

# **Exploring How Followers' Verification Behavior Influence Sharing Decisions: The Role of Source, Content, and Audience Factors**

## **Abstract**

Due to the pervasive use of social media platforms, firms use Social Media Influencers (SMIs) to exploit the massive number of social media users to promote their products and services. The success of influencer marketing remains in strong influencer–follower engagement. One method to engage with SMIs is through sharing their content. Yet, little has been investigated about the factors that encourage followers' sharing decisions. This article addresses this gap by adopting the Communication Persuasion Matrix (CPM) to identify factors related to the source, message, and audience. Moreover, it explores how followers' verification behavior influences their sharing behavior, employing digital media literacy to understand how followers evaluate and verify SMIs' content. Based on 21 semi-structured interviews, this qualitative study's findings conclude that factors like source popularity, content creativity, audience personal values, and self-efficacy influence followers' sharing behavior. The results also suggest a framework that links verification behavior to sharing behavior and demonstrates that verification behavior is important when engaging with SMIs.

**Keywords:** Social media influencers, influencer marketing, engagement, sharing behavior, Communication Persuasion Matrix, verification behavior.

## 1. Introduction

Influencer marketing is a novel form of social media marketing and can be defined as compensating Social Media Influencers (SMIs) for posting about a product or service on their social media portals (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This marketing enables marketers to leverage SMIs' assets (e.g., number of followers, authenticity, credibility) and interact with their followers at a personal level (Leung et al., 2022a). Moreover, sharing similar interests with their followers gives SMIs additional influence, making them especially attractive to marketers (Ren et al., 2023). Therefore, it is unsurprising that businesses increasingly turn towards SMIs to drive their marketing campaigns' effectiveness.

As collaborations between brands and SMIs become increasingly popular, SMIs' ability to generate engagement has become pronounced among researchers and practitioners. Moreover, the success of influencer marketing remains in strong influencer–follower engagement (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Industry reports have revealed that growing engagement is a top objective and the most important metric of success of influencer marketing (Santora, 2023). High engagement signifies that followers actively interact with SMIs' posts, a sign of loyalty to the SMI (Chen et al., 2023). Consequently, it benefits SMIs in gaining fame and personal branding (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). Additionally, social media platforms' algorithms prioritize posts with higher engagement levels to reach more users. Both SMIs and marketers value behavioral engagement, which is usually used for evaluating the effectiveness of SMIs (Leung et al., 2022a). Thus, we examine this form of follower-influencer engagement in this research study.

A limited number of studies have assessed the factors that stimulate follower engagement with the posts generated by SMIs. Some studies examined engagement as part of electronic-Word-of-Mouth (*eWOM*) (e.g., Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Taillon et al., 2020), while most studies focus on engagement with endorsed brands rather than engaging with SMIs (e.g.,

Hughes et al., 2019; Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019; Onofrei et al., 2022; Cheung et al., 2022b; Ren et al., 2023), despite much of the content posted by SMIs is typically of organic and non-commercial nature (Audrezet et al., 2018; Filieri et al., 2023; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Furthermore, studies exploring the unique follower-influencer engagement do not distinguish between various engagement behavior types offered by social media platforms (*i.e.*, *likes*, *comments*, and *shares*) (e.g., Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Chen et al., 2023), although research indicates that each engagement behavior serves a specific purpose (Li & Xie, 2020). More specifically, Kim & Yang (2017) asserted that sharing is the highest level of engagement as it integrates affective approval and cognitively triggered behavior. Consequently, engagement in sharing SMIs' posts has not been a primary focus in previous studies. By understanding the drivers of sharing behavior, 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). It is therefore in marketers best interest to understand factors promoting sharing behaviour among SMIs' followers.

In this paper, we employ the Communication Persuasion Matrix (CPM) concepts which treat *source*, *message*, *audience*, *channel*, and *destination* as determinants of persuasive communication and message effectiveness (McGuire, 2001) Our research study argues that follower engagement is influenced by factors related to the *source* (SMI), *message* (content), and *audience* (followers). Previous research indicates those three factors are crucial for persuasive SMI campaigns (Hudders et al., , 2020; Lou et al., 2022). Sharing SMIs' content on social media rationalizes the concept that the characteristics of the SMI, content, and follower are all core of the sharing process (Cheung et al., 2022a; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Thus, it raises the first research question of this study: (1) what are the specific attributes related to the SMI, content, and followers influencing followers' sharing behavior?

As followers become savvier, they tend to distrust what SMIs say recently (Ki et al., 2022). The more commercialized the SMI ecosystem becomes, the more followers question the organic and commercial nature of the content shared by an SMI. Therefore, followers of SMIs might view their content skeptically and attempt to validate its authenticity. Such skepticism must be considered when employing SMI campaigns (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Verification behavior refers to the tendency to verify the factuality of content (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). Past research studies on influencer marketing overlooked the issue of followers' verification behavior. This research gap offers to investigate a valuable yet insufficiently explored research area, as followers' verification behavior might threaten the persuasiveness of SMIs and influence how they engage with SMIs. Moreover, since sharing a post necessitates more cognitive effort than other engagement activities, such as *commenting* or *liking* (Kim & Yang, 2017), followers are more committed to evaluating the post's value before engaging. Thus, it raises our second research question: how does followers' verification behavior influence their sharing decisions? To address this, we employ the concept of digital media literacy (Livingstone, 2004; Maksl et al., 2015), which provides a theoretical lens to explain verification behavior.

To answer these two research questions, we collected qualitative data from twenty-one (21) participants who actively follow SMIs. Our study contributes to the influencer marketing literature by advancing the use of the CPM in online engagement behavior, focusing on exploring the *source*, *content*, and *audience* factors. Specifically, to the best of our knowledge, this research is among primary studies that explicitly explore the factors encouraging followers to engage and share SMIs' posts. We also explored novel factors related to the SMIs' audience, such as personal values and self-efficacy. Moreover, this research is among the first to introduce the concept of verification behavior to the influencer marketing literature. It also employs digital media literacy, particularly to explain verification behavior and its effect on

sharing behavior. This research additionally presents a framework that links followers' verification behavior to their sharing behavior. Methodologically, our research contributes qualitatively to the existing literature, which predominantly focuses on quantitative methods. Furthermore, understanding the drivers of sharing might help marketers partner with SMIs who get high shares. Our findings also help marketers comprehend how followers' verification behavior influences their engagement decisions.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: First, we review the relevant literature on influencer marketing, sharing behavior, and verification behavior. Next, we introduce the theoretical framework. Then we discuss the research methodology. Thereafter, we present the key empirical findings. Next, the findings are discussed in comparison with other studies. Finally, we present the conclusions and the relevant theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and future research directions.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Influencer marketing*

Influencer marketing is a persuasion strategy by which SMIs help brands to persuade followers to transform their attitudes and behaviors (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021), thus achieving a company's business objectives. Consumers' growing skepticism toward traditional marketing has made it challenging for businesses to entice and influence consumers (Leung et al., 2022a). Studies comparing traditional celebrities to SMIs found that SMIs are more influential (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), credible (Al-Emadi & Ben Yahia, 2020), and generate more engagement (Ahmadi & Ieamsom, 2022).

