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Parasocial Relationships & its Influence on Followers

A qualitative study exploring the interplay
between PSR, trust & credibility within
influencer marketing

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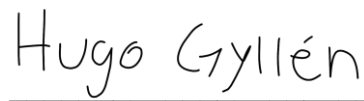
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Abstract

Social media influencers (SMIs) have become powerful figures in today's digital marketing, revolutionizing consumer behavior with their ability to form parasocial relationships (PSRs) with their followers that resemble real-life friendships. These emotional connections have been assigned the ability to nurture trust and enhance followers' perceptions of SMIs as credible and authentic sources of product recommendations. However, previous studies have neglected collecting soft data, missing crucial insights to followers' personal experiences and emotions. Additionally, research to date has not explored purchases made by actual followers of SMIs, leaving a gap in understanding the reasoning behind these purchases and the extent to which they were influenced by the SMI.

This thesis, therefore, investigates how PSRs influence trust in SMIs and explores the connection between trust, perceived credibility, and purchasing decisions. Through semi-structured interviews with ten actual followers who have previously purchased products promoted by SMIs, the findings reveal that PSRs act as a driver of trust, enhancing perceptions of credibility. Trust was often tied to emotional connections with SMIs, likened to friendships, and further reinforced by the SMIs' expertise within their niche.

Building on this, the study highlights variability in how followers engage with SMI endorsements, with PSRs existing on a spectrum. At one extreme, strong PSRs could lead to "blind trust," where critical evaluation of credibility is bypassed. At the other, weaker PSRs or their absence prompted followers to rely more on rational evaluations, such as the SMIs' expertise or product alignment.

Keywords: Parasocial relationships (PSR), Social media influencer (SMI), Trust, Credibility, Followers

Summary

Sociala media-influencers (SMI:er) har blivit viktiga aktörer i dagens digitala marknadsföring. De har revolutionerat konsumentbeteende genom sin förmåga att skapa parasociala relationer (PSR:er) med sina följare, jämförbara med verkliga vänskapsrelationer. Dessa emotionella band har förmågan att bygga upp förtroende och styrka följarnas uppfattning om SMI:er som trovärdiga och autentiska källor för produktmarknadsföring. Tidigare studier har dock inte samlat in mjukdata, vilket innebär att viktiga insikter om följarnas personliga upplevelser inte har studerats. Dessutom har tidigare forskning inte undersökt köp gjorda av faktiska följare av SMI:er, vilket skapar en betydande kunskapslucka kring varför dessa köp sker och i vilken utsträckning följarna har influerats av SMI:n.

Denna uppsats undersöker därför hur PSR:er påverkar förtroendet för SMI:er och utforskar sambandet mellan förtroende, upplevd kredibilitet och köpbeslut. Genom semistrukturerade intervjuer med tio följare som tidigare köpt produkter genom SMI:ers marknadsförda inlägg. Resultaten visar att PSR:er agerar som en drivkraft för förtroende, vilket stärker uppfattningen av SMI:ers kredibilitet. Förtroendet var ofta kopplat till emotionella band med SMI:er, som kan likna vänskapsrelationer, och förstärktes ytterligare av SMI:ers kunnighet inom sitt område.

Studier visar variation i hur följare agerar på SMI:ers marknadsföring, då PSR:er existerar på ett spektrum. I ena änden kunde starka PSR:er leda till ett så kallat blint förtroende, där kritisk utvärdering av trovärdigheten förbises. I den andra änden ledde svagare PSR:er, eller inget PSR alls, till att följare i högre grad förlitade sig på en rationell bedömning, såsom av SMI:ns expertis eller produktens relevans till SMI:n.

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1 Introduction

This section provides a background overview of the research topic and introduces the research aim guiding the study.

1.1 Relevance and history of influencer marketing

The global influencer market has seen steady growth each year ever since 2016. The global revenue of influencer marketing has more than tripled since 2019, and is estimated to reach a total revenue of 24 billion USD in 2024 (Statista, 2024a). Influencer marketing in Sweden has also seen steady growth and the industry reached a total spending of 1.1 billion SEK in 2022 (Institutet för reklam- och mediestatistik, 2023). According to Institutet för reklam- och mediestatistik, (2023) influencer marketing consists of two main categories: Influencer Sponsorship and Influencer Advertising, where Influencer Sponsorship accounted for 72% (769 million SEK) of the total spending in 2022. In 2022 the growth of influencer marketing slowed down due to a weakened advertising market, and 2023 was expected to show a decline of around 10.4%. However, a recovery with positive growth is forecasted for 2024 (Institutet för reklam- och mediestatistik, 2023). As of 2024, statistics show that 21% of Swedish consumers between the ages of 18-64, have previously bought products because celebrities or influencers advertised them (Statista, 2024b). These statistics together show that influencer marketing today is a massive industry that is more and more being utilized by companies around the world.

The history of influencer marketing in the modern era can be traced back to the 1930s, though the concept itself dates as far back as the roman era (Forbes, 2021). However, to contextualize this thesis, it is crucial to distinguish between influencers in general and social media influencers (SMIs). According to Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) an influencer refers to “someone who affects or changes the way that other people behave”. In contrast, an SMI is a more specific subset of influencers. However, the exact definition of an SMI is debated, as previous research provides differing interpretations. For the purposes of this thesis, an SMI is interpreted based on insights from Vaidya and Karnawat’s (2023) article as an individual who has gained a larger following on social media platforms due to their favored persona and content, granting them the ability to influence their audience’s opinions, preferences, and behaviors. SMIs play a central role in influencer marketing, where they collaborate with brands to create branded content, such as endorsements or product mentions, to enhance brand awareness and drive consumer purchasing decisions.

The era of SMIs emerged much later, beginning with the launch of Six Degrees, the first official social media platform, in 1997 (The Payments Association, 2022). This was soon followed by the rise of notable platforms such as Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. One of the first SMIs that gained fame is thought to be Jeffree Star who quickly gained attention on Myspace in 2003 (The Payments Association, 2022). By 2009, the age of SMIs had fully taken shape as major brands recognized the market potential of leveraging

these popular and well-known SMIs to promote and market their products (The Payments Association, 2022).

This idea has now been expanded, and influencer marketing has now become a crucial strategy for brands looking to engage with consumers in a more authentic way. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube dominate the space, providing SMIs with a stage to reach millions of followers daily. Authenticity and relatability have been key factors in the growing influence of these social media personalities. Consumers today are more likely to trust recommendations from SMIs they feel a connection with, similar to the way they connect with a friend. This stands in contrast to traditional celebrity endorsements or direct advertising, which often feel less personal or relatable. This shift in consumer behavior has made SMIs powerful opinion leaders, capable of shaping purchasing decisions through their content and interactions with followers. This aligns with Schwartz's (2023) statement in a blog article for GRIN that younger demographics often identify friends and family as their most trusted sources for product recommendations, a sentiment that extends to SMIs perceived as relatable and trustworthy. Brands have increasingly found success by collaborating with authentic SMIs who genuinely reflect their values, leveraging this trust to foster stronger connections with their target audiences. This effectiveness is further supported by other studies, Wilkens (2023) states that using SMIs to advertise has proven to be very effective in marketing as consumers tend to trust people they know and have confidence in such as friends or family but also SMIs to an extent. The emotional connections audiences form with SMIs can be understood through Horton & Wohl's (1956) concept of Parasocial Relationships (PSRs). These are one-sided bonds where audiences feel a sense of closeness to media figures who may not even know they exist. PSRs are central to influencer marketing, with their potential of framing SMIs as more authentic, making SMI endorsements more influential (Nah, 2022; Leite & Baptista, 2021).

The growth of influencer marketing highlights its role in shaping consumer behavior, driven by the relatability and authenticity of SMIs. While existing research provides valuable insights into this phenomenon, it leaves room to further explore the complexities of these interactions, highlighting the need for further exploration of the underlying dynamics.

1.2 Problematization

Influencer marketing has emerged as a central strategy for shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors in the digital age, with existing research highlighting key factors like PSRs, influencer credibility, and emotional attachment. While these studies provide valuable insights, they mainly rely on quantitative methods, such as surveys and experiments, which, while useful, often fail to capture the nuanced, personal, and psychological dynamics that underlie consumers' trust and behavior.

Although PSRs have been explored as a framework for understanding how consumers form emotional bonds with SMIs, the literature lacks depth in uncovering the subjective, lived experiences of followers and how these relationships influence their purchasing decisions. For example, while quantitative research demonstrates that PSRs can increase trust and reduce skepticism about paid sponsorships (Breves et al., 2021b), it often overlooks the personal narratives and thought processes followers undergo when engaging with SMIs or deciding to purchase endorsed products. Similarly, emotional attachment and trust in SMIs are acknowledged as critical factors, yet the mechanisms behind these phenomena remain underexplored (Ki et al., 2020; Leite & Baptista, 2021).

