exercise.	Unspecified
Manchanda, Arora and Sethi (2021)	Credibility (trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise) and popularity (attitude, values, and appearance).	EWOM intention.	Credibility and popularity positively relate to PSI. PSI positively impacts eWOM intention.	PSI acts as a partial mediator between popularity and eWOM.
Aw and Chuah (2021)	Attractiveness, prestige, and expertise. Number of followers was also included in post-hoc analysis.	Self-Serving motive	Attractiveness, prestige, and expertise positively relate to PSR. PSR positively relate to self-serving motive. Post-hoc analysis: Number of followers has a significant negative effect on PSR.	Unspecified
Yuan et al. (2021)	Popularity, leverage, fashionable, and affinity.	Value equity, brand equity, and relationship equity.	Leverage, fashionable, and affinity all positively influence PSR, while popularity has a negative influence on PSR. PSR positively influence value, brand, and relationship equity.	Unspecified
Fazli-Salehi et al. (2022)	Perceived channel interactivity and self-disclosure.	Trustworthiness, purchase intention, willingness to pay premium price, brand identification, and communal-brand connection.	Perceived channel interactivity and self-disclosure have a positive and significant impact on PSI. PSI positively and significantly impacts trustworthiness, purchase intention, willingness to pay premium price, brand identification, and communal-brand connection.	Unspecified
Chidiac and Bowden (2022)	Media naturalness and media richness.	Purchase intention and authenticity.	Media richness positively affects PSI, while media naturalness has an inverse relationship (not supported).	Unspecified

			PSI has a positive effect on purchase intention and authenticity.	
Santateresa-Bernat, Sánchez-García and Curras-Perez (2022)	Vlogger credibility and identification with the vlogger.	Future behaviour towards destination and future behaviour towards vlogger.	Vlogger credibility and identification with the vlogger significantly and positively affect PSR. PSR significantly and positively affects future behaviour towards vloggers but not future behaviour towards destination.	Unspecified
Bhattacharya (2022)	Social attractiveness, physical attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness.	Brand preference.	Social and physical attractiveness have been found to positively and significantly impact PSI. Trustworthiness positively impacts PSI. However, expertise has an insignificant impact on PSI. PSI has a positive and significant influence on brand preference.	Unspecified
Farivar, Wang and Turel (2022)	Perceived physical attractiveness, perceived social attractiveness, influencer's self-presence, followers' participation comprehensiveness, and followers' length of following.	Problematic engagement relationship.	Physical and social attractiveness had positive and significant effects on PSR. Following length had a positive and significant effect on PSR. Participation comprehensiveness on PSR was not significant. PSR had a positive and significant effect on problematic engagement.	PSR was proposed as a mediator, but no results for mediation were shown.
Cheung et al. (2022a)	Information quality, design quality, creativity, and technology quality.	Consume, contribute, and create.	The results reveal that three of the four dimensions of SMI's content characteristics, namely design quality, technology quality, and creativity are significant predictors of PSR. PSR positively and significantly impacted consumption, contribution, and creation.	PSR mediates the relationship between technology quality, creation, contribution, and consumption. PSR mediates the relationship between design quality, creation, contribution, and consumption. PSR mediates the relationship between creativity and creation, contribution, and consumption. No mediation effects on information quality.

Leite and Baptista (2022)	Intimate self-disclosure.	Brand trust and purchase intention.	Intimate self-disclosure has a positive and significant impact on PSR. PSR has a positive and significant impact on brand trust and purchase intention.	Unspecified
Liu (2023)	Digital media exposure.	General political trust and COVID-19 political trust.	Digital media exposure has a significant positive effect on PSR. PSR significantly and positively affects general political trust and COVID-19 political trust.	PSR moderates the effect of digital media exposure on general political trust and COVID-19 political trust.
Bailey, Mishra and Vaishnav (2023)	Social media attachment.	Susceptibility to SMI influence and SMI compliance intentions.	Social media attachment has a positive and significant impact on PSR. PSR has a positive and significant impact on susceptibility to SMI influence. PSR does not influence SMI compliance intentions.	PSR mediates the relationship between social media attachment and susceptibility to SMI influence. PSR mediates the relationship between social media attachment and SMI compliance intentions.
Melnychuk, Arasli, and Nevzat (2024)	Expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity.	Follower's engagement and stickiness.	Expertise and trustworthiness have a positive and significant influence on PSR. PSR exhibited a positive and significant impact on the level of engagement and the degree of stickiness.	Unspecified

Appendix 5: Studies Adopting The S-O-R Framework

Authors and Context	Stimulus (S)	Organism (O)	Response (R)
Peng and Kim (2014) Social commerce	Hedonic shopping value, utilitarian shopping value, and environmental stimuli.	Attitudes towards online shopping and emotional purchase.	Repurchase intention.
Hu et al. (2016) Social commerce	Similarity, expertise, benevolence, support for recommendation, and support for social interactions.	Perceived utilitarian value and perceived social value.	Purchase intention.
Xiang et al. (2016) Impulsive buying	Information fit to task, visual appeal, similarity, expertise, and likability.	PSI, perceived usefulness, and perceived enjoyment.	Urge to buy impulsively.
Liu et al. (2016) Social commerce	Expertise, similarity, and familiarity.	Flow experience.	Purchase intention.
Kim and Johnson (2016) Brand-related UGC	Brand related UGC.	Pleasure, arousal, and perceived information quality.	Information pass along, impulse buying, future purchase intention, and brand engagement.
Pelet, Khan and Cowart (2017) Celebrity endorsement	Celebrity endorsement.	Need for humour.	Negative attitude towards ad, positive attitude towards ad.
Ul Islam and Rahman (2017) Online brand community	Information quality, system quality, virtual interactivity, and rewards.	Customer engagement.	Brand loyalty.
Fu, Yan and Feng (2018) Social commerce, movie tickets	External similarity and internal similarity.	Perceived usefulness, perceived enjoyment, and trust towards members.	Online purchasing intention.
Cao and Sun (2018) Social media usage	Information overload, communication overload, and social overload.	Exhaustion and regret.	Discontinuous intention.
Liu, Luo and Cao (2018) Online reference groups	Similarity, familiarity, and expertise.	Normative influence and informational influence.	Purchase intention.
Min et al. (2019) Celebrity endorsement	Celebrity brand congruency and publicity.	Attitude towards the celebrity and attitudes towards the brand.	Purchase intention.
Gadalla et al. (2019) Influencer marketing	Source credibility.	Cognitive involvement, affective involvement, informative influence, and normative influence.	Purchase intention.
Kim, Lee and Jung (2020) Virtual reality in tourism	Authentic experience.	Cognitive response and affective response.	Visit intention and attachment to VR.
(Zhu et al., 2020)	Perceived information quality and social presence.	Trust and satisfaction.	Purchase intention.

Information management, online reviews			
Burnasheva and Suh (2020) Celebrity endorsement	Credibility	Brand affection and self-brand connection.	Purchase intention.
Zafar, Qiu and Shahzad (2020) Influencer marketing	PSR and social climate.	Urge to buy.	Impulse buying.
Zhou et al. (2021) Influencer marketing [qualitative study]	SMI narrative strategy.	Consumer perception of SMI narrative strategy.	Consumer behavioural response.
Sultan, Wong and Azam (2021) Organic food	Marketing communication sources and organic food values.	Hedonic attitude and utilitarian attitude.	Behavioural intention.
Belanche et al. (2021a) Influencer marketing	SMIs' posts on social media.	Product-influencer congruence, ad recognition, influencer credibility, and attitude towards the SMI.	Intention to follow the account, intention to initiate the SMI, and intention to recommend the SMI.
Djafarova and Bowes (2021) Influencer marketing [qualitative study]	Brand advertisements, opinion leaders, and user-generated content on Instagram.	Pleasure and arousal.	Consumer impulse purchases.
Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2021) Influencer marketing	Instagram brand publications	Creativity and positive emotions.	Affective commitment and interactions intention.
Yousaf (2022) Influencer marketing	Source perceived similarity, source credibility, and source expertise.	Food vlog's authentic value, food vlog's experiential value, and PSI.	Attitudes towards the vlog, visit intention, and destination's food image.
Zaib Abbasi et al. (2022) Influencer marketing	Informativeness, entertainment, irritation, and credibility.	Advertising value and attitudes toward Vlog.	EWOM, pWOM, customer referral, and destination visit intention.
Hazari and Sethna (2023) Influencer marketing	Lifestyle marketing and brand influencer.	Attention to advertisement and attitude toward advertisement.	Purchase intention.
Barta et al. (2023) Influencer marketing	Originality, quality, quantity, and humour.	Hedonic experiences and opinion leadership.	Intention to follow the account and intention to follow the advice.
Wu, Yang and Liu (2023) Influencer marketing	Intimate self-disclosure, environmental concern, and spending self-control.	Social value and epistemic value.	Purchase intention.