Research on influencer marketing has grown exponentially over the past few years (Vrontis et al., 2021). Recent studies explored various factors elaborating on its impact on consumer behaviors, such as SMIs' credibility (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019), authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018), the *parasocial-*

relationship between SMIs and followers (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Sokolova & Perez, 2021; Reinikainen et al., 2020), product–influencer fit (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021), advertisement disclosure (Boerman, 2020; Breves et al., 2021), and influencer types (*e.g.*, micro- mega-influencers) (Park et al., 2021). However, most research in the field takes a brand perspective, ignoring the outcomes of SMI campaigns on followers' engagement toward SMI content. Researchers have suggested that it is vital to comprehend how SMI contents impact their followers' intentions and behavior beyond commonly investigated outcomes such as purchase intentions (Sokolova & Perez, 2021).

## 2.2. *Engaging and sharing SMIs' posts*

SMIs' ability to target and affect many followers has attracted marketers (Vrontis et al., 2021). More significantly, they can promote engagement among their followers (Ren et al., 2023), who engage with SMIs via three behaviors—*like*, *comment*, and *share*. In this study, we focus on the sharing behavior, defined as the extent to which a follower shares an SMI's post. When many people engage and share a post, it is more likely to be visible to others, increasing the post's reach, and helping marketers earn free online exposure (Yang & Wang, 2015). Posts that are continuously shared provides insight into what content the audience prefers. This can be done through the “*share*” button that differs among various social media platforms. A post-sharing activity may occur across multiple platforms, enhancing the post's visibility. However, the sharing process halts if the SMI's post does not persuade followers to pass it along. Thus, marketers should explore the factors determining a follower's sharing decision.

Sharing content on social media has been discussed interchangeably with other terms in the literature, such as *eWOM*, *referrals*, and *engagement* (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). Whether incentivized or not, *referrals* occur when a current customer or user recommends a brand, product, or service to others

(Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Lastly, *engagement* (also known as digital engagement) measures how responsive are followers to SMIs' content manifested in behaviours such as *commenting*, *liking*, and *sharing* (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). A study by Li & Xie (2020) categorized engagement on social media into two types: (1) direct responses such as *likes* and *comments* and (2) sharing of the original post. More specifically, Kim & Yang (2017) asserted that *sharing* is the highest level of engagement among the three engagement behaviors (*i.e.*, *likes*, *comments*, and *shares*) as it combines affective approval feelings and cognitively triggered behavior. However, sharing content online may not strictly involve explicit recommendations. In fact, the majority of shared SMIs' content is organic and non-commercial (Audrezet et al., 2018; Filieri et al., 2023; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Organic engagement is generally recognized as more memorable and trustworthy (Harmeling et al., 2017).

We classify literature into two parts for this study. First, determinants to share content online have been studied in various digital domains such as forwarding content on the Internet in general (Ho & Dempsey, 2010), passing along emails (Phelps et al., 2004), news sharing (Lee & Ma, 2012), and retweeting on *Twitter* (Suh et al., 2010). Past research signified multiple factors related to the source, content, and audience characteristics driving content sharing. For example, a study by Chiang & Hsiao (2015) specified that reputation, self-efficacy, and self-expression are predicated on sharing videos on *YouTube*. In the context of *Twitter*, Suh et al. (2010) demonstrated that many followers positively affected the likelihood of a tweet being shared. In Boehmer & Tandoc (2015), the authors 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. Tellis et al. (2019) suggested that surprising and inspiring posts drives sharing of online digital content. Nonetheless, most existing studies fail to acknowledge characteristics unique to the SMI

context. Hence, there is a need to incorporate additional features to comprehend the process of engaging and sharing SMIs' posts.

Secondly, more recent research explored SMIs' persuasive power to boost positive eWOM communications and engagement. Specifically, Hwang & Zhang (2018) found that *parasocial* relationships with SMIs increased *eWOM* intention. Moreover, research by Cheung et al. (2022b) studied the impact of motivational factors (*i.e.*, entertainment, information seeking, social interaction, and reward) on consumer-brand engagement behaviors. Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández (2019) concluded that perceived SMI power enhanced brand engagement. Also, Hughes et al. (2019) differentiated between engagement on blogs vs. *Facebook* and found that source (expertise), content (*hedonic* value of post), and trial (campaign intent; giveaways) characteristics drive engagement on blogs, while on *Facebook*, it is caused by *hedonic* value and trial campaigns. Onofrei et al. (2022) found that source factors (credibility and homophily) positively predict behavioural engagement, while content factors (quality) did not. While Ren et al. (2023) classified SMIs into entertainers and informers and showed that entertainers attract more brand engagement. Furthermore, using data from publicly available SMI profiles, Tafesse & Wood (2021) observed that the number of followers and content volume adversely impact engagement with SMIs. Finally, Chen et al., (2023) demonstrated that clear sponsorship disclosure drives followers' engagement with SMIs.

Despite these studies, knowledge about factors influencing followers sharing behavior is limited in the literature. For example, past studies rarely differentiate between various engagement activities (*i.e.*, *like*, *comment*, *share*). Likewise, most studies addressing source and content characteristics rarely refer to audience-specific aspects. Thus, to contribute to the academic literature, we explore the source, content, and audience factors that specifically trigger followers' sharing behavior. Therefore, an in-depth-qualitative investigation is required to document these factors.

### 2.3. Verification behavior

Followers usually rely on SMIs to get information on products and services and expect them to provide genuine details (Lou & Kim, 2019). However, the openness of participation in user-generated online information has enhanced the probability of poor-quality content (Lin et al., 2016). 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 & Metzger, 2007). Therefore, the lack of sufficient control mechanisms on social media information has led to concerns about its credibility (Dabbous et al., 2022). Thus, followers might tend to fact-check what SMIs claim.

Acknowledging followers' uncertainty toward SMIs, studies such as Ki et al., (2022) and Cabeza-Ramírez et al. (2022) motivated future research to explore variables that might adversely impact followers' behavior towards SMIs. A growing body of research has indeed begun to investigate the growing suspicion towards SMIs. For example, 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 skeptical of influencer marketing if they see brand endorsements mixed in SMIs' posts (Jamil & Qayyum, 2022; Reinikainen et al., 2020). 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., 2022b). Moreover, Balaban & Mustăţea (2019) indicated that too many sponsored SMI posts can trigger consumers' suspicion of the SMIs' branded content. While some SMIs will try to hide their commercial intent as it may provoke resistance among their followers (Boerman, 2020). Such practices (or mistakes) can lead to '*cancelling*' the SMI, where followers unfollow the SMI and encourage others to do so (Lee & Abidin, 2021). This, eventually, might harm SMIs' reputation and the brands they

endorse. The aforementioned evidence might strengthen followers' verification behaviour because of the perception that SMI's endorsements are misleading.

Since sharing a SMIs' post requires more cognitive effort than other engagement activities (*i.e., commenting, liking*), we can assume that followers are more committed to assessing the post's value before sharing it (Kim & Yang, 2017). Verification behavior is how a user confirms the veracity of information witnessed on social media (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Majerczak & 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 & 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 et al., 2018). Utilizing a cross-cultural study in Lebanon and Spain, Dabbous et al. (2022) demonstrated that verification behaviour has a positive influence on fake news detection in both countries. Another study found that fake news awareness, followed by the intention to share are antecedents of verification behaviour (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022). Overall, the research studies reviewed thus far suggests a possible link between followers' verification behaviour and engaging with SMIs. Metzger et al. (2003) argues that there remains a great deal of research to be performed on online verification behaviour by internet users Therefore, we investigate the potential impact of verification behavior on followers' sharing decisions on social media.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### *3.1. Limitations of existing theories on sharing behavior*

The phenomenon of information sharing has been studied across various disciplines, leading to the development of multiple theories (Charband and Jafari Navimipour, 2016). Prominent among these are the Theory of Reason Action (TRA), Social Exchange Theory (SET), and Social Contagion Theory, each of which offers valuable insights into general

sharing behaviors. However, these theories fall short in explaining sharing behaviors within the unique context of SMIs. For example, TRA states that behavior is predicted by intentions, which are functions of the individual'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.