This thesis seeks to address these gaps by conducting qualitative, in-depth interviews with followers who have previously purchased products endorsed by SMIs. By focusing on their personal experiences and perceptions, this research explores how followers engage with SMIs, form emotional bonds, and navigate the decision-making process when purchasing endorsed products. This approach will complement existing quantitative research by offering a richer and more holistic understanding of how PSRs create emotional bonds between followers and SMIs, with the potential of shaping perceptions of trustworthiness and credibility. By exploring these psychological dynamics, this thesis uncovers how these bonds influence followers' purchasing decisions and consumer behavior, providing insights that go beyond numerical data, which is crucial to reveal the extent to which emotional bonds to SMIs can drive consumer choices, despite the evident commercial intent behind SMIs' endorsements. These insights hold practical value for brands and SMIs by displaying what creates authentic relationships with audiences that go beyond transactional exchanges, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. At the same time, they offer consumers a greater awareness of the factors influencing their decisions, encouraging more thoughtful and informed engagement with SMI content.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative thesis is to investigate how PSRs influence follower trust in SMIs and explore the potential link between trust, perceived credibility, and purchasing decisions.

2 Literature & theory

This section will provide the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks.

2.1 Literature review

In the era of social media, SMIs play a big role in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors. The psychological dynamics behind these interactions, especially PSRs and SMI credibility, have been widely studied. However, there is still a need to better understand what drives consumer trust and purchasing decisions, particularly when SMIs' content is explicitly commercial. This literature review summarizes recent studies, identifies gaps, and highlights the unique contribution of this thesis.

2.1.1 Definition of influencer marketing

Influencer marketing is a form of marketing where influential online personalities promote brand messages through sponsored content on social media. This approach expands on traditional celebrity endorsements by leveraging the reach of social media to include bloggers, video creators, and other digital figures. Unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs resonate with audiences as relatable peers, catering to consumers (followers) who prefer recommendations from individuals they perceive as similar to themselves rather than solely relying on endorsements from high-profile figures (Boone, 2024). This strategy utilizes SMI' shared posts on social platforms to promote a brand's interests while encouraging co-creation of the brand image between SMIs and their followers (Evans et al., 2017; Giles & Edwards, 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019, as cited in Martínez-López et al., 2020).

2.1.2 PSRs and influencer marketing

The concept of PSRs, which can be described as one-sided emotional bonds between audiences and media figures, is a key part of understanding influencer marketing as it is widely used in previous research. The concept has provided a framework for researchers to expand upon, contributing to findings such as the ability of PSRs to enhance influencer credibility, foster trust, and shape consumer behavior.

A study by Pimienta (2023) described PSRs as attachment processes akin to real social relationships, where SMIs address emotional and psychological needs, such as offering comfort or inspiring exploration. Building on this, research by Ki et al. (2020), Chopra et al. (2020), and Asim et al. (2023) highlights that followers engage with SMIs because they satisfy key psychological needs. These include providing inspiration, facilitating social connection, and delivering trustworthy information, which not only encourages engagement and purchases but also helps explain why consumers are drawn to them in the first place. However, Hudders & Lou (2022) asserts how exposure to idealized lifestyles

promoted by SMIs can lead to negative feelings like envy or dissatisfaction, which may discourage some consumers from following them.

Breves et al. (2021b) and Leite & Baptista (2021) highlighted the importance of emotional intimacy in forming PSRs. This emotional closeness is often developed when SMIs share relatable, personal experiences, making followers feel more connected to them. Findings indicate that self-disclosure also has a great impact in influencer marketing. Studies show that when SMIs share personal stories, it strengthens the consumers' bonds, leading to greater trust and purchase intentions (Nah, 2022; Leite & Baptista, 2021). While existing studies have mapped these patterns using quantitative studies, an empirical gap remains as few studies have touched upon the deeper, personal experiences, or narratives of followers. This gap can be effectively addressed using qualitative methods, such as interviews.

2.1.3 Influencer credibility and consumer trust

Influencer credibility, which includes trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, is a key factor in building consumer trust. Content with high informational or entertainment value has shown to increase trust and engagement, which helps explain why followers choose to interact with SMIs (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Moreover, Chopra et al. (2020) and Hudders et al. (2021) found that when credibility is paired with authenticity and relatability, it boosts the effectiveness of endorsements. Furthermore, an article by Breves et al. (2021b) investigates how PSRs combined with high perceived credibility towards SMIs may lead to "blind trust". Their study found that strong PSRs reduce followers' skepticism about advertising, even when disclosures are present and clear (Breves et al., 2021b). This "blind trust" raises ethical concerns, especially for younger audiences who may be less able to critically evaluate promotional content, making them more susceptible to stealthy advertising practices (Boerman & Reijmersdal, 2020).

2.1.4 Emotional attachment and self-disclosure

Emotional attachment is another important part of influencer marketing. It can be achieved when SMIs fulfill key psychological needs. According to Ki et al. (2020), these attachments are formed through the fulfillment of three primary needs.

- Ideality, where SMIs inspire followers with aspirational traits.
- Relatedness, where enjoyable and relatable personas build a sense of social connection.
- Competence, where informative content enhances followers' sense of knowledge and capability.

Emotional attachments contribute to followers' development of PSRs and impact the followers' trust toward SMIs. When these three psychological needs are fulfilled, it was found that the emotional attachment led to "attachment transfer," where trust in the SMI extends to the brand they endorse (Ki et al., 2020; Leite & Baptista, 2021). However, as previously mentioned, most studies rely on surveys and other quantitative methods that do

not capture the complexity of how followers connect with SMIs on an emotional level. Hence, this thesis uses qualitative interviews to explore these emotional attachments in greater depth.

2.1.5 Problematization and relevance

Despite progress made in understanding influencer marketing, important gaps remain. First, the heavy reliance on quantitative methods limits the understanding of individual experiences, such as why followers engage and act on SMI product endorsements? Second, while the ethical concerns around “blind trust” and compulsive behaviors have been acknowledged, they have not been deeply explored through direct conversations with followers. Breves et al. (2021a) further highlight these limitations, noting that few externally valid studies have examined the mechanisms behind the persuasive success of SMIs. Further calling for deeper exploration as the majority of these studies have relied on quantitative methods (e.g., Breves et al., 2019; Yuan & Lou, 2020, as cited in Breves et al., 2012a).

This thesis seeks to address these gaps by employing a qualitative approach, specifically in-depth interviews with followers who have previously purchased products based on SMI endorsements. By exploring the psychological dynamics of PSRs, credibility, and trust, this method aims to provide a richer understanding of consumer behavior and add depth to existing research.

2.2 Parasocial relationship theory

The Parasocial Relationship theory, introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), examines the unique, one-sided relationships that audiences form with media figures, typically television hosts, celebrities, and entertainers. These connections begin through parasocial interactions (PSIs), where media figures simulate direct, face-to-face communication with their audience, often using modes like direct address and creating the impression of a personal conversation. By employing these methods, media figures create an illusion of reciprocal engagement, stimulating feelings of familiarity and emotional closeness. Although PSRs are inherently one-sided, where the media figure remains unaware of the individual audience member, audiences perceive these relationships as personal and meaningful. With repeated exposure, the connection deepens, and the media figure becomes a consistent and comforting presence in the audience's life (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

2.3 PSR within influencer marketing

PSR theory, originally introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), has been expanded to cover the unique phenomenon of influencer marketing. While Horton and Wohl primarily discussed PSRs in the context of television hosts and traditional media figures, recent

research has demonstrated how these one-sided emotional bonds also develop between SMIs and their followers. Unlike traditional media, social media platforms enable seemingly direct interactions between SMIs and their audiences through likes, comments, and the sharing of personal content. This creates an enhanced illusion of intimacy and reciprocity, even though the relationship remains one-sided (Breves et al., 2021a).

In the context of SMIs, PSRs are developed and sustained through strategies that leverage the interactive features of social media platforms. Bond (2020) emphasizes that perceived similarity, social attraction, and authenticity play key roles in strengthening these connections. For instance, SMIs often present themselves as relatable, ordinary individuals who share their daily lives, which creates a sense of shared experience with their followers. Building on this, Boerman & Reijmersdal (2020) states that Youtube provides an ideal platform for followers to build PSRs with SMIs and content creators by enabling followers to repeatedly engage directly with the content while gaining insights into the creator's personal life. This can lead to the video creator becoming a part of the follower's daily life.

Breves et al. (2021a) further note that consistent self-disclosure by SMIs, such as sharing personal stories or behind-the-scenes content can enhance the illusion of a reciprocal relationship. This approach mirrors the way real-life relationships are formed, through repeated exposure and personal sharing deepening emotional bonds. Additionally, social media enables SMIs to directly engage with their followers through comments, likes, and personalized messages, amplifying the perceived intimacy and reinforcing the one-sided connection (Breves et al., 2021b). Together, these mechanisms illustrate how PSRs have evolved in the influencer era, making them a cornerstone of modern digital marketing strategies.