Gamage and Ashill (2023) Influencer marketing	Commercial orientation of the Instagram post.	Trustworthiness and credibility.	Willingness to search for more information.
Kılıç and Gürlek (2023) Green influencer marketing	Environmentally friendly product-oriented influence and environmental sustainability-oriented influence.	Perceived fit with personal interest and environmental consciousness.	Green behavioural intention.

Appendix 6: Qualitative Studies in the Context of Influencer Marketing

Author	Aim	Theory	Methodology	Main findings
Djafarova and Rushworth (2017)	Understand how the source credibility of Instagram SMIs influences consumer behaviour.	Source credibility and halo effect	Eighteen in-depth interviews with female participants in the United Kingdom who actively engage with SMIs on Instagram.	SMIs are perceived to be credible and trustworthy when communicating marketing messages. Female SMIs are the most influential, as these categories are more credible and relevant to young women. No negative reviews regarding products are posted by users in order to maintain a positive online self-presentation.
Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack and Zahid (2018)	Investigate how SMIs persuade their followers by exploring which characteristics contribute to their persuasiveness.	Source credibility and source attractiveness	A longitudinal study employing the netnography method to analyse the content of 10 SMIs and supplement it with six focus group sessions.	Trustworthiness drives the persuasiveness of the SMI and is strengthened by the three characteristics: parasocial attachment, likeability, and perceived similarity.
Djafarova and Trofimenko (2019)	Determine micro-celebrities' credibility as a marketing tool and assess consumers' attitudes towards these Instagram celebrities.	Source credibility and self-presentation theory	Thirty-eight virtual in-depth interviews were conducted exclusively with female participants.	The quality of posts is most important. 30% answered that they were inspired by SMIs and obtained useful recommendations from them. Most participants stated that to be a micro-celebrity, one should be physically attractive.
Aljasir (2019)	Explores the applicability of classic celebrity endorsement theories when implemented on interactive social media platforms.	Source credibility	Semi-structured interviews with a sample size of 73 participants from Saudi Arabia.	Trustworthiness in endorsements is established when the disclosure of a paid advertisement is transparent or when indirect endorsement methods are employed. For high-tech products, celebrity expertise in the field is not crucial; however, when endorsing accessories, attractiveness, personal testing of the product, and endorsing a reasonable number of products are important. Acceptable endorsements primarily come from likable celebrities or ordinary

				individuals with a moderate social media following. The study reveals that while certain aspects of classic celebrity endorsement theories are relevant on social media, adjustments are needed to align with the behaviours of new media users.
Al-Emadi and Ben Yahia (2020)	Investigate the factors driving consumer engagement with ordinary celebrities on social media by identifying influential characteristics that captivate followers and contribute to opinion leadership on visual platforms.		Semi-structured interviews with a sample size of 32 participants from Qatar and Tunisia.	The findings of this study highlight five main characteristics that lead to fame and opinion leadership on social media visual platforms: credibility, storytelling, content quality, fit with the platform, Actual and aspired image homophily and consistency.
Coco and Eckert (2020)	Understand why women follow SMIs and how they respond to sponsored content.	Social exchange theory and relationship management theory	In-depth interviews with a sample size of 15 participants from the United States.	Women may follow SMIs because of shared interests in specific topics, relatability, and perceived authenticity. Social exchange and relationship management theories do not sufficiently account for purchasing decisions despite the negative views of consumers.
Abhishek and Srivastava (2021)	Identify the significant factors in influencer marketing strategy that drive purchase intention.	Theory of planned behaviour and social learning theory	In-depth interviews with a sample size of 25 participants from India.	Both attitude toward SMIs and perceived behaviour control positively influenced consumer behaviour, with peer influence showing no impact. Additional constructs like personal relevance, inspiration, and trust had positive effects, while perceived risk had no influence. Consumers considered product-influencer fit crucial.
Djafarova and Bowes (2021)	This study investigates what types of Instagram marketing tools are the most effective concerning	S-O-R Framework	Eight focus groups were exclusively conducted with female participants from the United Kingdom.	Advertisements, opinion leaders and user-generated content act as stimuli (S) in evoking positive emotions (O), which subsequently

	Generation Z's impulse purchasing behaviour within the fashion industry in the context of the United Kingdom.			trigger impulse purchases (R) in Generation Z females. Participants have deemed Brand-created content annoying and, thus, not considered a stimulus.
Zhou et al. (2021)	This research explicitly investigates the value of SMIs' narrative strategies in addressing influencer marketing challenges within China's luxury market.	S-O-R Framework	Six focus groups with participants from China.	This research proposes four factors to assess the effectiveness of SMIs' narrative strategies in navigating cultural differences: interpreting local consumers' preferred brand meanings, conveying local consumers' desired brand values, portraying an international brand identity and positioning, and ensuring consistency in brand images.
Childers and Boatwright (2021)	Explore consumers' perceptions of influencer marketing and develop a deeper understanding of how different generational groups experience and perceive SMIs.	Two-step flow of communication model	Semi-structured interviews with a sample size of 25 participants from the United States.	Gen Zs demonstrated indifference toward SMIs and placed greater importance on connecting with their social media community. Gen Y and X participants generally distrust social media advertising efforts.
Leung, Gu and Palmatier (2022)	Outline the fundamental features of online influencer marketing and offer a set of propositions that may spur progress toward a theory of online influencer marketing.	Social capital theory	Semi-structured interviews with a sample of 20 professionals and 58 college students	The distinctive advantages of online influencer marketing, encompassing targeting, positioning, creativity, and trust benefits, contribute to its superior effectiveness, though not without potential threats such as content control and customer retention.
Kay et al. (2022)	This research explores disclosure practices from a multi-stakeholder perspective, including consumers, brands, and influencers.		In-depth interviews with N= 27 participants: Five brand participants, five SMI participants and 17 consumer participants.	Content cues within influencer marketing play a pivotal role in fostering advertising recognition. Brands perceive SMIs as possessing distinct credibility attributes, particularly in terms of expertise on social media platforms and product categories.

Appendix 7: Interview Guide

Purpose	Objective	Preamble	Questions	Possible prompts
Obtain demographic data		I will start this interview by asking you about...	Could you please state the following: your gender, age, marital status, education, and job status?	
Ice-breaking introductory questions		Now, I am going to ask you about social media influencers. I mean by influencers “.....” The next question is about influencers’ content. I mean by influencers’ content “.....”	Do you follow social media influencers? Can you name your favourite influencer (or influencers)? Can you tell me what type of influencer he/she is (e.g., lifestyle, beauty, travel, food)? How often do you watch influencers’ content? Can you be more specific in terms of numbers?	Which social media application do you use to follow influencers?
To explore the outcome of this study: Sharing behaviour.	To further understand the participants’ sharing behaviour.	One way to share content between you and your friends on social media is through the sharing button (the researcher demonstrates an example using his social apps, depending on the answer they provide regarding the app they use to follow SMIs). I will now ask you about your sharing behaviour in relation to influencers....	How often do you share influencers’ posts? Can you tell me how frequently you share content (using a scale to measure frequency)? With whom? What do you share? Do you decide to share some posts and not others, and why?	If participants decide not to share, ask them why. Do you share content with other platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, iMessage)?