SET posits that individuals engage in sharing behavior as a rational calculation of rewards and costs (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964). For example, followers might share content to gain social approval, enhance their self-image, or strengthen relationships. While SET effectively captures external motivations, it overlooks intrinsic factors such as cultural alignment or personal values which play critical roles related to the audience in SMI campaigns. Lastly, Social Contagion Theory focuses on the spread of ideas, behaviors, and emotions through social networks (Christakis and Fowler 2013). It highlights the importance of emotional triggers, such as humour, surprise, or inspiration, in driving content virality. Although useful for understanding the diffusion of content, this theory assumes uniformity in audience responses and does not consider individual differences, such as skepticism or digital literacy. For example, a follower's decision to share an SMI's post may depend not only on the emotional appeal of the content but also on how well it resonates with their personal values. These limitations highlight the need for a more integrative framework that considers the interplay of source, message, and audience factors, as offered by the CPM.

### *3.2. Categorizing factors influencing sharing behavior using CPM*

Arguably, social media engagement is essentially about communication (Xie-Carson, Benckendorff and Hughes, 2023) and influencer marketing is a persuasive type of communication. When followers engage with SMIs, it likely specifies effective persuasion

attempts. Persuasion theories have long been applied to marketing and advertising to learn how behavior can be triggered, transformed, or retained (e.g., Hovland & Janis, 1959). This study adheres to the CPM (McGuire, 2001) to evaluate and classify the factors inciting positive persuasive outcomes. Moreover, it presents the most comprehensive description of the relevant variables constituting the outcome of a compelling communication situation. The CPM proposes that antecedents of persuasive communication incorporate five classes of input variables: (i) the *source*, (ii) the *message*, (iii) the *audience*, (iv) the *channel*, and (v) the *destination* (McGuire, 2001). These factors function in the influencer marketing context in the following ways: SMIs are the *source* of persuasive communication. Followers of SMIs are the *audience*. *Channel* refers to the media or the platform on which the persuasive communication is performed (e.g., *Instagram*, *Twitter*, or *Snapchat*). Finally, *destination* variables concern the targeted attitudes, beliefs, actions, or behaviors persuasive communication seeks. Building on past engagement literature (e.g., Boehmer & Tandoc, 2015; Onofrei et al., 2022), we analyze three factors from the CPM, namely: *source* (SMI), *message* (content), and *audience* (followers). Existing literature suggests that those three factors are essential for persuasive SMI campaigns to occur (Hudders et al., , 2020; Lou et al., 2022). Because sharing SMIs' content on social media occurs when one follower shares content with other users, it is reasonable to consider that the characteristics of the SMI, content, and follower are all core of the sharing process (Cheung et al., 2022a; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

*Source* factors are the SMI's characteristics that can increase acceptance and persuasion in the endorsement process (Ohanian, 1990). *Content* factors include the various techniques and tactics that SMIs utilize in persuasive communication to influence their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Lastly, *audience* factors are followers' personal characteristics that influence how they cope with persuasive communication, including factors related to their ability, values, and

personality (McGuire, 1989). Understanding followers' characteristics is vital since deciding to engage and share influencers' content is entirely voluntary (Ho & Dempsey, 2010).

Few studies investigated the CPM in the SMI literature, as summarised in Table 1. For instance, Lou & Yuan (2019) focused on *source* and *message* factors and urged researchers to incorporate other factors related to SMIs' followers (*i.e.*, *values* and *personality*). Lou et al., (2019) examined the role of the *source* (*i.e.*, *SMI* vs. *brand*) in generating engagement with the *ad*. In summary, these studies could not ascertain how *source*, *content*, and *audience* factors influence followers' sharing decisions within the SMI context. Therefore, our research aims to explore the use of the CPM in the engagement literature.

Table 1: Past studies adopting the CPM in the influencer marketing literature.

Authors	Factors examined using CPM	Outcome	Methodology	Findings
Lou & Yuan (2019)	<i>Source</i> : Trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and similarity  <i>Message</i> : Informative value and entertainment value	Brand awareness and purchase intention	Survey	Trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness positively impact brand awareness.  Trustworthiness, similarity, informative value, and entertainment value positively impact purchase intention.
Lou et al., (2019)	<i>Source</i> : SMI vs. brand-promoted ads	Followers' engagement with ads	Text analysis	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 & Peng (2021)	<i>Source</i> : Attractiveness, expertise, originality, homophily, and interaction	Image satisfaction and advertising trust	Survey	Attractiveness, expertise, originality, and homophily positively impact image satisfaction. Expertise, originality, homophily, and interaction positively impact advertising trust.

Kapoor et al., (2021)	<i>Source:</i> SMI vs. hotel <i>Message:</i> sensual vs. guilt	Intention to stay at the hotel and travelers' perceptions	Experiment	<p>The message with the sensual appeal is more persuasive when the hotel posts it on social media.</p> <p>The message with the guilt appeal is more effective when the SMI posts it on behalf of the hotel on social media.</p>
Shamim & 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	<p>Informational value, vicarious expression, and perceived transparency positively impact trust in influencer posts.</p> <p>Informational value and perceived interactivity positively impact the urge to buy.</p>

### 3.3. Digital Media literacy, verification, and sharing

To explain the relationship between verification behavior and sharing behavior, we draw on the concept of digital media literacy. Digital media literacy extends beyond traditional media literacy, which focused on interpreting mediated messages (Park, 2012). In contrast, digital media require a broader skill set, including the ability to critically evaluate content, navigate diverse platforms, and understand social and cultural contexts (Livingstone, 2004). Digital media literacy equips individuals with the skills necessary to assess the quality of information, identify biases, and verify claims by consulting reliable sources (Maksl et al., 2015; Carlsson, 2019). In the context of social media, these skills are essential for navigating the unregulated and often misleading content generated by SMIs. Individuals with high digital media literacy are more likely to engage in verification behavior when exposed to SMI-generated content, particularly when credibility is uncertain. This process of verification helps them evaluate whether a post aligns with their values and warrants sharing with their networks. Conversely, those with lower levels of digital media literacy may skip verification steps, increasing the likelihood of sharing unverified or low-quality content.

Thus, digital media literacy provides the cognitive foundation for verification behavior, which in turn is likely to influence sharing behavior. By critically evaluating content, followers with high media literacy are better equipped to make informed decisions about sharing posts, ensuring that their engagement aligns with both their personal standards and the expectations of their audience.