2.4 Empirical findings and theoretical expansions on PSRs

Bond (2020) broadens the foundational definition of PSRs by exploring their emotional depth, long-term persistence. Bond (2020) emphasizes that PSRs extend beyond mere cognitive impressions and evolve into socioemotional bonds akin to real-life friendships. These bonds grow stronger over time, reinforced by continued exposure to the media figure. Bond (2020) further highlights the role of perceived similarity, social attraction, and authenticity in the formation and intensification of PSRs. Individuals are more likely to develop these relationships with media figures they perceive as relatable, socially attractive, and genuine. This aligns with Cohen (2009, as cited in Bond, 2020), who identified these relational cues as crucial for building parasocial connections.

Recent research by Breves et al. (2021a) found that PSRs reduce resistance to persuasion, particularly in influencer marketing. The authors reveal that followers with strong PSRs are less skeptical of promotional content, display greater trust, and evaluate brands more favorably compared to non-followers. Breves et al. (2021a) further states that PSRs'

persuasive nature increases as the intensity of the PSR increases. Breves et al. (2021b) expand on this by introducing the concept of schemas. The basic-term schema refers to memory structures that act as organizing devices, enabling humans to interpret new experiences efficiently without analyzing every detail from scratch (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020, as cited in Breves et al., 2021b). In the context of traditional marketing, these types of advertisements could trigger advertising schemas that evoke skepticism and resistance toward promotional content. However, in influencer marketing, these schemas may not always be triggered. Instead, when followers engage with advertisements from SMIs, they might apply schemas similar to those used in interactions with peers or friends, such as viewing the content as genuine or trustworthy, rather than as a sales pitch. This shift in schema activation could explain why resistance strategies, such as critical evaluation, are often bypassed when interacting with SMI content (Wojdyski and Evans, 2020, as cited in Breves et al., 2021b). Strong PSRs enhance perceptions of source credibility, such as trustworthiness and expertise, generating a “positive halo effect” that leads followers to evaluate SMIs and their content more favorably. Furthermore, Breves et al. (2021b) noted that while advertising disclosures are often frowned upon and cause increased skepticism, the authors found that followers with strong PSRs responded more positively to posts with disclosures. This suggests that PSRs can shield SMIs from the negative effects of transparency, likely due to trust and perceived authenticity (Breves et al., 2021b).

2.5 Source credibility theory

The source credibility theory states that individuals are more likely to be persuaded if they perceive the source as credible (Umeogu, B, 2012). According to Cho et al. (2009) there are four key factors within source credibility which are expertise, trustworthiness, co-orientation and attraction. Together, these four factors serve as the foundation for information to be perceived as authentic and credible. Expertise is defined as the extent to which a source is perceived to be able to provide the correct information (Cho et al. 2009). Trustworthiness is defined as the degree to which the source is perceived as providing information that reflects the source's actual feelings and opinions (Cho et al. 2009). Co-orientation or similarity is defined as the degree to which a source is similar to its target audience (Cho et al. 2009). The attraction factor is not always relevant or appropriate to use because it is generated in an environment where the information is directly passed to the information receiver. It is defined as the extent to which the source elicits positive reactions from members of an audience (Cho et al. 2009). The attraction factor can also just refer to the perceived physical or social attractiveness of endorsers (Ju & Lou, 2022).

Source credibility, which emphasizes the importance of trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness in establishing a communicator's credibility, provides valuable insights in understanding influencer marketing. In the context of social media several studies have tested the impact of source credibility on consumers and demonstrated its persuasiveness

across different scenarios (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The theory therefore bridges the gap in understanding how SMIs build and sustain trust in the digital age.

2.6 Assessing literature & research question

The literature review lays a strong foundation for exploring how PSRs shape followers' trust in SMIs and influence perceptions of credibility. It effectively examines key concepts like emotional attachment, influencer credibility, and consumer trust while highlighting gaps in existing research. Specifically, previous studies have focused on the individual elements of PSRs and credibility but have not captured the bigger picture of how these factors interact to drive purchasing decisions. Furthermore, the dominance of quantitative methods has left a gap in understanding the nuanced, personal experiences of followers. By identifying these gaps, the review justifies the need for a qualitative approach to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological dynamics underlying trust, credibility, and consumer behavior, therefore this thesis seeks to answer the research question of how PSRs shape followers' trust in SMIs, and how might this trust influence perceptions of credibility and purchasing decisions?

The PSR theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) explains one-sided relationships formed through digital interactions, where emotional bonds, trust, and perceived intimacy develop with influencers. Meanwhile, source credibility theory focuses on how sources are more persuasive when perceived as credible, based on four key factors outlined by Cho et al. (2009). Together, these theories complement each other in understanding the trust-building process in influencer marketing. PSR theory addresses the emotional connection between followers and influencers, while Source Credibility theory examines the cognitive factors that enhance influencers' credibility, offering a comprehensive view of consumer trust and decision-making. These two theories have the potential to help us in answering the research question and better understand how PSRs and perceived credibility influence trust building for followers of SMIs.

3 Methodology

This section will describe the methods used to collect the data for this research, along with the reasoning behind their selection and application.

3.1 Research design

In an attempt to successfully capture and accomplish this paper's research aim, a qualitative methodology has been employed. The research aim has been clearly stated to attempt to uncover how PSRs influence consumer trust in SMIs and explore the potential link between trust, perceived credibility and purchasing decisions. To grasp this, the qualitative method was applied through semi-structured interviews with 10 SMI-followers, who had previously bought at least one product from the SMI directly or from one of the SMI's brands.

The qualitative research approach was chosen as it allows for respondents to provide their subjective and personal beliefs. This makes it so the research can gain insights on personal behaviours and attitudes. These kinds of responses are difficult to derive from quantitative studies as the focus there is more on gathering information that can be measured on scale (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As this bachelor thesis seeks to understand the underlying factors between PSR's, trust and credibility, the qualitative approach was better suited for our research purpose.

The study uses the Semi-structured interview approach. This type of interview design allows us to have a prepared set of standard questions, but with the possibility to ask additional follow up questions tailored to each respondents answers and new questions not part of the interview guide that can come up on the spot. The semi-structured interview process is a flexible way to conduct interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This flexibility is important for our research in order to tailor the interviews according to each individual to get the best out of every interview. While we like the flexible aspect, the semi-structured interview style is also good in keeping the interviews from straying too far away from our research aim with the prepared standard questions asked in every interview.

3.1.1 Pre-study

Before the official interviews were held, a pre-study was conducted. In the pre-study we held interviews that were initially supposed to be official interviews for our research. But after evaluating the results of these interviews we concluded that they were not sufficient for our research which led to us using these interviews as a pre-study instead. The pre-study was conducted in Stockholm outside of NK where major Swedish SMIs Bianca Ingrosso and Lovisa Worge were opening up a pop-up store for their jewellery brand, ANI jewels. We felt that this could be a great opportunity to interview people that probably had quite strong relationships to these SMIs and could give us valuable insights to answer our

research aim. The authors used a prepared set of standard questions, with the opportunity to be flexible as well.

What quickly became evident when evaluating the interviews was that they were not sufficient for our study, for various reasons. Firstly, our inexperience in interview techniques proved to be a problem. While the standard set of questions prompted some valuable answers, we struggled to come up with relevant and insightful follow up questions. Another problem with these interviews was that the questions tended to be closed-end questions which prompted shorter answers, resulting in limited insights. Given the insufficient answers prompted during these interviews, we took the opportunity to reflect on our learnings from this experience. These learnings greatly assisted us in formulating new questions and gave us insights into how our performance as interviewers could be improved. As a result, we decided to highlight this experience and treat it as a pre-study.

3.2 Interview structure

The interviews were primarily held in private group rooms at Karlstad University, with interviewees notified of their scheduled time and date in advance. Additionally, three of the interviews were conducted via Zoom to accommodate participants who were unable to participate in person, for example, one of the respondents was located in a different country. To ensure accuracy and avoid any loss of information, all interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews were audio recorded using our personal cell phones, the recordings are later to be deleted to comply with GDPR measures.

The semi-structured interviews were set up in different stages.

- The first stage opted to find out more about the respondents' purchased products and what the reason for the purchase was.
- The second stage asked for the individuals' thoughts and opinions on SMIs in general, as well as the specific SMI they had bought a product from.
- The third stage of the interview was designed to ask questions which could identify signs that the interviewees had a PSR with the SMI, likening a form of real-life friend relationship. The questions were asked regarding the respondents' personal experiences relating to the SMI in question.
- The fourth stage was about asking questions in relation to the source credibility theory. Here we asked questions about the respondents' trust in the SMIs and what role credibility had in their purchasing decisions.