Purpose	Objective	Preamble	Questions	Possible prompts
To explore and uncover audience-specific factors.	To introduce the notion of audience factor and confirm whether participants agree on a particular factor.	Now, I am going to ask about your personal characteristics. I mean by this “.....”	In your opinion, what do you think it is about you/ your character/ your habits that lead you to engage and share your favourite influencer’s posts?	Can you tell me more about your personality and how it affects your decision towards your favourite influencer? How strongly do you think the impact of these characteristics affects your intention to share the influencer’s posts with your friends and family?
To explore the follower’s verification behaviour.	To confirm whether participants verify SMIs’ content. To confirm whether verification status is important and whether participants further validate the information. To confirm whether parasocial relationships (PSR) influence participants’ verification behaviour. To further understand whether verification behaviour impacts sharing behaviour.	I will now ask whether you verify what influencers endorse in their content. I mean by verification “.....” Let me explain the notion of verification status, which is represented by a star logo on Snapchat or a blue checkmark on Instagram and TikTok “.....” We spoke earlier about whether you verify the information posted by your favourite influencer...	Do you verify the content of your favourite influencer before making any engagement decisions? Do you, for example, look for if the influencer has verified status? Do you seek other sources to validate the information online? If you are attached to your favourite influencer, would you still verify the information posted by him/her? Can you tell me more? Can you tell me how you decide to share content? Specifically, does your verification behaviour affect your sharing decision?	If yes or no, can you tell me how and why?

Purpose	Objective	Preamble	Questions	Possible prompts
Closing question	To provide a structured conclusion to the interview, allowing participants to share any final thoughts or insights.	Thank you very much for your time and participation....	Before we conclude, would you like to share any final thoughts?	

Appendix 8: Consent Form (English and Arabic)



Participant Identification Number:

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: “Don’t forget to hit the share button!” Explaining the roles of influencer, content, and followers in parasocial relationships and sharing behaviour.

Name of Researcher: Tareq Aldlimi

Please initial box

- | | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. | <input type="text" value="yes"/> |
| 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without penalty. | <input type="text" value="yes"/> |
| 3. I agree that this form that bears my name and signature may be seen by a designated auditor. | <input type="text" value="yes"/> |
| 4. I agree that my non-identifiable research data may be stored in National Archives and be used anonymously by others for future research. I am assured that the confidentiality of my data will be upheld through the removal of any personal identifiers. | <input type="text" value="yes"/> |
| 5. I understand that my interview may be taped and subsequently transcribed. | <input type="text" value="yes"/> |
| 6. I agree to take part in the above study. | <input type="text" value="yes"/> |

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher.

رقم تعريف المشارك:

نموذج الموافقة

عنوان المشروع: "لا تنس الضغط على زر المشاركة!" شرح أدوار المؤثر والمحتوى والمتابعين في العلاقة الاجتماعية من جانب واحد، وسلوك النشر".

اسم الباحث: طارق الدليمي

التاريخ:

يرجى ملء المربع

☐ نعم

1. أؤكد أنني قد قرأت وفهمت المعلومات المتعلقة بالدراسة أعلاه ولدي الفرصة لطرح الأسئلة.

☐ نعم

2. أؤكد أن مشاركتي طوعية وأني مدرك لحريتي في الانسحاب في أي وقت دون إبداء أي سبب وبدون عقوبة.

☐ نعم

3. أوافق على أن هذا النموذج الذي يحمل اسمي وتوقيعي يمكن معاينته من قبل مدقق حسابات معين.

☐ نعم

4. أوافق على أنه يجوز تخزين بياناتي البحثية غير القابلة للتعريف في الأرشيف الوطني واستخدامها بشكل مجهول من قبل الآخرين في المستقبل من أجل البحث العلمي. أنا مدرك أنه سيتم الحفاظ على سرية بياناتي من خلال إزالة أي معرفات شخصية.

☐ نعم

5. أفهم أن مقابلي قد يتم تسجيلها ونسخها لاحقاً.

☐ نعم

6. أوافق على المشاركة في الدراسة أعلاه.

اسم المشترك

التاريخ

التوقيع

الباحث

التاريخ

التوقيع

نسخة واحدة للمشارك؛ نسخة واحدة للباحث.

Appendix 9: Qualitative Study Invitation Email/WhatsApp (English and Arabic)

Invitation to participate in the research project titled:

“Don’t forget to hit the share button!” Explaining the roles of influencer, content, and followers in parasocial relationships and sharing behaviour.

Dear participant

Thank you for reaching out!

My name is Tareq Aldlimi. I am a Doctoral student at Middlesex University, Business School in London, UK. I am conducting interviews as part of a research study to increase our understanding of how social media influencers are perceived by Saudi Arabian followers.

The interview will be conducted online via Zoom. The questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write-up of findings. There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to my research, and findings could lead to a greater public understanding of the impact of social media influencers in Saudi society.

If you are willing to participate, please fill out the consent form attached and suggest a day and time that suits you. I will do my best to be available and send you the Zoom link accordingly. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask them.

Thank you!

Tareq Aldlimi

Mobile number: +44 7478962589

Email: TA858@live.mdx.ac.uk

دعوة للمشاركة في مشروع البحث المعنون:

"لا تنس الضغط على زر المشاركة!" شرح أدوار المؤثر والمحتوى والمتابعين في العلاقة الاجتماعية من جانب واحد، وسلوك النشر.

عزيزي/عزيزتي المشارك،

شكراً لتواصلك!

اسمي طارق الدليمي، طالب دكتوراه في كلية الأعمال بجامعة ميدلسكس في لندن، المملكة المتحدة. أقوم بإجراء مقابلات كجزء من التواصل الاجتماعي للمؤثرين ومتابعات وسائل دراستي البحثية لزيادة فهمنا حول كيفية تصور متابعي

سيتم إجراء المقابلة عبر الإنترنت عبر تطبيق Zoom. وستبقى الأسئلة سرية. سيتم تخصيص رمز رقم لكل مقابلة للمساعدة في ضمان عدم الكشف عن المعلومات الشخصية أثناء التحليل وكتابة النتائج. لا يوجد أي تعويض للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة. ومع ذلك، فإن مشاركتك ستكون إضافة قيمة لبحثي ويمكن أن تؤدي النتائج إلى فهم عام أكبر لتأثير المؤثرين على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في المجتمع السعودي.

إذا كنت على استعداد للمشاركة، فيرجى ملء نموذج الموافقة المرفق، واقتراح اليوم والوقت المناسبين لك، وسأبذل قصارى جهدي لأكون متاحاً وأرسل لك رابط Zoom وفقاً لذلك. إذا كان لديك أي أسئلة من فضلك لا تتردد في طرحها.

شكراً لك!

طارق الدليمي

رقم الجوال: +44 7478962589

البريد الإلكتروني: TA858@live.mdx.ac.uk

I, Ossama Benlafquih, a native Arabic Translator, having completed +5 Years of studies after high school in English and working for 6 Years as a translator. Certify that the translation above requested by Tareq Aldlimi is accurate and identical in meaning the English source.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/ossama-benlafquih-63397b182>

Email: Ossamabenlafquih@gmail.com

Phone number(PL): +48 518 447 620

Appendix 10: Translation Certificate for Interview Guide



Dar Al-Yaqin for Certified Translation

+994503280091 | Yaqin.translation@gmail.com

Certification of Translation Accuracy

Translation of “**Interview Guide**”
from “**ENGLISH**” to “**ARABIC**”

We, Dar Al-Yaqin, a Certified Translation Services Agency, hereby certify that the abovementioned document(s) has (have) been translated by experienced, qualified and competent professional translator, fluent in the abovementioned language pair and that, in our best judgment, the translated text truly reflects the content, meaning, and style of the original text and constitutes in every respect a correct and true translation of the original document. This document has not been translated for a family member, friend, or business associate.

This is to certify the accuracy of the translation only. We do not make any claims or guarantees about the authenticity or content of the original document. Further, Dar Al-Yaqin assumes no liability for the way in which the translation is used by the customer or any third party, including end-users of the translation.