## **4. Methods**

### *4.1. Data collection*

Given the lack of past studies and the exploratory nature of this study, we adopted a qualitative approach to obtain a comprehensive understanding of various factors that inspire followers to engage and share SMIs' posts. Qualitative research allows the researcher to obtain comprehensive information on the researched concepts and aims to gain insights to advance theory, rather than derive statistical inference (Bryman, 2016). Thus, conducting an exploratory study would help develop deeper insights and gives the confidence that the researcher is addressing issues deemed important to the participants. While quantitative studies can provide important information about the prevalence and correlates of engagement, they may not capture the richness and complexity of individuals' experiences. Systematic reviews in the field of influencer marketing indicate a lack of qualitative research (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021). Specifically, Silva et al. (2020) urged future research to conduct interviews to advance our knowledge of engagement between SMIs and their followers. Exploring engagement through qualitative methods, such as interviews, can provide valuable insights into the subjective experiences and perspectives of SMI followers (Saunders et al., 2019).

This study was performed in the Saudi Arabian context for three reasons. First, the number of social media users in Saudi Arabia is 29.5 million - equivalent to 81% of the total population. These users spend an average of three hours and 24 minutes daily on social media (Statista, 2022b). Second, 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), making them a suitable sample for our study. Third, past studies on influencer marketing overlooked the issue of cultural differences (Zhou et al., 2021) and most recent studies have been conducted in Western and East Asian contexts (Vrontis et al., 2021). Therefore, the investigation in the Arab context complements a currently skewed interpretation of influencer marketing.

We utilized a literature review, research gaps, and the CPM to develop and design the interview guide structure, which includes twelve questions with preambles to ensure respondents' comprehension. We divided the interview guide into four sections. The first section comprises demographic and '*icebreaking*' questions about the participants' favorite SMI and their methods to check content updates. In the second section, we introduce the notion of sharing content on social platforms. The third section describes the *source*, *content*, and *followers'* factors contributing to the participants' sharing behavior. Finally, the last section describes participants' verification behavior.

We utilized convenience sampling and snowballing techniques to acquire a sample of over 18-year-old participants who follow at least one SMI. Non-probability convenience and snowballing sampling are widespread in marketing and has been employed in some exploratory influencer marketing studies (e.g., Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Next, we recruited participants with the help of two Saudi lifestyle SMIs: FA, 100k followers, and MA, 900K followers. The number of followers might have increased or decreased after the time of data collection. They were chosen because they represent two different categories (*i.e.*, micro- and mega-influencers); thereby, the study will benefit from two distinct viewpoints with diverse approaches (*i.e.*, low reach - high engagement vs. high reach - low engagement).

The interviews were conducted via *Zoom* from April to May 2022 and lasted 28 minutes on average. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as participants express their views easily

when the questions are flexible and open-ended (Flick, 2007). The interviews were conducted in *Arabic* by the first author, a native speaker of Arabic who is also fluent in English.

The study applied the principle of data saturation (Bowen, 2008); namely, a sample size of 21 participants (twelve males and nine females) was deemed to have achieved the saturation criterion. Various age groups were represented in the sample ranging from 21 to 47 years old, with 21-30 as the most dominant age group. This age category aligns with the largest proportion of social media users in Saudi Arabia (GMI, 2022). Moreover, 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 diploma, one had an MBA degree, and one held a PhD. In addition, fourteen participants were employees, six were students, and one was unemployed.

Ethical approval was granted before we undertook the research. We presented a debrief sheet and an informed consent form to sign before participating, informing them that they could withdraw at any time. Moreover, we assured them there were no wrong or right answers and that data would be deleted after the project was awarded. After the consent, the interviews were audio recorded to improve data collection accuracy since it allows the interviewer to be more attentive to the interviewee (Priporas et al., 2017) and allows verbatim transcription. The transcripts used a coded number for each participant to ensure anonymity, also used in the findings and discussion section.

#### *4.2. Data analysis*

The semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to explore themes in the study (Saunders et al., 2019). This method is more flexible than other exploratory study methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and is widely adopted in influencer marketing (e.g., Al-Emadi & Ben Yahia, 2020; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). This study employed three elementary analytic processes: open, axial, and selective coding, as recommended by (Saunders et al., 2019). Open coding is the first step toward discovering themes and their properties (Corbin &

Strauss, 1990). In *open* coding, codes are identified, labeled, categorized, and related in an outline form. In the *axial* coding stage, the correlation among themes was explicitly stated, examined, and categorized (Williams & Moser, 2019). Finally, in *selective* coding, categories generated during open and axial coding are integrated and refined (Saunders et al., 2019).

To assist with the open, axial, and selective coding processes, we employed NVivo 12, a widely used qualitative data management program compatible with thematic analysis and other qualitative methods (Zamawe, 2015). NVivo facilitated the organization and coding of data, reducing subjectivity and enhancing analytical rigor. The coding was conducted by the first author, who is familiar with both the data and the Saudi cultural context. To ensure reliability, the emergent themes and coding framework were iteratively reviewed and validated through discussions with the co-authors. This collaborative review process ensured consistency and rigor in the coding, aligning with the flexibility of thematic analysis, which emphasizes iterative refinement and cross-validation over rigid procedural adherence (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Table 2 presents the determined themes and codes.

Table 2: The established themes and codes as per the collected data

<b>Open Codes (direct quotes)</b>	<b>Axial codes (subthemes)</b>	<b>Selective coding (themes)</b>
Number of followers, well-known, likable, popular, unknown, special-not-known, benchmark	SMI popularity	Source factors
Repetitive, new, unique, unexpected, quality, outside the box, boredom, clones, freedom	Creativity	Content factors
Family-oriented, religious, focus on culture, doing social good, charities, obeying parents, obeying the rules	Personal values	Audience factors
Confidence, easy access, getting better, know the trick, fake influencers, finding influencers, straightforward	Self-efficacy	

## 5. Research Findings

This section evaluates the findings from the primary research. The analysis determined notable themes and arranged them into the two research questions such as: The factors that impact followers' sharing decisions and the influence of followers' verification behaviour on the sharing process.

All participants expressed that they watch SMIs' posts daily. In addition, most participants said they use *Snapchat* as a social media platform to follow SMIs, followed by other platforms like *Instagram* and *TikTok*. It is logical since Saudi Arabia has one of the biggest *Snapchat* audience reach in the world (Statista, 2021) and 56% of Saudis are on *Snapchat* (Statista, 2022a). The most followed categories of SMIs were *lifestyle* (n= 12), *beauty* (n= 5), *traveling* (n= 5), and *storytelling* (n= 3). Table 3 presents the participants interviewed for the qualitative data and shows sufficient breadth in the sample for the interviews.