Every interview followed this structure because of our predetermined set of standard questions asked to everybody. The interviews varied quite widely though in how much conversation there was in between the standard questions and in how many follow-up questions were asked. So while our design of the interview was quite strict as we didn't want the interviews to stray away too much, there was still a great deal of flexibility in the interviews. This shows in the length of our interviews where the average length was 33 minutes, with the longest being 58 minutes and the shortest 20 minutes.

3.3 Respondent selection

To ensure relevance and quality of the collected data two specific sets of criteria were imposed that the participants had to meet. First off every respondent had to have made a purchase based on an endorsement from an SMI that they followed. This criteria was set up to ensure that all respondents had first hand experience with the phenomenon that we aim to explore. The second criteria was that every respondent had to be at least 18 years old. This age requirement was implemented to comply with regulations, as interviewing individuals under 18 would require obtaining a special permit. Due to time constraints, obtaining a permit was not feasible.

The respondents were primarily selected from the authors' extended social networks, including friends and acquaintances of friends. The study employs purposive sampling, which means choosing respondents based on the goal of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2015) as respondents were selected on previous experiences based on our research aim. We selected participants from our extended social networks because we believed that we could find respondents to fit well without looking too far, which proved to be true. However, we avoided selecting participants from our close personal circles to avoid biased responses.

The interviews consisted of ten selected respondents with eight females and two males with ages ranging from 18-26. We initially planned to conduct 12 interviews but because of time constraints and difficulty in finding respondents fit for our research we had to settle with ten. However, after evaluating, this was deemed to be sufficient due to the quality of responses we gathered from the conducted interviews.

What we found to be a common theme among respondents was that 7 of them had purchased products from the same SMI, namely Bianca Ingrosso. This was not very surprising as she is one of the most prevalent SMIs in Sweden, with a very successful makeup brand. This is reflected in the products our respondents had bought, 8 of them had purchased makeup, with the remaining two having purchased a backpack and a coffee cup respectively.

Table 2: Respondent information.

Respondent	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	SMI	SMP's Industry	Follow Duration
1	Peter	Male	25	Cody Ko	Comedy/ Commentary	2-3 years
2	Tracy	Female	20	Bianca Ingrosso	Fashion & Beauty	8 years
3	Douglas	Male	22	Jon Olsson	Luxury & Sports	6 years

4	Sarah	Female	26	Bianca Ingrosso	Fashion & Beauty	8 years
5	Grace	Female	24	Bianca Ingrosso	Fashion & Beauty	8 years
6	Olivia	Female	18	Bianca Ingrosso	Fashion & Beauty	8 years
7	Lucy	Female	20	Bianca Ingrosso	Fashion & Beauty	8 years (On & Off)
8	Julie	Female	25	Bianca Ingrosso	Fashion & Beauty	8 years (On & Off)
9	Lovisa	Female	22	Hailey Bieber	Beauty	2-3 years
10	Felicia	Female	24	Bianca Ingrosso	Fashion & Beauty	8 years

3.4 Data analysis

We started by listening to all interviews and transcribing them verbatim manually in order to maintain a proper handling of the personal data and to ensure accuracy in the transcriptions. The method chosen to analyze the collected data was through a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is often used in research studies using qualitative data and it is a method of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2021). This was deemed to fit our study as using thematic analysis to analyze the data from open-ended responses could explore the context of the learnings at depth, while allowing flexibility and interpretation (Castleberry & Nolen, 2021).

Following the transcriptions we began to familiarize ourselves with transcribed data by reading and re-reading the transcripts. Key ideas were then highlighted in an initial coding phase. The tool used to analyze and code the data was Nvivo 15. In this stage the codes were grouped into broader themes, aligning with the research aim. The emerging themes then acted as the basis for our findings and discussion.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The data was handled in line with GDPR regulations to ensure the respect for privacy of the respondents' personal information. All respondents were asked if they were okay with us recording and dealing with their information privately and anonymously. This was key to establish the respondents' consent before we started with the interviews. All respondents were given a pseudonym to keep their anonymity while still allowing us to present our

findings and discussion in a nicer way, as we deemed names to be more fitting than describing the respondents as numbers.

The decision to exclude potential respondents under the age of 18 was also based on ethical considerations. Younger audiences may be more susceptible to trust in SMIs, as they might lack the critical skills to evaluate promotional content. This makes them more vulnerable to stealthy advertising practices. By restricting the participation of non-adults we ensured that ethical and legal considerations were met.

4 Findings

This section presents the findings from the conducted interviews, highlighting key patterns, themes, and insights related to the interview questions.

4.1 Credibility of SMIs

This section reviews respondents' opinions and thoughts regarding their SMI's credibility and its importance in their product purchases. It also presents identified themes that influence credibility.

4.1.1 Importance of credibility in purchasing decisions

We asked a question whether the respondents value SMIs credibility when deciding to purchase a product. Findings show that the majority (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10) consider SMI credibility to be important.. The following themes present their thoughts on what makes an SMI credible in the first place.

SMIs Must Be Knowledgeable in Their Field

The majority of the respondents (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10) emphasized that it is crucial for an SMI to be knowledgeable within a product category to be considered credible. Both Tracy and Felicia highlight this in their respective interviews:

Yes, I'd say that plays a role. I mean, for example, when it comes to skincare, I'd probably rather buy from someone who actually knows things about that topic rather than someone who just got a sponsorship saying 'this is really good and I want you to buy it because then I get money' and stuff like that. (Tracy, 2024)

You want to feel that the person behind the product knows what they're doing. And I think that builds more trust that I'll get a good product when I buy from you. So I'd say that's probably valued quite highly. (Felicia, 2024)

These responses highlight the importance of an SMI's perceived knowledge and expertise within their respective product field.

The Product Must Align With the SMI's Persona

Another theme that emerged was the importance of alignment between the product being endorsed and the SMI's established persona or content focus. Respondents 1, 2, 3, and 7 mentioned that they are more likely to trust an SMI's recommendation if the product aligns within the SMI's area of expertise. For instance Peter mentions his interest in golf, and would be more willing to buy a product within that if the SMI promoting it has knowledge about the sport and creates content around it.

Yes, I'd probably say so. For example, generally speaking, I play golf, and I follow people to get tips to improve my golf swing, for instance. If one of them were to recommend a golf club, I'd probably be more inclined to buy it than from some other influencer, you know. So yes, I'd say so. (Peter, 2024)

Lucy is in agreement with Peter's view in that she also places high importance on the SMI endorsing something that is relevant to their content and personality.

If someone who always posts about cars, for example, were to say, 'Oh, now I've released a makeup line,' I probably wouldn't buy it. There needs to be some relevance to the type of product the person is releasing. (Lucy, 2024)

In this statement she highlights how she feels that if an SMI were to endorse something that is not relevant to their persona, she likely would not buy that product.

Contrasting views on credibility

However, not all respondents placed high importance on an SMI's credibility. Sarah's narrative stands out from the majority as she admitted that she does not critically evaluate the credibility of larger SMIs.

No, I think I assume that if she thinks it's good, then it is good. But not everyone, but big influencers in general, yes. I mean, then I probably wouldn't. (Sarah, 2024)

Sarah uses Bianca Ingrosso as an example and claims that she can fully trust Ingrosso's judgement regarding the products they promote. Sarah explains that this trust is not exclusively held towards Ingrosso, but also applies for many other SMIs with larger followings. She also admits in the interview that she is easily influenced by marketing from well-known SMIs and does not actively consider their credibility.

Lovisa provided a nuanced perspective. While she perceives Bieber as trustworthy, Lovisa expressed her skepticism about other SMIs product recommendations, leading her to question whom to trust.

TikTok has added if they get Ad commission. So if they are getting money off of promoting this product, then I automatically skip the video [...] there's influencers that I will trust because they will give honest reviews on products like, let's use Jeffrey star, for example. [...] he will actually give honest reviews of products. If they're bad, he'll tell us. I feel like very few influencers give me that information. [...] Like if they actually don't like the product, they're not going to tell us that because even if they're not getting commission now, if they promote a product and a lot of people buy it, then that influencer will be on that brand's radar. So then, then they'll get commission at some point. So it's kind of hard to believe good reviews of products unless they're coming from people that I know have also given bad reviews of products. (Lovisa, 2024)

Lovisa mentions that she will instantly skip content with advertising disclosures. Indicating that sponsored recommendations from SMIs automatically loses their credibility according

to Lovisa. She underscores that there are very few SMIs whose opinion and judgement she can trust. However, Lovisa mentioned exceptions, such as Jeffree Star, whom she trusts for honest reviews, emphasizing that he will also give bad reviews of products.

Lastly, Lovisa even mentions that non-sponsored recommendations can be suspect. She argued that these SMIs might fake positive product reviews in hopes of gaining attention from brands and obtaining sponsorships that way.