A copy of the translation is attached to this certification.

Asgarov.I,

Authorized Signatory

Order Date: April 1, 2022



Dar Al-Yaqin for Certified Translation

Appendix 11: A Sample of Interview Transcript (English and Arabic)

Italic font is the participant's voice.

Could you please state the following: your gender, age, marital status, education, and job status?

Male, 47, married, bachelor's degree, full-time employee.

Do you follow social media influencers? Can you name your favourite influencer (or influencers)?

Can you tell me what type of influencer he/she is (e.g., lifestyle, beauty, travel, food)?

Yes, I do. I actually follow a lot of influencers, but my favourite is Rashid bin Salmeen Al-Mari (philanthropy and charities).

How often do you watch influencers' content? Can you be more specific in terms of numbers?

Everyday. Generally, once a day or twice a day.

Which social media application do you use to follow influencers?

Mainly Snapchat and Instagram.

How often do you share influencers' posts? Can you tell me how frequently you share content (using a scale to measure frequency)? With whom? What do you share? Do you decide to share some posts and not others, and why?

Once every day or two. Family and friends. Snaps related to philanthropy. If he posts personal Snaps related to his family and personal life, I usually share them, also, if he posts some of his philanthropic activities. Sometimes, I use WhatsApp to share content with the groups I am involved in.

In your opinion, what do you think it is about you/ your character/ your habits that lead you to engage and share your favourite influencer's posts?

Speaking of my personality, I love smiley faces. I try my best to keep a smile on my face. I try to spread positive vibes as much as possible. Therefore, when looking at influencers, I ask myself, is he smiling all the time? Does he spread positive vibes? On the other hand, I am a religious person, and I like religious people. So, if they provide content aligning with our culture, I am definitely sharing. (Thinks then talks:) He talks about religion, he hand-picks humanitarian issues, he travels around the world with charities in order to provide help for those in need, he takes care of homeless people and orphan children, and I care a lot about supporting community projects and local causes. On the other hand, he is very humble and simple; you can relate to him. As we said before, he always smiles; a person who always smiles makes you feel comfortable. He works with a couple of charities; it seems to me that, yes, he gets sponsored by them. But at the end of the day, he is promoting something good, which is charities.

He selects content that is suitable to our religion. He is also a philanthropist. He selects speech that is very well polished and respectful. He always smiles and is spontaneous. His language is easy for everyone to understand. At the same time, he always refers to religion and uses phrases from the Quran (Muslims' holy book) and Hadith (the prophets' words). Thus, he mixes religion with our everyday life in a simple yet attractive way. In my opinion, religion is the most important thing in life. This is also true in the Saudi society that we live in. If I want to share your content (referring to influencers), then you better post something that goes along with our society, something religious, something that can plant ethical values in our children and future generations. We need someone who can represent our culture and not just an influencer who keeps making pranks (laughs).

He has my full respect (referring to his favourite influencer), trust, and appreciation. His content is useful, and for that reason, I check on him daily. At the same time, personal content that discloses his personal life is important for me because it speaks about him and his personal life with his kids, family, and brothers. Family is so important; trust me on this. As we said before, religion plays a role, and his good deeds too. It makes me respect him more. Even if he is documenting what he is doing, at least he is doing it, not just talking and bragging like other influencers. By following my favourite influencer, I can see him doing good to others moment by moment. On the other hand, the way he treats his family and older brothers, the way he respects them, the way he respects his nephews, and his kindness and smiley face make me respect him. Because I see myself accepting such principles and I wish I follow him on such principles and be like him. Seeing influencers actively engaged in volunteer work and community projects inspires me to contribute more to my society. Their efforts remind me of the importance of giving back.

Can you tell me more about your personality and how it affects your decision towards your favourite influencer? How strongly do you think the impact of these characteristics affects your intention to share the influencer's posts with your friends and family?

Maybe the way we use our smartphones to follow influencers has some kind of effect. I mean, it would be difficult to find influencers that match your personality. Moreover, it will not be easy to navigate through the influencer's content. Just give your phone to someone who does not follow influencers; he will not know the trick (what trick?) – I mean, you should have prior knowledge to know if an influencer is being for real or just there to trick his followers and make money and do not even get me started on the amount of face-filters some influencers are using! I bet they do not look like that in real life. So, they can fool some of us. Knowledge is power, I believe. Now, engaging with influencers is like starting a conversation. If you have high knowledge, you are more likely to think and say I can do this, and you will feel comfortable sharing their content.

Do you verify the content of your favourite influencer before making any engagement decisions?

No doubt. Everyone has to verify the content before making any decision, even if you like that person. As you know, we are human beings, and we all make mistakes. My favourite influencer might share the wrong piece of information. If you are a reasonable person, you would verify such information.

Do you, for example, look for if the influencer has verified status? Do you seek other sources to validate the information online?

No, and my favourite influencer is not even verified. In current times, I heard that 'verified status' has become harder than before. Even if you were to pay to get it, the price has increased significantly. I know for a fact that a lot of influencers do not have verified status. At the end of the day, such a status will not change the content of the influencer. Hence, the content is more important than the verification status. (So, if the influencer had verified status, would you still attempt to verify what he says? Some say that verified influencers care for their reputation; thus, they would only share genuine information) in my point of view, verified status goes through a long process. During this process, Snapchat looks at whether this influencer will help Snapchat (as a company) financially. In other words, Snapchat asks whether verifying such influencers will benefit the company. They do not care about content quality; they care about his rapid posting behaviour and large number of followers. Based on this, I do not care about verification as a follower. If Snapchat really cared about content quality, then verified status would have an impact on me.

If you are attached to your favourite influencer, would you still verify the information posted by him/her? Can you tell me more?

For me, yes. Because I have believe that we all make mistakes, consequently, I do verify his content in order to avoid unnecessary embarrassment. It is important to make sure the information is accurate and trustworthy. You never know; sometimes, even our favourites can share something that needs a double-check. It is a good habit to stay informed and ensure everything adds up.

Can you tell me how you decide to share content? Specifically, does your verification behaviour affect your sharing decision?

Of course. If I ever decide to share content, what matters to me is that I am satisfied with what the influencer has posted. At the same time, I share it because I want others to benefit from such information. If there were no benefit from sharing, I would not bother. Therefore, I first verify whatever I intend to share. If it is correct and beneficial, then I will share it. (Goes quiet, then talks:) Verification plays a big role in this decision. If I have doubts or if I am unable to verify the information, I am more cautious about sharing because I would not want to pass along something that might not be accurate.

الخط/المائل يمثل صوت المشارك

هل يمكنكم ذكر ما يلي: جنسكم، العمر، الحالة الاجتماعية، المستوى التعليمي، وحالة العمل؟
ذكر، 47 سنة، متزوج، بكالوريوس، موظف بدوام كامل.

هل تتابعون نشاط مؤثرين على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي؟ هل يمكنكم ذكر اسم مؤثركم المفضل (أو المؤثرين)؟ هل يمكنكم أن تخبرونا عن نوع المؤثر، مثل (أسلوب الحياة، التجميل، السفر، الطعام)؟
نعم، أفعل ذلك فعلياً. أتابع العديد من المؤثرين، ولكن المفضل لدي هو راشد بن سلمان المري (الأعمال الخيرية والأعمال الإنسانية).

كم مرة تشاهدون محتوى المؤثرين؟ هل يمكنكم أن تكونوا أكثر تحديداً من حيث الأرقام؟
كل يوم، عموماً، مرة في اليوم أو مرتين في اليوم.

أي تطبيق لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي تستخدمون لمتابعة المؤثرين؟
أساساً سناب شات وإنستغرام.