Table 3: The participants' profiles and the details of the semi-structured interview

ID	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Education	Job Status	Frequency of Watching SMIs' Posts	Frequency of Sharing SMIs' Posts
01	Female	27	Single	Bachelor	Full-time employee + businesswomen	Once a day	Once a day
02	Female	23	Married	High School	Student	Twice a day	More than once a day
03	Male	32	Single	Masters	Full-time employee	Once a day	Once a day
04	Male	47	Married	Bachelor	Full-time employee	Twice a day	Once a day
05	Male	38	Married	MBA	Full-time employee	Twice a day	Once a day
06	Male	25	Single	Masters	Student	Once a day	Every two days
07	Male	26	Single	Bachelor	Full-time employee	Twice a day	Every two days
08	Male	33	Single	Masters	Full-time employee	Once a day	Every two days
09	Male	27	Single	Bachelor	Part-time employee	Twice a day	Four times a day
10	Female	25	Single	High School	Student	Once a day	Ten times a day
11	Female	21	Single	High School	Student	Once a day	Three times a day
12	Male	33	Single	Bachelor	Full-time employee	Every few hours	Five times a day
13	Female	31	Single	Bachelor	Unemployed	Twice a day	Once a day
14	Female	19	Single	High School	Student	Daily	Every two days
15	Female	36	Single	PhD	Full-time employee	Twice a day	More than once a day
16	Male	27	Single	Bachelor	Student	Five times a day	2 -7 times a day
17	Male	28	Single	Masters	Full-time employee	Four times a day	7 - 8 times a day
18	Male	34	Single	Bachelor	Full-time employee	20 times a day	Fifteen times a day
19	Male	24	Single	Masters	Full-time employee	Once a day	Once a day
20	Female	27	Single	Masters	Self-employed	Twice a day	Few times a week

21	Female	28	Single	Masters	Full-time employee	Once a day	Once a week
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The frequency of sharing SMIs' posts among participants ranged from over fifteen times a day to once a week. Participants primarily share posts with their friends, family, and rarely co-workers. The most shared category was *entertainment*, followed by *informative* posts. Past studies also concluded that people prefer to forward entertaining messages (Phelps et al., 2004; Tellis et al., 2019). Moreover, some participants acknowledged that they cross-share content between social platforms, such as *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *TikTok*, and *WhatsApp*. Furthermore, most participants admitted to sharing content with peers with similar interests.

### 5.1. Factors influencing followers' sharing decisions

In response to the *source*, *content*, and *audience* factors influencing the participants' sharing behavior towards SMIs' posts, the interview discussion presents that the most important factors were *source* popularity, *content* creativity, and the *audience's* personal values and self-efficacy.

#### 5.1.1. Source factor: SMIs' popularity

Popularity is defined as the extent to which an SMI is popular and has accumulated several followers on a social media platform. We adopted the classification by Campbell & Farrell (2020) by categorizing SMIs into mega-influencers (over 1 million), macro-influencers (100k-1 million), and micro-influencers (10-100k). According to the participants, micro-influencers are more desirable and will likely influence their sharing decisions. For instance, Participant 07 stated: *"If he has a low number of followers but high content quality, I trust his content will be worth sharing because it's not purely commercial; I can sense that."* Other participants mentioned a certain appeal in SMIs with fewer followers: *"I think there's a certain magic of influencers having fewer followers, giving you the feeling of finding a special-not-known to many people."* (Participant 16). The participants exhibited loyalty to micro-

influencers stating that even if they knew that the micro-influencer was sponsored, they still shared and supported small SMIs if it supported their cause: *"Whenever I see an unpopular influencer, it tells me that the influencer is working hard on himself. Therefore, I support and only follow small influencers. The content I share is mainly from not widely known influencers"* (Participant 14).

Micro-influencers will likely exert greater sharing decisions due to followers' perceptions of them being more genuine and authentic. On the contrary, mega-influencers might lack perceived authenticity, and their followership is perceived as only *superficial* *"I prefer those with few followers. I do believe that most mega-influencers can be a bit fake or reserved in a way. They usually have to act in a certain way to please their followers and avoid criticism. I like those who are unapologetically themselves."* (Participant 15). Therefore, more followers do not always imply influence and a better impact on the SMI's endorsement. On the contrary, consumers might identify themselves with micro-influencers more than macro- and mega-influencers: *"If the influencer is wearing a certain brand, I want to be able to buy it. Famous influencers often advertise high-end brands which are too expensive. I know my friends will not buy them either; thus, I will not even share them with them. Yet, small influencers usually advertise clothes that we wear every day."* (Participant 9). When SMIs have many followers, it might not be convenient for them to interact with each follower. Thus, this might indicate that SMIs engage less with their audience. Participant 17 mentioned that it is futile to interact with popular SMIs since they would not respond or notice: *"Why would I even share [name's] content if he won't even know? We are just making them more famous, literally. Thank you, I prefer more natural influencers who are just like me."*

### 5.1.2. Content factor: Content Creativity

A prevalent content factor throughout the interviews was *creativity*. Most participants mentioned that SMIS must create unexpected and original ideas that are different from other

competing SMIs. In contrast, uncreative content might lead to boredom and lack of intention to share: *"A lot of influencers are just clones, and they should be unfollowed. Some influencers are creative and come up with new ideas. However, there are only a few of them. This kind of content is worth sharing"* (Participant 04). Moreover, an association between the surprise element in SMIs' content and the decision to share their posts could be observed. For example, participant 19 explains: *"I want to surprise my friends with content that no one has ever seen. If no effort is made to create the content, why should someone care"*.

Furthermore, content creativity was also reflected by the quality of photos and videos presented in the SMI's content. Participant 01 referred to the aesthetics of her favorite SMI content and how it affects her engagement decisions. The following excerpt is quite representative: *"The way she takes photos and videos is unique. The way she presents also plays a role... Because these are the things that get my attention. Before sending it out to my friends, how you present content is important to me."* On the other hand, over-posting and repetition might reduce the effectiveness, which was evident in Participant 19's assertion: *"I do believe that most non-stop content posters' influencers' posts are invaluable. There is no point in sharing their content with my friends because it is repetitive. Therefore, I stick with the influencers that know exactly what to post."*

Influencer marketing rests in that SMIs create the type of content their follower base likes the most. SMIs typically share user-generated content in real-life authentic settings. Some participants stated that marketing agencies should have less control over SMIs' content to allow them to express their content creativity. *"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 working on some sponsored content. I believe every influencer should be themselves and should be creative. 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 nor in sharing."* (Participant 13).

### *5.1.3. Audience factor: Personal values*

The participants were invited to think about their personality and habits that leads them to engage and share their favourite SMI content. Most participants supported their personal values' impact on driving behavioral intentions. Online communities do not behave alone and have norms, beliefs, and cultures shared among them. The participants' personal values varied between family, culture, and religious affiliations. For example, Saudi Arabia's culture is dominantly traditional and conservative. However, the Saudi people generally share a firm moral code and cultural values, such as hospitality, loyalty, and community support (Klabi & Binzafrah, 2023). Specifically, family-oriented participants paid more attention to SMIs that exhibit affection for their families. Participants have mentioned the word 'family' more than 30 times. From this perspective, participant 04 stated that he favors family-oriented influencers: *"I mainly share his videos because of how he treats his family and older brothers. Because I see myself accepting such principles, I wish I follow him on such principles and be like him."* In the same context, Participant 10 stated: *"I am a family person. When I see my favorite influencer posting around her family, I tend to share it with my family."*

Besides family values, a few participants mentioned the importance of culture and how the SMI content should represent it. Participant 01 was inspired by her favorite SMI because she shows aspects of Saudi Arabian culture: *"I love her because she is showing what our culture has in Saudi Arabia; it's so inspiring. I send this kind of content to my foreign friends to show them our culture."* Participant 04 mentioned the role of religion and its role in following his favorite influencer: *"I am a religious person, and I like religious people. So, if they provide content aligning with our culture, I am definitely sharing."*