4.1.2 Is the respondent's SMI a credible source?

Respondents were asked whether they perceived their SMI as a credible source for promoting that product. Interestingly, all 10 respondents considered their SMI as a credible source for promoting the product they bought. The upcoming themes capture respondents' thoughts of what makes their SMI credible.

Expertise

Lovisa linked Bieber's credibility to their apparent knowledge of the products, along with Bieber working together with larger organizations to produce them. Lucy shares a similar narrative, stating that the credibility comes from the SMI having a large team behind the product releases.

Yes, I think so. And then you know she has a big team behind her. Maybe she's knowledgeable now, but in the beginning, she didn't know much about it either, you know. So yes, I would still say that. (Lucy, 2024)

Olivia and Felicia both perceived their SMI as credible because of their demonstrated skill and use of beauty and fashion products. Felicia added that her SMI has repeatedly showcased their knowledge, reinforcing their credibility.

Yes, definitely. I think so. I think she shows it very well. That's probably also part of their industry, in that she showcases a lot of her knowledge in makeup and skincare and everything on her private social media as well. (Felicia, 2024)

Sarah and Grace claim that Ingrosso's credibility stems from their long-term experience in working within the fashion and beauty industry, and they should therefore have knowledge about the products.

Previous product experiences

Felicia & Julie shared that their satisfaction with previous purchases endorsed by their SMI increased their credibility.

I would say that the credibility is much greater as well. Partly because I've tested the products myself and gained insight, knowing that they are of good quality. (Felicia, 2024)

Product alignment

Douglas felt that his SMI's credibility stemmed from the alignment of the products and their persona. As a former skier, Jon Olsson's products resonated with Douglas because they matched the SMI's expertise and reputation. Douglas also trusted that his SMI would not attach their name to something of low quality.

These findings showcase how expertise, product alignment and positive product experiences were factors for credibility.

4.1.3 Do respondents view their SMI as a trustworthy person?

To further explore perceptions of credibility, we asked the interviewees whether they viewed their SMI they had purchased products from as a trustworthy person. Responses varied, with respondents 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, and 9 stating that they perceived their SMI as trustworthy, while others provided more mixed or critical perspectives.

Lucy explained that she finds Bianca Ingrosso trustworthy because, as a major SMI, Ingrosso has the freedom to be selective about her endorsements. This level of choice, Lucy believes, adds credibility to her recommendations, as smaller SMIs may feel urged to accept any collaboration for financial reasons:

Yes, I think so. I mean, influencers that big don't need to say yes to collaborations they don't want, I think. Take a B-list celebrity, for example, who might have 30,000 followers and wants to make a living off it, they might say yes to most things just to get an income. Whereas she has a million followers. She doesn't have to say yes to something she doesn't actually want.
(Lucy, 2024)

Interviewees 3, 6, 8, and 10 offered more mixed reviews about the trustworthiness of their SMIs. Olivia stated that Bianca Ingrosso is trustworthy in some aspects but not consistently. Felicia expressed hesitation, stating that while her SMI seems trustworthy, there's a sense that some of it could be a facade crafted to sell products.

Person vs. marketer

Julie & Felicia provided a different perspective, they distinguished their trust for Ingrosso as a person versus a marketer. Although they find Ingrosso's marketing trustworthy, as both have been very pleased with the SMI's products, they admitted to not having much trust in their SMI as a person.

These findings showcase how respondents do not always view their SMI as trustworthy but can still perceive their marketing as trustworthy.

4.2 Signs & factors for PSRs

This section examines respondents' connections to their SMIs, focusing on identifying those who exhibit strong PSRs that may resemble aspects of a real-life friendship. It also explores underlying factors that seem to be key in building or strengthening these bonds. These findings will serve as a baseline in the discussion, where we will explore how PSRs might influence respondents' perceived trust in SMIs, subsequently purchase decisions.

The first three subheadings in this section are questions designed by the researchers to identify signs of PSRs among the respondents. The latter three subheadings are themes which address potential underlying factors that may explain how these PSRs were formed and strengthened.

4.2.1 *Willingness to defend the SMI*

As part of identifying potential signs of PSRs, respondents were asked whether they had ever felt the need to defend their SMI in the face of criticism. Though their responses differed, a majority of respondents (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10) shared instances where they actually felt the need to defend their SMI.

Sarah explained that she had defended Bianca Ingresso on several occasions, particularly when her parents had negative things to say about their early in her career. She described how her parents initially saw Ingresso as a “spoiled kid,” overlooking the ambition and effort that Sarah admired.

Yes, I think so. But then I would probably mostly say something like. Mom and Dad, because they don't see the same image of her that we see on social media. [...] Now they have a better understanding of her. But if you think about when she started becoming popular, maybe they saw her more as a spoiled kid. But even then, I would probably have defended her, and there are so many people who don't like her. But I've probably always said that I actually like her just because she has such drive. (Sarah, 2024)

Sarah's response could be indicating signs of a PSR being present, due to her willingness to defend Bianca Ingresso.

Similarly, Tracy, who displayed a sense of inspiration coming from her strong admiration and appreciation for Ingresso's career success, had also found herself often defending her SMI when her mother criticized and dismissed Ingresso's success as being purely a result of her family's fame.

Lucy, on the other hand, explained that she occasionally felt a desire to defend her SMI when her mother criticized them. However, Lucy admitted she did not act on this urge, since she decided it was not worth engaging in an argument. This hesitation to engage could reflect a weaker sense of connection compared to Sarah and Tracy.

However, not all respondents felt the need or desire to defend their SMI. Julie explained that she had never been in a situation where she had to defend her SMI, but also asserted that she has mixed opinions about her SMI, and would therefore not defend.

Similarly, Lovisa shared that she could feel frustrated in situations where people online speak negatively about Hailey Bieber's private life and relationships, imagining how it would feel if she were in Hailey's shoes. However, she explained that her lack of personal connection to Bieber, combined with knowledge of past controversies, made her less inclined to step in and defend.

I'll get frustrated with that topic specifically, just because I feel like that would just be very rude if someone did that to me. But since I don't know Hailey Bieber and I also have read a lot of different articles about things that she's done, I don't feel the need to defend her really. (Lovisa, 2024)

Lovisa's response reflects a more detached relationship with her SMI, as she acknowledges Hailey's imperfections and chooses not to involve herself in defending someone she does not personally know.

These responses reflect a range of attitudes toward defending SMIs. For some, like Sarah and Tracy, their willingness to defend seemed linked to a sense of admiration for their SMI's efforts and achievements. For others, like Julie and Lovisa, the decision not to defend was shaped by mixed feelings which may indicate a more shallow connection.

4.2.2 Discussing the SMI with others

To further explore respondents' indications of a PSR to their SMI, they were asked whether they discussed their SMI with friends or acquaintances. While most respondents said they did not talk about their SMI on a personal level, the vast majority (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10) mentioned that their SMI's products, lifestyle, or controversies were common topics around their SMI in their discussions.

Tracy shared that she often found herself talking about Bianca Ingresso, as Ingresso can be seen everywhere in the media. She stated how these discussions often included both controversies surrounding Ingresso and positive experiences with her products. She also shared that Ingresso's makeup brand, Caia, was a regular conversation topic among her friends.

You see her a lot everywhere, so I've absolutely done that. [...] There was some controversy not too long ago involving her and her colleague. [...] So I know that was discussed a lot. [...] it definitely happens that her products get discussed. (Tracy, 2024)

Similarly, Sarah explained that discussions about Bianca Ingrosso was a frequent conversation topic with her peers. Particularly discussions about their activities, product launches, and general lifestyle.

Yes, I'd say so. It's often like 'did you see what she did?' if there's been something special happening. Or 'has she released this?' I think it's easy for her to come up in conversation. (Sarah, 2024)

Olivia similarly acknowledged that she had talked about her SMI with friends, often discussing rumors or positive experiences with the SMI's products. Julie also mentioned having conversations about her SMI, focusing on her success and drive, though occasional controversies were also discussed.

For some respondents, the conversations were primarily product-focused. Felicia and Lucy, both mentioned that their discussions revolved mainly around their SMI's products, sharing their experiences with specific products.

While these responses vary in content, they suggest that conversations about SMIs are not limited to their products but often extend into broader discussions about their lives and actions.

4.2.3 Approachability of the SMI

The third and last question employed to test respondents' relationships to their SMI, was whether they would find their SMI approachable if they encountered them in public. The majority of respondents (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8) expressed positive views, agreeing that their SMIs appeared approachable. However, one respondent offered a more critical perspective.

Grace thinks Bianca Ingrosso comes off as approachable, and explained that their personality traits such as directness, honesty, and charm, contribute to her approachable demeanor.