كم مرة تقومون بمشاركة مشاركات المؤثرين؟ هل يمكنكم أن تخبروني عن تكرار مشاركتكم للمحتوى (باستخدام مقياس لقياس التكرار)؟ مع من؟ ما الذي تشاركونه؟ هل تقررون مشاركة بعض المشاركات وعدم مشاركة البعض الآخر، ولماذا؟
مرة كل يوم أو يومين. مع العائلة والأصدقاء. مقاطع تتعلق بالأعمال الخيرية. إذا نشر مقاطع شخصية تتعلق بأسرته وحياته الشخصية، عادةً ما أشاركها، وأيضاً إذا نشر بعض أنشطته الخيرية. أحياناً أستخدم واتساب لمشاركة بعض المحتوى في المجموعات التي أشارك فيها.

في رأيك، ما الذي تعتقد أنه في شخصيتك/ طابعك/ عاداتك يجعلك تشارك مشاركات مؤثر كالمفضل؟ بالنسبة لشخصيتي، أحب الوجوه المبتسمة. أبدأ قصارى جهدي للابتسام دائماً. أحاول نشر الطاقة الإيجابية قدر الإمكان. لذلك، عندما أنظر إلى المؤثرين، أسأل نفسي، هل هو دائم الابتسام؟ هل ينشر طاقة إيجابية؟ من ناحية أخرى، أنا شخص ديني، وأحب الأشخاص الدينيين. لذا، إذا قدموا محتوى يتناسب مع ثقافتنا، فإنني بالتأكيد سأشارك. (يفكر ثم يتحدث:) إنه يتحدث عن الدين، ويختار قضايا إنسانية، يسافر حول العالم مع الجمعيات الخيرية لتقديم المساعدة للمحتاجين، يعتني بالمشردين والأطفال الأيتام. أهتم كثيراً بدعم مشاريع المجتمع والقضايا المحلية. من ناحية أخرى، هو متواضع وبسيط جداً يمكنك التعاطف معه. كما قلنا من قبل، دائماً ما يبتسم، والشخص الذي يبتسم دائماً يجعلك تشعر بالراحة. يعمل مع عدة جمعيات خيرية، يبدو لي أنه نعم يحصل على دعم منهم. ولكن في نهاية اليوم، يروج لشيء جيد وهو الأعمال الخيرية.

إنه يختار محتوى يتناسب مع ديننا. كما أنه محسن اجتماعي. يختار كلمات جيدة ومحترمة. دائماً ما يبتسم ويكون عفواً. لغته سهلة الفهم للجميع. في الوقت نفسه، دائماً ما يشير إلى الدين ويستخدم عبارات من القرآن (كتاب المسلمين المقدس) والحديث (كلام النبي). بالتالي، يمزج بين الدين وحياة اليوم العادي بطريقة بسيطة وجذابة. في رأيي، الدين هو أهم شيء في الحياة. وهذا صحيح أيضاً بالنسبة للمجتمع السعودي الذي نعيش فيه. إذا أردت مشاركة محتوى (في إشارة إلى المؤثرين)، فعليك أن تنشر شيئاً يتناسب مع مجتمعنا، شيئاً دينياً، شيئاً يمكن أن يزرع القيم الأخلاقية في أطفالنا والأجيال القادمة. نحن بحاجة إلى شخص يمكنه تمثيل ثقافتنا وليس مجرد مؤثر يقوم بعمل مقالب باستمرار (يضحك).

يحظى بكامل احترامي (مشيراً إلى مؤثره المفضل)، وثقتي، وتقديري. محتواه مفيد، ولهذا السبب اتابعه يومياً. في الوقت نفسه، المحتوى الشخصي الذي يكشف عن حياته الشخصية مهم بالنسبة لي، لأنه يتحدث عنه وعن حياته الشخصية مع أطفاله وعائلته وإخوته. العائلة مهمة جداً، صدقني في ذلك. كما قلنا من قبل، الدين يلعب دوراً، وأفعاله الطيبة أيضاً. يجعلني أحترمه أكثر. حتى لو كان يوثق ما يقوم به، على الأقل هو يقوم بذلك، لا مجرد الحديث والتفاخر كما يفعل بعض المؤثرين. من خلال متابعتي لمؤثري المفضل، يمكنني رؤيته يقدم الخير للآخرين لحظة بلحظة. من ناحية أخرى، الطريقة التي يعامل بها عائلته وإخوته الكبار، الطريقة التي يحترم بها، الطريقة التي يحترم فيها أبناء أخيه، لطفه ووجهه المبتسم، تجعلني أحترمه. لأنني أرى نفسي قادراً على قبول مثل تلك المبادئ وأتمنى أن أتبعه في تلك المبادئ وأكون مثله. رؤية المؤثرين مشاركين بنشاط في العمل التطوعي والمشاريع المجتمعية تلهمني للمساهمة أكثر في مجتمعي. تذكرني جهودهم بأهمية العطاء.

هل يمكنكم أن تروا لي المزيد عن شخصيتكم وكيف تؤثر هذه الصفات بشكل قوي على قراركم تجاه مؤثر كالمفضل؟ ربما يكون لدينا تأثير بسبب كيفية استخدامنا للهواتف الذكية لمتابعة المؤثرين. أعني أنه سيكون من الصعب العثور على مؤثرين يتناسبون مع شخصيتك. علاوة على ذلك، لن يكون من السهل التنقل عبر محتوى المؤثر. فقط قدم هاتفك لشخص لا يتابع المؤثرين، لن يعرف الخدعة (ما هي الخدعة؟) – أعني، يجب أن تمتلك معرفة مسبقة لمعرفة ما إذا كان المؤثر حقيقياً أم موجوداً هناك فقط لخداع متابعيه وجني المال، ولا تبدأ معي في كمية الفلاتر التي يستخدمها بعض المؤثرين! أنا متأكد تماماً أنهم لا يظهرون بهذا الشكل في الحياة الواقعية. لذلك، يمكنهم خداع بعضنا. أعتقد أن المعرفة هي القوة. الآن، التفاعل مع المؤثرين يشبه بدء محادثة. إذا كنت تمتلك معرفة عالية، فأنت أكثر احتمالاً أن تفكر و سوف تقول يمكنني فعل ذلك، وستشعر بالراحة في مشاركة محتواهم.

هل تتحقق من محتوى مؤثر كالمفضل قبل اتخاذ أي قرار مشاركة؟ بلا شك. يتعين على الجميع التحقق من المحتوى قبل اتخاذ أي قرار حتى لو أعجبت بهذا الشخص. كما تعلم، نحن بشر، ونرتكب جميعاً أخطاء. قد يشارك مؤثرينا المفضلين معلومة خاطئة. إذا كنت شخصاً منطقياً، فستتحقق من مثل هذه المعلومات.

هل تبحث، على سبيل المثال، عما إذا كان لدى المؤثر سمة التوثيق؟ هل تبحث عن مصادر أخرى للتحقق من المعلومات عبر الإنترنت؟

لا، وليس لمؤثري المفضل حتى سمة توثيق. في الأوقات الحالية، سمعت أن "التوثيق" أصبحت أصعب مما كانت عليه في السابق. حتى لو كنت ستدفع للحصول عليها، فإن السعر ارتفع بشكل كبير. أنا أعلم بأن الكثير من المؤثرين لا يحملون حتى سمة توثيق. في النهاية، لن تغير مثل هذه الحالة محتوى المؤثر. لذلك، يعتبر المحتوى أكثر أهمية من التوثيق. (إذا كان للمؤثر سمة توثيق، هل ستحاول لاحقاً التحقق مما يقوله؟ هناك من يقولون إن المؤثرين الذين حصلوا على حالة تحقق يهتمون بسمعتهم، وبالتالي لن يشاركوا إلا المعلومات الحقيقية) من وجهة نظري، سمة التوثيق تمر بعملية طويلة، خلال هذه العملية، ينظر سناوبات في ما إذا كان هذا

المؤثر سيساعد سناپ شات (كشركة) ماليًا. وبعبارة أخرى، يسأل سناپ شات عما إذا كان التوثيق من مثل هذا المؤثر سيفيد الشركة. لا يهتمون بجودة المحتوى، يهتمون بتكرار نشره وعدد كبير من المتابعين. بناءً على ذلك، لا يهتمني التوثيق كمتابع. إذا كانت سناپ شات تهتم حقًا بجودة المحتوى، فإن سمة التوثيق ستكون لها تأثير على.