#### 5.1.4. Audience factor: Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as a person's judgment of their ability to execute a specific behavior (Hocevar et al., 2014). Most participants (N= 19) argued that if they could not utilize a particular social platform, this would impact how they engage with SMIs. They stated that someone with low self-efficacy would likely believe whatever SMIs claim and could not choose the right SMI for themselves. For instance, Participant 04 said: *"It would be difficult to find influencers that match your personality. Moreover, navigating through the influencer's content won't be easy. How you share depends on your knowledge of the app."* On Snapchat, the *Discover* tab (a special section that illustrates trending SMIs, equivalent to the *Explore* tab on *Instagram*) is one method to discover trending SMIs. In addition, Snapchat's algorithm features SMIs that amass a lot of engagements (*i.e.*, number of *shares*) during the last 24 hours. Participant 18 asserted that unless you are confident in your *Snapchat* abilities, you might randomly follow trending SMIs who post futile content and consequently share their content: *"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 this trick, so they keep following and sharing trending content from influencers."*

We encounter what Marwick (2013) calls edited personas on social media equipped with beautification filters. These filters alter the user's appearance by smoothening the skin, sharpening the nose, enlarging the eyes, and whitening the teeth. Some participants mentioned that users with low self-efficacy might not notice SMIs that deeply rely on beautification filters: *"My friend sent me this super attractive model; I was like, why can't you see that she used a filter? There is no way she looks like that in real life. Go learn!"* (Participant 12). Judgment in one's ability to spot fake SMIs is essential to decide whether to share. For instance, Participant 05 indicated: *"I never share apparently fake content. I believe those influencers' reality is far from the glamour associated with their content. I think it depends on our awareness as a*

*viewer/follower. Knowing how to use Snapchat greatly affects my evaluation of influencers because I know who is acting and faking."*

## *5.2. Verification behavior*

Followers' verification behavior was integral when engaging and sharing SMIs' posts. 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 behavior. Participant 21 argued that she does not investigate products that her favorite SMI recommended: *"I don't actually because I have tried many products recommended by her and it met my expectation. Therefore, I will not be reluctant to recommend."*

In contrast, having a prior negative experience with a certain product or service makes the verification process especially critical: *"If I already know it's bad, the influencer won't change my opinion."* (Participant 18). Moreover, 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, only then I can share the product with my friends. If it's only 'chit-chat' and no results, I must verify and seek others' opinions."* (Participant 07). Moreover, participant 16 realized the power of having a one-sided relationship with SMIs, better known as parasocial-relationship (Aw & Chuah, 2021): *"I think if I were to have a strong attachment, I wouldn't go out of my way to verify the information. I think of it as a real-life tangible relationship or friendship, where you take the person's word for granted."*

However, verification behavior 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. This was evident in participant 12 reply, who follows

medical doctors SMIs: *"Imagine [name] endorsed a product not related to his expertise, I will know that he just did it for the sake of money. It's dangerous to pass along such products to others. I have to do my part in the research."* For other participants, it occurred because they lacked trust in SMIs due to their commercial intent: *"Defo 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."* (Participant 09). We were also interested in whether verification status (i.e., emblem of verification; *blue tick* on *Instagram* and *TikTok*; yellow star on *Snapchat*) impacts their verification behavior. The participants had prior knowledge concerning the function of verification status (i.e., to assure that the account belongs to the person who is intended to be): *"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). Some participants mentioned that they tend to verify the information posted by verified SMIs because they perceive them as unauthentic. As Participant 15 said: *"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."*

Finally, the participants employed various techniques to validate the visual and verbal information posted by SMIs. For instance: asking for peers' opinions, browsing review websites, and using multiple social media platforms and search engines.

## **6. Discussion**

This study focused on various factors encouraging engagement with SMIs manifested in sharing behaviors among their followers. The CPM assumes that certain aspects related to the *source*, *content*, and *audience* impact the outcome of persuasive campaigns. Based on the CPM, we classified the findings into factors associated with SMI (i.e., popularity), content (i.e., creativity), and followers-specific features (i.e., personal values and self-efficacy). We also

attempted to shed light on the potential effects of verification behaviour on followers' sharing decisions.

Our study found that SMIs' with lower popularity are effective in engaging and sharing decisions. While past studies demonstrated that *Twitter* users with more followers are more likely to be retweeted (Suh et al., 2010) and SMIs with more followers lead to more positive attitudes toward them (De Veirman et al., 2017), yet recent studies have illustrated that micro-influencers (10,000 to 100,000 followers) are more persuasive than mega-influencers (+1 million followers) (Park et al., 2021). Although a higher follower count implies a broader reach, it is more likely to reduce followers' engagement likelihood (Wies, Bleier and Edeling, 2023). In addition, micro-influencers present higher perceptions of authenticity and transparency (Audrezet et al., 2018). Moreover, the lower the popularity, the greater the SMI's persuasive power and emotional connection with their followers (Conde & Casais, 2023). Specifically, followers tend to identify and share similar interests with micro-influencers, strengthening their *parasocial* relationships and eventually boosting engagement (Yuan & Lou, 2020). Contrarily, macro- and mega-influencers may lose intimate connections with their followers and fail to establish *parasocial* relationships (Aw & Chuah, 2021). Furthermore, due to these relationships, some participants become indifferent toward their favorite micro-influencer sponsorships (Chen et al., 2023). Overall, these insights complement the findings by (Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Park et al., 2021) and affirm that smaller SMIs may have higher engagement rates than the total number of followers and a more homogenous and loyal follower base. Moreover, this evidence also addresses recent appeals to explore the potential effects of follower count (Taylor, 2020; Ladhari et al., 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021).

The CPM suggests that factors related to the *content* can influence SMIs' persuasiveness. This study identified *creativity* as a focal content factor fostering sharing behaviors. Creative content incorporates original, surprising, and unexpected posts.

Specifically, Dobele et al. (2007) and Tellis et al. (2019) asserted that viral messages must contain surprise elements. They also observed that uncreative content trigger less engagement. Creativity was also associated with high-quality posts, which aligns with findings by Li and Xie (2020) that high-quality posts encourage engagement. The results also reveal that an SMI who posts more content is perceived with low content creativity and ultimately deters followers from sharing their content. It resonates with Tafesse & Wood (2021), who found that content volume adversely influences followers' engagement. Our findings also resonate with the work of Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018), which highlights how creative content strengthens followers' intention to engage with social media posts. Moreover, our findings support the conclusions of Cheung et al. (2022a), demonstrating that creative content drives followers' intention to consume, contribute, and create content on endorsed brands' social media platforms. This study's findings also signify that brands and marketing agencies should give SMIs the freedom to express and create content in their own way. Engagement is unlikely to occur if followers find the content scripted and unnatural. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain the balance between control and creativity of the SMI (Martínez-López et al., 2020).

Regarding *audience* factors, our findings suggested that characteristics of followers, such as personal values and self-efficacy, are important factors contributing to engagement with SMIs. Personal values are “broad desirable goals that motivate people's actions and serve as guiding principles in their lives” (Sagiv et al., 2017, pp. 3). Values are at the core of an individual's self-concept and identity, serving as guides to everyday behaviours (Parks-Leduc et al., 2015). Generally, followers often associate and identify with their preferred SMIs (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Therefore, engagement behaviours are more likely to occur among people who share similar qualities and values (Ren et al., 2023). 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 & Casais, 2023). This

leads us to understand that certain followers have certain values influencing their behavioural decisions and certain cultural and religious factors can shape online engagement. The existing literature on consumer behaviour has considered personal variables or value orientation as the fundamental factor influencing consumer decision-making (Kim, 2020; Lages & Fernandes, 2005). The most widely used conceptualization of values is the Schwartz (1992) theory of basic values (Parks-Leduc et al., 2015; Kim, 2020), which specifies ten broad values based on the motivation underlying them (Schwartz, 1992). They include religion, spending time with family, and being culturally driven, and they align with the conservation dimension of Schwartz's (1992) theory of basic values. According to *Schwartz*, the personal values of tradition (e.g., culture and religion), conformity (e.g., commitment to norms and custom), and security (e.g., a harmony of relationships and society) all contribute to the conservation dimension (Schwartz, 1992). Followers usually share content that exhibits culture, promotes family love, and conforms to society's religious beliefs. Hence, when partnering with SMIs, marketers should choose SMIs based on their target audience's characteristics and values (Leung et al., 2022b).