That's the impression I've gotten of her, that she's a very straightforward and honest person. That she's quite bold, a bit fun. (Grace, 2024)

Peter states that he thinks his SMI seems approachable, and argues this goes back to the way the SMI produces their content:

Yes, I would say so. I think so. [...] It could have to do with the format of the content. Like, no, but he talks a lot directly to the camera rather than being turned toward someone else or something like that. (Peter, 2024)

Peter observed that his SMI often faces and speaks directly to the camera, giving the impression of a personal, one-on-one conversation. Something that makes the SMI come off more personal according to Peter.

Moreover, Sarah confidently believes that she could walk up to and engage with Bianca Ingrosso if she saw her.

I think so. I think I could walk up to her and say, 'Wow, you're amazing. It's so great that things are going so well,' and she would be genuinely happy. (Sarah, 2024)

Conversely, Felicia provided a contrasting perspective, expressing that her SMI's approachability seemed to have diminished over time. She felt that her SMI's growing fame and the increasing number of fans approaching them had shaped their personality in a way that made them less inviting.

Yes, it's hard to say, but I can imagine that it might have to do with, like, her hubris and her career, how there are so many people around her all the time. That maybe it has shaped her personality now, thanks to the career choices she's made, you know. (Felicia, 2024)

Felicia suggested that her SMI's success might have led to a sense of hubris, which she believed had negatively impacted their perceived approachability.

Overall, most respondents described their SMIs as approachable, often citing specific traits or behaviors, such as honesty, charm, and how they engage with their audience, both online and in person. However, Felicia's response introduces an interesting contrast, reflecting how perceptions of approachability may shift as an SMI's career evolves and their fame grows.

4.2.4 Similarity & relatability

The first theme that emerged as a key underlying factor in developing PSRs to SMIs, was similarity & relatability. The respondents were asked a question regarding their sense of similarity and relatability to their SMI. The question asked was open for interpretation and prompted answers related to shared personality traits, experiences, as well as shared interests between the follower and SMI.

Peter identified some common characteristics between himself and Cody Ko. According to Peter, he perceives himself as skeptical and discerning, characteristics he believes are also reflected in Cody Ko's personality. He also described himself as someone who is not overly confrontational and linked these traits to Cody Ko. Furthermore, Peter emphasized that the person behind the content is more important than the content itself. He explained that if Cody Ko were replaced, he would not enjoy the content as much, highlighting the importance of the SMI's personality in his sense of connection.

Similarly, Tracy explained that she could relate to Bianca Ingrosso's emotional personality, describing them as sensitive and emotionally expressive as well as their shared interest in makeup, referencing Bianca's involvement with her own makeup brand. However, more interestingly, When asked if these similarities made Tracy feel closer to Ingrosso, she

hesitated but acknowledged that having something in common is important for forming a connection.

Yeah, maybe. That was a little more difficult, [...] I feel like you have to share something if you like someone, you know. (Tracy, 2024)

Olivia also highlighted aspects of Bianca Ingrosso's personality that she found relatable, particularly her silliness. She also relates to the fact that Ingrosso shares personal experiences like the chaos around her and her meltdowns for instance.

I don't know, she's kind of silly, I think. So it's a bit relatable since she has some chaos around her. [...] she shares the chaos and when they.. Everyone can have meltdowns and stuff like that. And she shares them on her social media. (Olivia, 2024)

Olivia's response shows that she can relate to her personality but also struggles. Sarah shared a similar narrative where she believes Bianca Ingrosso and her both have quite energetic and bubbly personalities. Sarah also revealed that she felt a strong sense of relatability to Ingrosso due to their past struggles with well-being, something Ingrosso has openly disclosed. Additionally, Sarah mentioned that a common interest in fashion further strengthened her sense of relatability to Ingrosso.

Respondents often identified shared traits or interests as key to feeling a connection with their SMIs. These included shared personality traits, such as emotional or bubbly, and also shared experiences, such as struggles with well-being. Additionally, common interests, like fashion or makeup, further strengthened relatability and their overall admiration for their SMI.

4.2.5 Frequent exposure

To understand how often respondents engage with their SMI's content, they were asked on what platforms they are exposed to their SMI, and how frequently they are exposed to their content. The responses reveal many participants reporting daily exposure through multiple platforms with varying levels of interaction. This emerged as an additional theme contributing to PSRs.

Sarah and Grace described encountering Bianca Ingrosso's content almost daily, primarily on Instagram, where posts about Ingrosso's makeup brand, Caia, are frequently advertised.

Pretty much daily. You see what she posts on Instagram and so on. I also get a lot of ads for her makeup brand, Caia. So, it's basically every day (Grace, 2024)

Felicia shared a similar experience, mentioning Bianca Ingrosso's daily presence on her social media, adding that she is exposed to Ingrosso's face more than anyone else's.

Yes, absolutely. She pops up every day on Instagram, TikTok, and so on. When I think about it, her face is probably the face I see every day (Felicia, 2024)

Tracy shared the same pattern of interaction as Felicia. Meaning that she sees Ingrosso's posts regularly in her Instagram feed, however, her engagement with their content on YouTube is more intentional rather than passive.

On Instagram, it's more like it's in the feed, yeah. Like she pops up there because I follow her. But then on YouTube, it can sometimes be that I watch one of her videos, and then I actively search for her channel and go there. (Tracy, 2024)

Lovisa revealed a high level of engagement with Hailey Bieber, actively keeping up with her posts across Instagram, TikTok, and X, formerly Twitter.

I follow her on Instagram, TikTok. I followed her on Twitter when it used to be Twitter, and I keep up with all of her posts. So I know that she's a mom now and all of the things going on in her life that she posts on social media. (Lovisa, 2024)

Lovisa's detailed knowledge of her SMI's life suggests a deep interest.

Respondents reported frequent and often daily exposure to SMI content across multiple platforms, particularly Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. While some, like Grace and Sarah, primarily encountered content passively through Instagram posts and ads, others, such as Felicia and Tracy, engaged more actively by seeking out YouTube videos or TV appearances. Lovisa displayed a particularly high level of engagement, following Hailey Bieber across multiple platforms and keeping detailed track of her personal updates, indicating a deeper level of interest.

4.2.6 Emotional responses to SMI's content

To gain a deeper understanding of respondents' emotional responses to their SMI and their material, they were asked to describe their emotional reactions when engaging with the SMI's content. The respondents shared a wide range of reactions, where some described feeling relaxed and entertained, while others experienced feelings of stress from comparing themselves to their SMI. Interestingly, the social media platform where the SMI is active appears to influence these emotional experiences.

Two respondents, Sarah and Lovisa, reported feelings of inspiration. Sarah explained that she views their fashion and interior design content as a source of creativity and inspiration, rather than comparing herself negatively to Ingrosso, which Sarah believes a lot of followers do.

There's a lot that's perfect, but I think I'm more inspired by it. I don't feel like, 'Is this how you're supposed to live?' Instead, it's more like if I see an outfit, I think, 'Oh, that's nice.' Or if it's something about interior design, I think I'm more inspired by her posts. (Sarah, 2024)

Additionally, Lovisa shared a very similar reaction:

I go more so inspiration than comparing myself to her. I'm not sure I would want to switch places with Hailey Bieber, but I do like the way she teaches how to apply makeup. So I think it's more so her being a teacher and me listening or being a student. (Lovisa, 2024)

Lovisa described her experience with Hailey Bieber's content as more inspirational than comparative. She exemplifies her appreciation for their guidance on makeup application, by drawing an analogy describing Bieber as a teacher, and herself being the student.

Tracy offered a nuanced perspective, explaining that her emotional response to Bianca Ingrosso's content varies depending on the platform.

When you see her pictures on Instagram, you might compare yourself a bit more and get a feeling of, 'It would be nice if I looked like that.' But then I'd say on her YouTube, I've almost never felt that comparison as much, really. [...] On her YouTube, it's more like, yeah, I feel like it's entertaining, and I feel pretty calm when I sit down watching it. (Tracy, 2024)

Tracy's reflection highlights that she would not compare herself to Ingrosso when consuming their Youtube content, due to the content being perceived as more personal, real, authentic, and inviting, compared to the content on the SMI's Instagram. This perspective aligns with Peter's thoughts, who has more of a negative attitude towards Instagram influencers compared to Youtube influencers, whom he perceives as more authentic and relatable. Furthermore, Olivia shares a similar narrative, noting that she finds Ingrosso's Instagram content increasingly shallow and impersonal.

I think her content lately has been pretty boring. Or, like, a bit superficial compared to other smaller influencers. [...] I mean, she was really funny back then, and you enjoyed watching her content. [...] But on Instagram, it's mostly pictures and stuff that are kind of like, 'oh, okay.' (Olivia, 2024).

Olivia's critique highlights a shift in Ingrosso's content on Instagram, which now seems more like a brand page rather than a personal account. This observation ultimately aligns with Tracy's and Peter's perspectives, suggesting that followers often feel a stronger emotional connection to content that appears more authentic and less commercialized.

Furthermore, Douglas described how Jon Olsson had become part of his daily routine, as he would watch their content every day.