إذا كنت متعلق بمؤثرك المفضل، هل ما تزال تتحقق من المعلومات التي يقوم بنشرها؟ هل يمكنك أن تخبرني بالمزيد؟ بالنسبة لي، نعم. لأن لدي اعتقادًا بأننا جميعًا نرتكب أخطاء. وبالتالي، أقوم بالتحقق من محتواه لتجنب الحرج الغير ضروري. من المهم التأكد من دقة وجودة المعلومات. فأنت لا تعلم أحيانًا حتى المؤثرين المفضلين لدينا يمكنهم مشاركة شيء يحتاج إلى التحقق. إنها عادة جيدة البقاء على اطلاع والتأكد من أن كل شيء مناسب.

هل يمكنك أن تخبرني كيف تقرر مشاركة المحتوى؟ وتحديدًا، هل يؤثر سلوكك في التحقق على قرارك بالمشاركة؟ بالطبع. إذا قررت أن أشارك محتوى ما، يهتمني أن أكون راضيًا عما نشره المؤثر. في الوقت نفسه، أشاركه لأنني أريد أن يستفيد الآخرون من مثل هذه المعلومات. إذا لم يكن هناك فائدة من المشاركة، فلن أتعجب نفسي. لذلك، أقوم أولاً بالتحقق من كل ما أنوي مشاركته، إذا كان صحيحًا ومفيدًا، أقوم بالمشاركة. (يفكر ثم يتحدث): يلعب التحقق دورًا كبيرًا في هذا القرار. إذا كانت لدي شكوك أو إذا كنت غير قادر على التحقق من المعلومات، سوف أكون أكثر حذرًا في المشاركة لأنني لا أرغب في تمرير شيء قد لا يكون دقيقًا.

This is to certify that We, MB Freelance Translation Services, have performed translation service by bilingual experts who are fluent in and understand the English and the Arabic languages.

We are qualified to translate the study documents. We hereby certify that the identified [Arabic] translated document is, a true and accurate translation of the original English source document titles "Participant_Survey English File."

The above-mentioned file was translated by:

Translator Name Muhammed Saad: MB Freelance Translation Services

Address: E-mail: mbenm84@gmail.com

Appendix 12: Online Survey (English)



If you prefer to read this page in Arabic, please choose your preferred language from the top right corner.

Dear Participant,

Welcome to the survey!

I would like to invite you to take part in my research project. This survey aims at understanding the potential factors influencing an individual's intention to engage and share social media influencers' content in Saudi Arabia. Your participation is a significant factor in this study's success. This survey will require approximately 12 minutes to complete.

Your confidentiality will always be ensured; you will remain anonymous as a respondent. You may withdraw from the study without penalty. All the information you provide in this survey will remain completely confidential. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. Completing the survey will constitute your consent to participate.

As a token of our appreciation, I am offering you a chance to win a \$50 Amazon gift card.

If you have any concerns, or questions, or require further details about the current study please do not hesitate to contact my Director of Studies or me using the contact details below.

Thank you in advance for your time and effort in completing the survey.

**Tareq Aldlimi
PhD Candidate
Middlesex University, London, UK
Email: ta858@live.mdx.ac.uk**

**Dr Costas Priporas
Director of Studies
Middlesex University, London, UK
Email: c.priporas@mdx.ac.uk**



1. Are you above the age of 18?

☐ Yes

☐ No

2. Are you a citizen of Saudi Arabia?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please carefully read the definition of social media influencers

Social media influencers are ordinary content-generators who influence their followers' opinions through social media platforms. They are usually experts in specific areas. They hold at least a thousand followers and share their daily lives, tips or tricks on social media. Examples are lifestyle influencers, fashionistas, fitness gurus and others.

3. Do you follow at least one social media influencer?

☐ Yes

☐ No

4. In the box below, please name your favorite influencer that you have been following for more than three months

5. Which of the following social media platforms do you use to follow your favorite influencer?

☐ Snapchat

☐ Instagram

☐ TikTok

☐ YouTube

6. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about {{Q4}}'s popularity?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
{{Q4}} is famous	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
{{Q4}} has a lot of followers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The popularity of {{Q4}} is increasing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
{{Q4}} has a lot of interactions under each post	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

7. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about {{Q4}}'s authenticity?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
{{Q4}} tries to act in a manner that is consistent with their held values	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
{{Q4}} cares about openness and honesty in close relationships with others	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
{{Q4}} places a good deal of importance on others understanding about their true self	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
People can count on {{Q4}} being who they are	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your relationship with {{Q4}}?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
{{Q4}} makes me feel comfortable as if I am with friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If {{Q4}} appears on another social media platform, I would watch/read it to know more	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I look forward to watching the last post uploaded by {{Q4}}	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I miss seeing {{Q4}} when he or she is not posting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would like to meet {{Q4}} in person	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

9. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the content posted by {{ Q4 }}?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
{{ Q4 }}'s content is original	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
{{ Q4 }}'s content is novel	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
{{ Q4 }}'s content is unusual	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
{{ Q4 }}'s content is innovative	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

10. Research in decision-making shows that people when making decisions and answering questions, prefer not to pay attention and minimize their effort as much as possible. Some studies show that over 50% of people don't carefully read questions. If you are reading this question and have read all the other questions, please select the answer marked Influencers. Thank you for participating and taking the time to read through the questions carefully.

What was this study about?

- ☐ Dogs
- ☐ Lions
- ☐ Tigers
- ☐ Influencers

11. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the content posted by {{ Q4 }}?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
The content provided by {{ Q4 }} is accurate	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The content provided by {{ Q4 }} is reliable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The content provided by {{ Q4 }} is updated	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
{{ Q4 }} provides high-quality information	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

12. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about sharing the content of {{ Q4 }}?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I would click on "Share" {{ Q4 }}'s content	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would share {{ Q4 }}'s content on my own social media	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would share {{ Q4 }}'s content to contacts on my friends list	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would share {{ Q4 }}'s content using other forms of social media platforms	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

13. Please respond to the following statements as to whether you verify (fact-check) the content of {{ Q4 }}

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
When I watch {{ Q4 }}'s content, I check to see if the information is complete and comprehensive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When I watch {{ Q4 }}'s content, I look for other sources to validate the information	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When I watch {{ Q4 }}'s content, I check to see if the information is current and up to date	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would still verify {{ Q4 }}'s content, even if I was attached to them	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

14. Here we ask about your knowledge of using {{Q5}} to engage with {{ Q4 }}. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your {{Q5}} knowledge?

Before you proceed, please read the definition of face filters: beautification filters that enhance beauty. These filters smoothen the skin, sharpen the nose, and enlarge the eyes.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel confident and familiar with {{Q5}}'s interface very quickly	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel confident of using {{Q5}} even if there is no one around to show me how to do it	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel confident in my abilities to use the various functions of {{Q5}} (for example, sharing content with others)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel confident in my abilities to know if content posted on {{Q5}} used enhancement filters (for example, face filters)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

15. To understand your perspective on culture, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
If a coworker gets a prize, I would feel proud.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The well-being of my co-workers is important to me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
To me, pleasure is spending time with others.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel good when I cooperate with others.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parents and children must stay together as much as possible.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It is my duty to take care of my family, even when I have to sacrifice what I want.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Family members should stick together, no matter what sacrifices are required.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It is important to me that I respect the decision made by my groups.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

16. What is your age group?

- ☐ 18-25
- ☐ 26-35
- ☐ 36-45
- ☐ 46-55
- ☐ 56-65
- ☐ Over 65

17. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

18. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ High school or less
- ☐ Associate degree (community college, technical school, two-year college)
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Graduate degree (Master's, MBA, or doctoral)

19. What is your occupation status?

- ☐ Work full-time
- ☐ Work part-time
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Do not work

20. Overall, how long do you spend on {{Q5}} on a typical day?

- ☐ 5 minutes or less
- ☐ 5-15 minutes
- ☐ 15-30 minutes
- ☐ 30 minutes-1 hour
- ☐ 1-2 hours
- ☐ 2-3 hours
- ☐ More than 3 hours



21. Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey! Your participation is greatly appreciated. As a token of our gratitude, we are offering you an opportunity to enter a draw to win a \$50 Amazon gift card. To participate, please enter your email address below. Your email will only be used for the purpose of this draw and will not be associated with your survey responses. The winner will be selected randomly, and their email address will be used solely for prize notification. Good luck!