Social media users' perceived ability to use social media (i.e., social media self-efficacy) is one variable that relates to *eWOM* behaviors (Choi & Kim, 2019). In other words, having doubts about one's ability to use a specific social media application may be a critical barrier to engaging and sharing SMIs' posts. The findings indicated that followers with low self-efficacy find engaging and sharing SMIs' posts difficult. This attitude can be explained in two ways. First, low self-efficacy followers might be unable to choose the right SMI for themselves, leading to invaluable content being shared and trending. Second, novice followers might be unable to notice SMIs that heavily rely on beautification filters, promoting the circulation of unrealistic content. Hence, if followers do not have enough competency, skilfulness, and knowledge of using such platforms and their various functions, they would

hesitate to put their energy into assessing the SMI's post because they do not know it well or simply cannot do it, which eventually halts their sharing behaviour. Contrarily, the findings show that veteran followers with high self-efficacy are more prone to engage and share content posted by SMIs. This aligns with previous research demonstrating the role of self-efficacy in predicting sharing behaviors, including news sharing intentions (Lee & Ma, 2012), video sharing on YouTube (Chiang & Hsiao, 2015), and knowledge sharing, as highlighted in the systematic review by Charband & Jafari Navimipour (2016).

Verification behavior arises from an awareness that an SMI message may be misleading. This study finds that followers exhibit higher verification behavior when they feel skeptical, leading to more cautious sharing, whereas low verification behavior results in confident engagement with SMIs. Prior research suggests that users bear the responsibility to evaluate content quality before deciding to accept and share it (Charband & Jafari Navimipour, 2016). This can be further explained through the concept of digital media literacy, which equips individuals with the critical skills necessary to assess the credibility of online content and verify claims before sharing (Livingstone, 2004; Maksl et al., 2015). Digital media literacy fosters a deeper understanding of content quality, enabling users to identify biases, assess the authenticity of influencer messages, and make informed sharing decisions. Consequently, verification behavior may be viewed as a practical application of digital media literacy in response to perceived risks in social media content.

The findings reveal that verification behavior can be mitigated in multiple ways. First, in line with the results by Aw & Chuah (2021), the study demonstrated that followers who fostered *parasocial*-relationship with their favorite SMI exhibited lower verification and more sharing behavior. It is because followers at higher parasocial levels are less aware of the persuasive intentions and less critical of SMIs' posts (Breves et al., 2021). Previous misinformation research shows that if trust is present in a relationship, people may forego

actions they would normally perform (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022). Second, when SMIs endorse products, being transparent, criticizing the product, and proving that it works (*e.g.*, testing the product on oneself) results in less verification behavior.

The results also highlighted conditions where followers attempt to verify the SMI's post. First, previous influencer marketing research found a negative correlation between an SMI's trustworthiness and purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Our results also demonstrate that some followers generally distrust SMIs and thus devote more importance to verification behavior. It can be explained as some followers are highly suspicious of influencer marketing if they deem brand endorsements mixed in SMIs' posts (Jamil & Qayyum, 2022; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Second, this study found that when the followers notice an absence of fit between the SMI and the product/service, they verify the message and engage less with the SMI. Therefore, congruence is important for endorsement's effectiveness and to enhance engagement (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021; Ahmadi & Ieamsom, 2022). Third, previous studies have demonstrated that verified accounts on social media are more likely to be trusted (Vaidya et al., 2019; Kabakuş & Şimşek, 2019). However, our research findings indicated that SMIs with verified status do not influence their followers' sharing behavior.

The following figure presents a framework for followers' verification behavior based on the above results. This framework illustrates that followers do not attempt to verify the factuality of the SMI's endorsement after establishing a *parasocial* relationship with the SMI. Therefore, they share the SMI's post with confidence. However, the framework demonstrates that followers usually verify the content endorsed when they lack trust in the SMI, when the SMI has verification status, when the SMI is incongruent with the product/service, or when the followers have past adverse experiences with the endorsement. Thus, they become more cautious when intending to share SMI's posts.

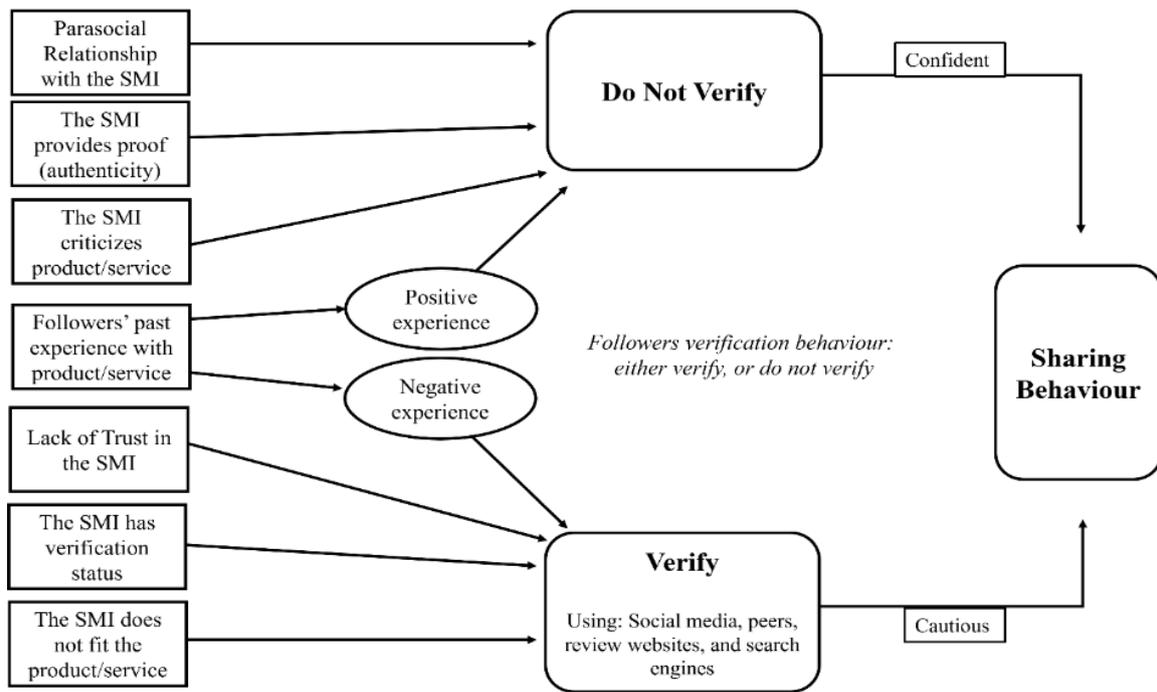


Figure 1: Framework for Followers' Verification Behavior. (Source: the authors)

## 7. Conclusions

In today's highly competitive SMI environment, in which followers' loyalty is essential in relationship-building (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014), the concept of engagement is ever more significant. This study demonstrates that the type of influencer (*i.e.*, popularity) and the *content* (*i.e.*, creativity) are related to the engagement level, such as the decision to share SMIs' posts. This study also introduced novel factors related to the followers (*i.e.*, personal values and self-efficacy) rarely discussed in the literature. Finally, we also explored the path followers attempt to take when verifying (or not verifying) SMIs' posts.