He was the one I watched in the afternoons. If math class was boring, I'd put on my headphones and watch this instead during high school. So, he was kind of like an escape from reality. You'd watch him and follow him in a way. In the end, it kind of felt like he became a close friend. You felt like you got to know him in a way. Or like you sort of understood him as a person. (Douglas, 2024)

For Douglas, Olsson not only provided entertainment but also acted as an escape from reality, leading to a sort of perceived friendship over time due to frequent exposure.

Respondents expressed a range of emotional responses to SMIs' content. Tracy felt stressed from comparing themselves to polished Instagram posts, while others, such as Sarah and Lovisa found inspiration in creative or educational content. Additionally, content on Youtube was perceived as more authentic and personal, in comparison to platforms like Instagram. Lastly, Douglas found their SMI content to serve as an escape from reality, offering daily comfort.

4.3 PSRs in shaping trust and purchasing decisions

In the final section of each interview, we explored how PSRs shaped respondents' perceptions of trust in SMIs and influenced their purchasing decisions.

4.3.1 Growing trust over time

The vast majority of the respondents (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9) reported that their trust in their SMI grew the longer they followed them. Lovisa shared that her trust in her SMI developed over her 2-3 years of following, and even drew parallels between this process and any other type of relationship-building.

I followed her before she even had the brand that I purchased from. So at the beginning it was just her being Justin Bieber's girlfriend and then wife, and then she came out with a brand and I liked her posts even before that. So, yeah, I would say it's grown. It's kind of like any other type of relationship. The longer that you're following someone, the more your trust grows. I think. (Lovisa, 2024)

This exhibits that Lovisa views her relationship to Bieber similar to any other real-life relationship, where trust strengthens over time with continued exposure, and a sense of familiarity.

This point of view stayed true throughout other interviews as well. Sarah explained that her trust in Ingrosso increased over time as she gained insights into the SMI's daily life and personal relationships.

I think it's just that she has posted more, and you've been able to join in more and see everything. I've followed her on Instagram and YouTube for a long time. And then in everyday situations, you get to see so many different sides of her. So, over time, I think the trust grows. (Sarah, 2024)

By following Ingrosso on Instagram and YouTube, Sarah felt she had been exposed to various aspects of Ingrosso's personality, which made her feel as though she was getting to know her personally.

Yes, it's like getting to know someone, even though you're not really getting to know them. (Sarah, 2024)

Julie, however, shared a contrasting experience. Despite following Ingrosso on and off for roughly eight years, she admitted to having little trust in them, which remained unchanged throughout her following.

Felicia, who also followed Ingrosso for about eight years, gave a mixed response. She felt Ingrosso was more genuine at the start of her career but perceived her to have developed a sense of hubris with fame. However, she noted that the success of Ingrosso's company over time increased her trust in the brand and its products, even as her personal trust in the SMI decreased. This indicates a distinction between trusting the SMI as a person versus trusting their professional achievements and associated products.

4.3.2 SMIs' impact on respondents' purchasing decision?

All respondents acknowledged that their SMI played a role in their purchasing decisions, although the degree of influence varied. Sarah admitted that her SMI played a major role in her purchase, stating that she likely would not have bought the product if someone else were marketing it. When asked to reflect on her relationship with Ingrosso, she said:

Yes, I feel like I'm probably a bit more influenced and obsessed than I thought. Not obsessed, but... yeah, I didn't think I was influenced and inspired by her this much. (Sarah, 2024)

This response suggests that Sarah's connection to her SMI subconsciously influenced her purchasing behavior more than she initially realized.

Similarly, Lovisa explained that her trust in Bieber had developed over the years she spent actively following her, reasserting that she feels she somewhat "knows" them.

I genuinely don't know. I think I just trusted her since I've. Quote unquote, known her and everything about her for a couple of years. So when she came out with the products, I was like. Very influenced already. I don't think I would be influenced if I just started following her because of her skin care brand. (Lovisa, 2024)

This demonstrates how Lovisa's long-term PSR with her SMI played a central role in shaping her purchasing decision, as her trust and familiarity were well established even before the product launch.

Peter gave an opposing perspective and explained that he probably could have bought a similar product elsewhere but the connection to his SMI was a decisive factor.

Other respondents, Douglas, Grace, and Lucy, noted that their SMI's endorsements lead them to learn about the brand. However, they emphasized that their actual purchases were driven by their liking for the product itself rather than their SMI's involvement.

5 Discussion

This section interprets the findings in relation to the research aim, theoretical framework, and existing literature, offering an in-depth analysis of the results.

This section aims to address the research question: How do PSRs shape followers' trust in influencers, and how might this trust influence perceptions of credibility and purchasing decisions? By combining insights from various parts of our findings, it will explore how PSRs influence followers' trust in SMIs and how this trust, in turn, impacts perceptions of credibility and purchasing decisions. By looking at the overall patterns in respondents' answers and connecting their experiences, this section covers the broader implications and examines the transferability of the findings.

5.1 The role of PSRs in building trust and credibility

Referring to source credibility theory, Cho et al. (2009) identifies four key factors that influence the perception of a source as credible: expertise, co-orientation, attraction, and trustworthiness. This theory is relevant since all these factors appeared across our respondents' narratives. Although all four were not present simultaneously in every case, their presence supports the alignment of our findings and assists in gaining deeper insights into how perceived credibility influences purchasing decisions.

Most respondents identified expertise as a crucial factor in evaluating an SMI's credibility. Tracy, for instance, emphasized the importance of the SMI's knowledge about the product category, aligning with Cho et al.'s (2009) definition of expertise as the extent to which a source is perceived to provide accurate and reliable information. This suggests that expertise serves as a cornerstone for credibility, which, in turn, influences followers' trust and purchase intentions. Peter highlighted the interplay between product alignment and expertise, expressing greater trust in recommendations when the SMI's niche matched the product category. In addition to this, Lucy noted that endorsements outside an SMI's niche could damage their perceived expertise, exemplifying how misaligned endorsements can hinder trust.

Although most respondents explicitly identified expertise as a crucial factor in assessing an SMI's credibility, subtle indications in their responses suggested that co-orientation, attraction, and trustworthiness also played a role, even if they were not directly mentioned. For example, Olivia highlighted aspects of Bianca Ingresso's personality that she found relatable, particularly her silliness and openness about personal struggles, while other respondents highlighted shared hobbies as a point of connection. According to Cho et al. (2009), such perceived similarity enhances co-orientation, and though it was not directly linked to credibility by respondents, we believe that it could operate on a more

subconscious level, but ultimately exerting a lesser influence on how our respondents perceive the credibility of their SMI.

Similar to co-orientation, attraction was not explicitly identified by respondents as a factor in evaluating the credibility of their SMI. However, Tracy's admiration for Bianca Ingrosso's accomplishments and appreciation for her hard work and resilience suggest that attraction, in the form of respect and inspiration, may subtly enhance an SMI's perceived credibility. This aligns with Cho et al.'s (2009) description of attraction as an SMI's ability to elicit positive reactions from their audience.

While expertise, co-orientation, and attraction contribute to credibility, trustworthiness emerged as a more complex and emotionally driven theme. For example, Sarah expressed almost unconditional trust in Bianca Ingrosso, stating that she rarely considered the SMI's credibility when deciding to purchase a product. Instead, she placed complete trust in Bianca's judgment, believing that Bianca would never endorse a product that was not genuinely good. Such a response leaves us to believe that Sarah's trust in Bianca goes beyond factors like expertise and is deeply rooted in an emotional connection.

This is where PSRs become particularly relevant. Bond (2020) suggests that PSRs mimic aspects of real-life relationships, which we believe could explain Sarah's behavior. Her strong PSR with Bianca Ingrosso appeared to create a foundation for trust that bypassed critical evaluation, mirroring the kind of implicit trust one might place in a close friend. Findings by Breves et al. (2021a) support this perspective since they found that strong PSRs reduce resistance to persuasion in influencer marketing, with followers displaying greater trust and less skepticism toward promotional content. While trustworthiness might reflect the outcome of a strong PSR, our findings also indicate that perceived similarity, relatable content, SMI's ability to inspire, and frequent exposure are essential in strengthening the emotional bond between followers and SMIs. These factors were not only critical for the development of trust through PSRs, but also for enhancing perceived credibility, which in turn influences purchasing decisions.

Interestingly, similarity (co-orientation) and inspiration (attraction), factors identified in source credibility theory, also operate to enhance PSRs. Bond (2020) highlights that perceived similarity is a key factor in forming PSRs, as shared traits and interests create a sense of connection between followers and SMIs. Tracy explicitly underscored this idea, stating that having something in common is essential for building relationships, noting how shared personality traits and interests helped her feel closer to her SMI. Moreover, inspiration emerged as another subtle, yet influential theme. While respondents did not explicitly identify inspiration as a direct contributor to PSRs, Sarah and Lovisa described how their SMIs' content inspired them. This aligns with Ki et al.'s (2020) assertion that an SMI's ability to inspire is integral to building emotional attachments, a precursor to PSR

development. Lovisa's statement and engagement with Hailey Bieber's makeup tutorials exemplifies this, as she viewed the SMI as a teacher, suggesting an aspirational connection that strengthened her trust and thus perceived credibility.