Appendix 13: Online Survey (Arabic)



عزيزي المشارك،

مرحبًا بك في الاستبيان!

أود دعوتك للمشاركة في مشروع بحثي. يهدف هذا الاستبيان إلى فهم العوامل المحتملة التي تؤثر على نية الفرد في المشاركة ومشاركة محتوى مؤثري وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في المملكة العربية السعودية. مشاركتك هي عامل مهم في نجاح هذه الدراسة. سيستغرق الاستبيان حوالي 12 دقيقة لاستكماله.

يمكنك الانسحاب من الدراسة دون أي عقوبة. ستبقى جميع المعلومات التي تقدمها في هذا الاستبيان سرية تمامًا. لن يتم الإشارة إلى أي مشاركة في التقارير الشفوية أو الكتابية التي يمكن أن تربطك بالدراسة. استكمال الاستبيان سيشكل موافقتك على المشاركة.

كبادرة تقدير منا، نقدم لك فرصة للفوز ببطاقة هدايا من أمازون بقيمة خمسين دولار أمريكي.

إذا كان لديك أي مخاوف أو استفسارات أو تحتاج إلى مزيد من التفاصيل حول الدراسة الحالية، فلا تتردد في الاتصال بمدير الدراسات أو بي على العناوين البريدية أدناه.

شكرًا مقدمًا لوقتك وجهدك في استكمال الاستبيان.

طارق الدليمي

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التالي

*1. هل عمرك فوق 18 عاماً؟

☐ نعم

☐ لا

*2. هل أنت مواطن سعودي؟

☐ نعم

☐ لا

يرجى قراءة تعريف المؤثرين على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي بعناية

المؤثرون على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي هم منشئو محتوى عاديون يؤثرون على آراء متابعيهم من خلال منصات التواصل الاجتماعي. يكونون عادة خبراء في مجالات محددة. لديهم ما لا يقل عن ألف متابع ويشاركون حياتهم اليومية أو نصائحهم أو حيلهم على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. ومن الأمثلة عليهم المؤثرون في مجال الموضة ومعلمو اللياقة البدنية وغيرهم.

*3. هل تتابع مؤثراً واحداً على الأقل على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي؟

☐ نعم

☐ لا

*4. في المربع أدناه، يرجى تسمية المؤثر المفضل لديك والذي تتابعه منذ أكثر من ثلاثة أشهر

*5. أي من منصات التواصل الاجتماعي التالية تستخدمها لمتابعة المؤثر المفضل لديك؟

☐ سناب شات

☐ انستغرام

☐ تيك توك

☐ يوتيوب

*6. إلى أي مدى توافق على العبارات التالية حول شعبية و شهرة (المؤثر)؟

أعارض بشدة	أعارض	أعارض إلى حد ما	لا أوافق ولا أعارض	أوافق إلى حد ما	أوافق	أوافق بشدة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

*7. إلى أي مدى توافق على العبارات التالية حول أصالة و مصداقية (المؤثر)؟

أعارض بشدة	أعارض	أعارض إلى حد ما	لا أوافق ولا أعارض	أوافق إلى حد ما	أوافق	أوافق بشدة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

*8. إلى أي مدى توافق على العبارات التالية حول علاقتك بـ (المؤثر)؟

أعارض بشدة	أعارض	أعارض إلى حد ما	لا أوافق ولا أعارض	أوافق إلى حد ما	أوافق	أوافق بشدة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

*9. إلى أي مدى توافق على العبارات التالية حول المحتوى المنشور من قبل (المؤثر)؟

أعارض بشدة	أعارض	أعارض إلى حد ما	لا أوافق ولا أعارض	أوافق إلى حد ما	أوافق	أوافق بشدة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

10. تظهر الأبحاث أنه عند اتخاذ القرارات والإجابة على الأسئلة ، يفضل الناس عدم الانتباه وتقليل جهدهم قدر الإمكان. تظهر بعض الدراسات أن أكثر من 50٪ من الأشخاص لا يقرؤون الأسئلة بعناية. إذا كنت تقرأ هذا السؤال وقرأت جميع الأسئلة الأخرى ، فيرجى تحديد الإجابة التي تحمل عبارة المؤثرون. شكراً لك على المشاركة وأخذ الوقت الكافي لقراءة الأسئلة بعناية.

ما الذي كانت تدور حوله هذه الدراسة؟

- ☐ الكلاب
- ☐ الأسود
- ☐ النمر
- ☐ المؤثرون

*11. إلى أي مدى توافق على العبارات التالية حول المحتوى المنشور من قبل (المؤثر)؟

أعرض بشدة	أعرض	أعرض إلى حد ما	لا أوافق ولا أعارض	أوافق إلى حد ما	أوافق	أوافق بشدة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	المحتوى الذي يقدمه (المؤثر) دقيق
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	المحتوى الذي يقدمه (المؤثر) جدير بالثقة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	المحتوى الذي يقدمه (المؤثر) حديث
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	(المؤثر) يقدم معلومات ذات جودة عالية

*12. إلى أي مدى تتفق مع العبارات التالية حول مشاركة محتوى (المؤثر) ؟

أعرض بشدة	أعرض	أعرض إلى حد ما	لا أوافق ولا أعارض	أوافق إلى حد ما	أوافق	أوافق بشدة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	سأفكر على "مشاركة" محتوى (المؤثر)
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	سأشارك محتوى (المؤثر) على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي الخاصة بي
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	سأشارك محتوى (المؤثر) مع جهات الاتصال في قائمة أصدقائي
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	سأشارك محتوى (المؤثر) باستخدام منصات ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي الأخرى

*13. يرجى الإجابة على العبارات التالية حول ما إذا كنت تتحقق من محتوى (المؤثر)

أعرض بشدة	أعرض	أعرض إلى حد ما	لا أوافق ولا أعارض	أوافق إلى حد ما	أوافق	أوافق بشدة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	عندما أ شاهد محتوى (المؤثر) ، أتحقق لمعرفة ما إذا كانت المعلومات كاملة وشاملة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	عندما أ شاهد محتوى (المؤثر) ، أبحث عن مصادر أخرى للتحقق من صحة المعلومات
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	عندما أ شاهد محتوى (المؤثر) ، أتحقق لمعرفة ما إذا كانت المعلومات حديثة ومواكبة لأحدث المحيطات
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	ساقوم بالتحقق من محتوى (المؤثر) حتى وإن شعرت بنوع من التعلق بهم

*14. نسأل هنا عن معرفتك بكيفية استخدام سداب ثبات للتفاعل مع (المؤثر). إلى أي مدى توافق على العبارات التالية حول معرفتك بسداب ثبات؟

قبل الاجابة، يرجى قراءة تعريف فلاتر الوجه: هي فلاتر تعمل على تجميل و تعزيز الشخص. تعمل هذه الفلاتر على تنعيم البشرة وتحديد الأنف وتكبير العينين.