### 7.1. Theoretical implications

This research is, to our knowledge, one of the first studies that explicitly highlights the factors engaging followers to share SMIs' posts. Moreover, it fills the gap in the literature by specifically applying the CPM concept to include not only factors identified in past research, such as *source* and *content*, but factors related to the *audience* (*i.e.*, followers), responding to the calls of (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Li & Peng, 2021; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2022). With these

findings, we validate some factors identified by existing literature in and outside the influencer marketing domain, such as source popularity and content creativity (e.g., Dobele et al., 2007; Tellis et al., 2019; Li & Xie, 2020; Park et al., 2021; Tafesse & Wood, 2021;). Yet, novel factors have been found and linked to how followers engage with SMIs, such as followers' personal values and self-efficacy.

The findings have also produced insights into how followers' attempts to verify the factuality of SMIs' posts affect engagement. We additionally presented a framework linking followers' verification behavior to sharing decisions. By introducing the idea of verification behavior to the SMI literature, this study paves the way to a novel research avenue investigating its association with multiple marketing outcomes. By doing so, we contribute to the existing literature on the skepticism surrounding influencer marketing (e.g., Ki et al., 2022), respond to calls to explore variables that might negatively impact followers' behaviour towards SMIs (Cabeza-Ramírez et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2022), and expand studies on the concept of verification behavior (Metzger et al., 2003; Dabbous et al., 2022).

To strengthen the theoretical foundation of this study, we incorporate insights from digital media literacy to enhance the understanding of verification behavior within the CPM framework. While the CPM identifies source, content, and audience factors influencing sharing behavior, digital media literacy explains how followers' ability to critically assess these factors impacts their verification processes and, consequently, their sharing decisions. This connection helps clarify why followers may scrutinize content before sharing it, especially in the context of influencer marketing. By drawing on concepts from communication studies and information science, this integration provides an interdisciplinary perspective on how cognitive evaluation shapes sharing behavior. This approach not only deepens our understanding of verification behavior but also broadens the applicability of the CPM in the influencer marketing context, contributing to the uniqueness of the paper.

Finally, our research contributes qualitatively to the existing literature, which predominantly focuses on quantitative methods. Using semi-structured interviews, we offered a nuanced understanding of follower-influencer engagement, highlighting aspects often overlooked in quantitative studies, responding to the calls from studies such as (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2020).

### *7.2. Managerial implications*

This study offers a new perspective on the dynamics of follower-influencer engagement and helps marketing professionals select the suitable SMI for their campaigns. If the campaign aims to improve followers' engagement and sharing decisions, they are urged to invest in these factors. For instance, marketers and brands gradually turn to micro-influencers (Santora, 2021) as they account for 60% higher engagement rates (Childers & Boatwright, 2021). Moreover, content innovation is essential, and SMIs should be provided additional control over their content to accomplish higher content creativity.

Social media platforms should provide tutorials or other help facilities to help new users. Moreover, they may also offer unified sharing mechanisms to allow content to be shared across multiple platforms. In addition, SMIs are advised to avoid beautification filters as much as possible because this can negatively affect their persuasiveness. Furthermore, marketers must clearly define and determine their target audience to maximize engagement and motivate sharing behaviors. The significant cultural differences relating to various geographical locations and the followers' culture, standards, and accepted values should be considered as a criterion for choosing SMIs.

Growing skepticism towards SMIs and higher followers' verification behavior implies that marketing practitioners should be more cautious while selecting SMIs for their campaigns. The findings indicate that followers are more likely to verify content when they distrust the SMI, perceive a mismatch between the SMI and the endorsed product, or encounter verified accounts

that lack authenticity. To mitigate this, marketers should prioritize authenticity by selecting SMIs who align closely with the endorsed product or service. Ensuring fit and transparency in endorsements, such as through clear disclosures, can reduce skepticism and verification tendencies. Additionally, fostering parasocial relationships by encouraging genuine, relatable interactions can enhance trust and increase confident sharing of SMI content.

At a societal level, this research highlights how digital literacy and critical evaluation skills empower individuals to navigate the increasingly saturated digital world. By emphasizing the role of verification behavior, the study promotes a culture of informed content sharing, helping improve the quality of information shared online and fostering more discerning public attitudes. These insights can also guide public policies aimed at enhancing digital literacy and reducing misinformation.

## **8. Limitations and areas for future research**

While this study provides valuable insights, it has some limitations that suggest avenues for future research. First, as an exploratory study based on qualitative interview data, it offers initial insights into the factors influencing followers' sharing behavior. Future qualitative research could expand on these findings through deeper interviews or focus groups to uncover additional factors and refine existing ones. Second, to enhance generalizability, future studies could employ quantitative methods with larger, more diverse samples. Third, this research was conducted with a Saudi Arabian sample, offering unique cultural insights. Future studies could examine diverse cultural contexts to better understand how sharing behavior varies across regions. Fourth, the participants in this study followed two lifestyle SMIs. Future research could explore followers of different types of SMIs (e.g., travel, fashion, fitness) to identify how influencer categories impact sharing behavior. Finally, extending the applicability of the CPM

framework by investigating other influencing factors, such as the channel and the destination, could offer additional insights.

Future research could explore verification behavior in cross-cultural contexts. For instance, followers in collectivist cultures may approach verification differently compared to those in individualist cultures, thereby enhancing its applicability in global influencer marketing campaigns. Additionally, verification behavior should be studied in platform-specific contexts. Different social media platforms offer unique affordances and user experiences, which can impact how followers engage with content. For example, the ephemeral nature of Snapchat may lead to less rigorous verification compared to the more permanent and curated content on Instagram or YouTube. Developing platform-specific frameworks for verification behavior can help marketers tailor their strategies to the distinct characteristics and user expectations of each platform, ensuring more effective engagement and sharing outcomes

Based on the qualitative insights derived from this study, we propose potential relationships between source, content, audience factors, and sharing behavior, moderated by verification behavior. First, source popularity is expected to have a negative effect on sharing behavior, meaning that the lower the popularity of an SMI, the higher the likelihood of followers sharing their content. This aligns with the perception that micro-influencers are often seen as more authentic and relatable compared to macro- or mega-influencers. Second, content creativity is proposed to have a positive effect on sharing behavior. Creative content is more likely to capture attention and encourage followers to share it within their social networks. Third, audience factors, specifically self-efficacy and personal values, are expected to positively impact sharing behavior. Followers who are confident in their ability to navigate social media platforms (self-efficacy) are more likely to identify and share meaningful content. Similarly, content that aligns with followers' personal values, such as cultural or family-

oriented themes, is likely to drive higher sharing behavior. Finally, we propose that verification behavior moderates the relationship between these factors (popularity, creativity, self-efficacy, and personal values) and sharing behavior. Specifically, a high level of verification behavior is expected to weaken the effect of these factors on sharing behavior. For instance, even highly creative or value-aligned content may not lead to sharing if followers engage in high levels of verification and perceive the content as lacking credibility. Future research should empirically test these propositions to validate and refine the relationships suggested here.

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