أعترض بشدة	أعترض	أعترض إلى حد ما	لا أوافق ولا أعترض	أوافق إلى حد ما	أوافق	أوافق بشدة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
أشعر بالثقة والاعتماد على واجهة سداب ثبات بسرعة كبيرة						
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
أشعر بالثقة في استخدام سداب ثبات حتى لو لم يكن هناك أحد بجواري ليوضح لي كيفية استخدامه						
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
أشعر بالثقة في قدراتي على استخدام الوظائف المختلفة في سداب ثبات (على سبيل المثال، مشاركة المحتوى مع الآخرين)						
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
أشعر بالثقة في قدراتي على معرفة ما إذا كان المحتوى المنشور على سداب ثبات يستخدم فلاتر التحسين (على سبيل المثال، فلاتر الوجه)						

*15. لفهم وجهة نظرك حول العادات و التقاليد، يرجى الإشارة إلى مدى موافقتك أو عدم موافقتك على العبارات التالية

أعترض بشدة	أعترض	أعترض إلى حد ما	لا أوافق ولا أعترض	أوافق إلى حد ما	أوافق	أوافق بشدة
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
إذا حصل زميل العمل على جائزة، سأشعر بالفخر.						
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
رفاهية زملائي في العمل مهمة بالنسبة لي.						
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
بالنسبة لي، المتعة هي في قضاء الوقت مع الآخرين.						
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
أشعر بالرضا عندما أتعاون مع الآخرين.						
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
يجب أن يبقى الآباء والأطفال معاً قدر الإمكان.						
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
من واجبي أن أعطي بعائلي، حتى إذا اضطررت للتضحية بما أريد.						
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
يجب على أفراد العائلة أن يظلوا متماسكين مهما كانت التضحيات المطلوبة.						
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
من المهم بالنسبة لي أن أحترم القرارات التي نتخذها معاً.						

*16. ما هي فئتك العمرية؟

- ☐ 18-25
- ☐ 26-35
- ☐ 36-45
- ☐ 46-55
- ☐ 56-65
- ☐ أكثر من 65

*17. ما هو جنسك؟

- ☐ ذكر
- ☐ أنثى

*18. ما هو أعلى مستوى تعليمي أكملته؟

- ☐ المدرسة الثانوية أو أقل
- ☐ درجة الزمالة (كلية مجتمع، مدرسة تقنية، كلية لمدة عامين)
- ☐ درجة البكالوريوس
- ☐ درجة الدراسات العليا (ماجستير أو ماجستير في إدارة الأعمال أو دكتوراه)

*19. ما هو وضعك المهني؟

- ☐ أعمل بدوام كامل
- ☐ أعمل بدوام جزئي
- ☐ طالب
- ☐ لا أعمل

*20. بشكل عام، كم تقضي من الوقت في استخدام مناب سات خلال يومك الاعتيادي ؟

- ☐ 5 دقائق أو أقل
- ☐ 5-15 دقيقة
- ☐ 15-30 دقيقة
- ☐ 30 دقيقة - 1 ساعة
- ☐ 1-2 ساعة
- ☐ 2-3 ساعات
- ☐ أكثر من 3 ساعات

21. شكرًا لك على أخذ الوقت لاستكمال هذا الاستبيان! كبادرة تقدير منا، نقدم لك فرصة للمشاركة في السحب على فوز ببطاقة هدايا أمازون بقيمة 50 دولارًا أمريكيًا. للمشاركة، يرجى إدخال عنوان البريد الإلكتروني الخاص بك أدناه. سيتم استخدام عنوان البريد الإلكتروني الخاص بك فقط لأغراض هذا السحب ولن يتم ربطه بإجابات استبيانك. سيتم اختيار الفائز بشكل عشوائي، وسيتم استخدام عنوان البريد الإلكتروني الخاص بهم فقط لإعلامهم بالجائزة. حظًا سعيدًا!

تم

السابق

Appendix 14: Sample of the Certified Translated Survey

Please carefully read the definition of social media influencers Social media influencers are ordinary content-generators who influence their followers' opinions through social media platforms. They are usually experts in specific areas. They hold at least a thousand followers and share their daily lives, tips or tricks on social media. Examples are lifestyle influencers, fashionistas, fitness gurus and others.	يرجى قراءة تعريف المؤثرين على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي بعناية المؤثرون على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي هم منشو محتوى عاديون يؤثرون على آراء متابعيهم من خلال منصات التواصل الاجتماعي. يكونون عادة خبراء في مجالات محددة. لديهم ما لا يقل عن ألف متابع ويشاركون حياتهم اليومية أو نصائحهم أو حيلهم على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. ومن الأمثلة عليهم المؤثرون في مجال نمط الحياة والمؤثرون في مجال الموضة ومعلمو اللياقة البدنية وغيرهم.
Do you follow at least one social media influencer? Yes No	هل تتابع مؤثراً واحداً على الأقل على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي؟ نعم لا
In the box below, please name your favourite influencer that you have been following for more than three months	في المربع أدناه، يرجى تسمية المؤثر المفضل لديك والذي تتابعه منذ أكثر من ثلاثة أشهر
Which of the following social media platforms do you use to follow your favourite influencer? Snapchat Instagram TikTok YouTube	أي من منصات التواصل الاجتماعي التالية تستخدمها لمتابعة المؤثر المفضل لديك؟ سناپ شات الانستغرام تيك توك يوتيوب
To what extent do you agree with the following statements about {{Q4}}'s popularity? Strongly disagree Disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Agree Strongly Agree	إلى أي مدى توافق على العبارات التالية حول شعبية {{Q4}}؟ غير موافق بشدة غير موافق غير موافق إلى حد ما محايد موافق إلى حد ما موافق موافق بشدة
{{Q4}} is famous	{{Q4}} مشهور



نخلى ترانس سكوب مسؤوليتها إذا كان هناك أي تعديل أو كسح أو خدش في النص المترجم

العنوان: حي العقاد، بجوار سجل مدني مركز إصدار البطاقات الشخصية، مقابل للمستشفى العسكري، عمارة 1، شقة 2، أسوان، مصر

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Appendix 15: Letter of Ethics Approval



Marketing, Branding & Tourism REC

The Burroughs
Hendon
London NW4 4BT

Main Switchboard: 0208 411 5000

04/04/2022

APPLICATION NUMBER: 18375

Dear Tareq Saadoon Guwir Aldimi and all collaborators/co-investigators

Re your application title: Mixed - Influencer Marketing on Snapchat

Supervisor: Shing-Wan Chang, Franco Beschizza, Costas Priporas

Co-investigators/collaborators:

Thank you for submitting your application. I can confirm that your application has been given APPROVAL from the date of this letter by the Marketing, Branding & Tourism REC.

The following documents have been reviewed and approved as part of this research ethics application:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Participant Recruitment Information	Invitation Letter		
Materials	Tareq Saadoon Guwir Aldimi Interview Guide V2 - FINAL		
Data Protection Declaration	Data Protection Checklist and Declaration Form		
Informed Consent Form	MLO Consent Form		
Informed Consent Form	MLO Consent and PIS Minimal Risk		
Informed Consent Form	MLO PIS template		
Resubmission Response to Feedback Summary	Resubmission Feedback Summary		

Although your application has been approved, the reviewers of your application may have made some useful comments on your application. Please look at your online application again to check whether the reviewers have added any comments for you to look at.

Also, please note the following:

1. Please ensure that you contact your supervisor/research ethics committee (REC) if any changes are made to the research project which could affect your ethics approval. There is an Amendment sub-form on MORE that can be completed and submitted to your REC for further review.
2. You must notify your supervisor/REC if there is a breach in data protection management or any issues that arise that may lead to a health and safety concern or conflict of interests.
3. If you require more time to complete your research, i.e., beyond the date specified in your application, please complete the Extension sub-form on MORE and submit it your REC for review.
4. Please quote the application number in any correspondence.

5. It is important that you retain this document as evidence of research ethics approval, as it may be required for submission to external bodies (e.g., NHS, grant awarding bodies) or as part of your research report, dissemination (e.g., journal articles) and data management plan.

6. Also, please forward any other information that would be helpful in enhancing our application form and procedures - please contact MOREsupport@mdx.ac.uk to provide feedback.

Good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely

Chair Prof Charles Dennis and Dr Costas Priporas

Marketing, Branding & Tourism REC

Appendix 16: Coding for the Control Variables

Variable	Coded as
Gender	1 for male 2 for female
Age	1 for 18-25 2 for 26-35 3 for 36-45 4 for 46-55
Time spent on social media every day	1 for 0-5 minutes 2 for 5-15 minutes 3 for 15-30 minutes 4 for 30-60 minutes 5 for 1-2 hours 6 for 2-3 hours 7 more than 3 hours