Additionally, our findings revealed how frequent exposure and engagement with an SMI emerged as key drivers of PSR and trust development. Several respondents noted that their trust in their SMI grew over time following them, demonstrating how prolonged exposure strengthens PSRs over time. Much like real-life relationships, repeated exposure enables followers to feel as though they are "getting to know" the SMI, which develops a sense of familiarity, emotional closeness, and trust. However, not all respondents experienced this emotional bond. For some, frequent exposure primarily increased their awareness of SMIs' product endorsements rather than leading to deeper PSRs. This distinction shows how exposure can influence followers in varied ways, depending on their level of emotional connection and engagement. Among respondents who displayed stronger PSRs, such as Lovisa, their emotional connection and familiarity with the SMI appeared to enhance trust over time. This growing trust seemed to lessen their reliance on critical evaluation, as the perceived bond made the SMI's endorsements feel more genuine. These findings are supported by previous research, which identifies frequent exposure as a key driver of PSR development (Bond, 2020; Breves et al., 2021a; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Breves et al. (2021a) further reveal that followers with strong PSRs exhibit greater trust in SMIs compared to those without such connections, reinforcing the importance of exposure and engagement in trust building.

5.2 Differing narratives

Our findings suggest that PSRs exist on a spectrum, with followers displaying varying levels of emotional connection and engagement with SMIs. While some respondents exhibited strong PSRs, characterized by deep emotional bonds and high trust, others displayed weaker PSRs, where trust and emotional connection had a less meaningful role in their interactions with SMIs. This variation highlights the nuanced and complex nature of PSRs and their influence on trust, credibility, and purchasing decisions.

At the higher end of the spectrum, Sarah exemplifies a respondent whose strong PSR seemed to influence her perception of trust and influenced her purchasing behavior. Sarah's experience provides a clear example of how strong PSRs can influence trust and purchasing decisions. She confidently defended Bianca Ingrassio against criticism and believed she could comfortably approach her in public. This behavior mimics that of real-life relationships and suggests that Sarah feels a strong sense of emotional connection to Ingrassio. Sarah admitted she never considered her SMI's credibility, such as expertise, before purchasing endorsed products, and hinted that this applied to other popular SMIs

as well. This suggests that an SMI's large following could serve as an independent driver of trust.

Nonetheless, Sarah placed complete faith in Ingrosso's judgment, believing she would never recommend a subpar product. This lack of critical evaluation demonstrates Sarah's almost unconditional trust in Ingrosso, stemming from an emotional connection developed over years of following her rather than a rational evaluation of credibility.

Sarah's narrative aligns with Bond's (2020) assertion that PSRs mimic aspects of real-life relationships, where trust is often implicit and emotionally driven. It also reflects findings by Breves et al. (2021a; 2021b), who observed that strong PSRs reduce followers' resistance to persuasion and skepticism, even in the presence of advertising disclosures. For Sarah, this dynamic created what Breves et al. (2021b) describe as a "positive halo effect," where her emotional connection to Ingrosso overrode critical analysis. This effect was further reinforced by schemas (Breves et al. (2021b), which are associated with friendships or personal relationships and frame SMI endorsements as genuine recommendations rather than commercialized content.

The trust that matured through Sarah's PSR with Ingrosso appears to have bypassed critical evaluation entirely, leading to what Breves et al. (2021b) describe as "blind trust." This emotional bond not only enhanced her perception of Ingrosso as trustworthy but also influenced her purchasing decisions, demonstrating the powerful role PSRs can play in shaping consumer behavior.

Ultimately, Sarah's narrative demonstrates the profound impact of PSRs on consumer decision-making. In this case, the emotional connection built through frequent exposure and perceived relatability was sufficient to drive her purchasing decisions, even in the absence of other credibility factors such as expertise or product alignment. This suggests that for some followers, the trust established through a strong PSR can serve as the sole basis for action, bypassing the need for critical evaluation. It also highlights the potential for strong PSRs to act as a double-edged sword, while they enhance trust and perceived authenticity, they may also limit followers' ability to critically assess endorsements.

At a slightly lower point on the PSR spectrum, Lovisa's narrative demonstrates how strong but selective trust in an SMI can shape purchasing decisions. Unlike Sarah's nearly unconditional trust in Bianca Ingrosso, Lovisa took a more balanced approach, shaped by years of consistent exposure to Hailey Bieber's content.

Lovisa described her trust in Bieber as gradually developed through prolonged exposure, which allowed her to "get to know" Bieber in a personal and authentic way. She explicitly compared this process to trust-building in real-life relationships, where familiarity and repeated positive interactions deepen emotional connections. This trust, established well

before Hailey launched her own product line, played a critical role in Lovisa's willingness to purchase, reflecting the concept of "attachment transfer," where trust in the SMI extends to the brand they endorse (Ki et al., 2020; Leite & Baptista, 2021).

However, Lovisa's narrative also reveals the complex and inconsistent nature of PSRs. While she displayed strong emotional trust and long-term familiarity with Bieber, she hesitated to fully defend or engage with Hailey in certain scenarios, citing a lack of personal connection and past controversies. This suggests further alignment with the idea that PSRs may resemble real-life relationships, where trust and emotional connection can coexist with reservations or doubts, and disagreements do not necessarily sever the bond.

Lovisa also expressed skepticism toward other SMIs, particularly regarding sponsored posts, which she always disregarded unless she already trusted the SMI. This selective trust aligns with Breves et al.'s (2021b) findings that strong PSRs can shield SMIs from skepticism associated with advertising schemas. Lovisa's trust in Bieber appeared to override these schemas, allowing her to perceive Bieber's endorsements as genuine recommendations rather than typical marketing.

Lovisa's narrative highlights the importance of emotional connection in shaping credibility. While expertise and product alignment were factors, they played a secondary role to the trust generated through her PSR with Bieber. This demonstrates how PSRs can selectively enhance trust in certain SMIs, even while skepticism toward the broader practice of influencer marketing remains. Lovisa's narrative also illustrates the nuanced nature of PSRs, where trust and emotional connection coexist with a critical evaluation of endorsements, highlighting that PSRs do not guarantee unconditional trust but rather provide a foundation that can be influenced by other factors. As a result, by selectively trusting Bieber, Lovisa demonstrates how PSRs can act as a foundation for credibility, directly influencing purchasing decisions.

At the lower end of the PSR spectrum, Felicia's narrative illustrates how weaker PSRs result in a more critical and analytical approach to SMI endorsements. Despite following her SMI for eight years, Felicia described having little personal trust in them. Lacking the emotional depth seen in Sarah's or Lovisa's experiences, Felicia separated the SMI's role as a marketer from their persona as an individual.

Felicia emphasized Ingrosso's credibility, citing expertise and trustworthiness through previous positive product experiences. Her trust stemmed from the SMI's knowledge and reliability within their niche, aligning with Cho et al.'s (2009) source credibility theory, where expertise is key to perceived credibility. As such, Felicia's purchasing decisions were driven by her SMI's expertise and product quality, rather than emotional connection. This critical stance focused on tangible factors like product functionality, contrasting with the emotional trust observed in Sarah and Lovisa's narratives.

Interestingly, Felicia noted that her perception of Ingrosso's authenticity had shifted over time. She found the SMI more genuine earlier in their career but perceived them to have developed a sense of hubris with growing fame. This suggests that increased popularity can sometimes erode trust by making SMIs seem less relatable or authentic. In contrast, Sarah's narrative hinted that larger followings could enhance trust, showing how followers perceive popularity differently. Despite this, Felicia's trust in the SMI's brand and products grew due to their consistent quality, illustrating how brand trust can persist even as personal trust in the SMI wanes.

Felicia's narrative highlights how the absence of a strong PSR shifts the focus from emotional trust to pragmatic evaluations of credibility and product performance. It shows that while PSRs enhance credibility through trust, they are not the only pathway influencing purchasing decisions. For Felicia, rational assessments of expertise and brand reliability were far more critical than emotional connections, providing a sharp contrast to the PSR-driven behavior seen in Sarah and Lovisa's narratives.

5.3 Link between PSRs and credibility in consumer decision-making

The narratives gathered from the respondents provide deep insights into their personal experiences as followers of SMIs and consumers of their endorsed products. More specifically, it provides insights into how PSRs and the perceived credibility of SMIs operate together and, at times, independently to shape followers' purchasing decisions. These findings reveal that trust, driven by emotional connections and credibility factors, plays a central role in this process. The following figure demonstrates how these mechanisms operate to influence purchasing decisions. See figure 1.

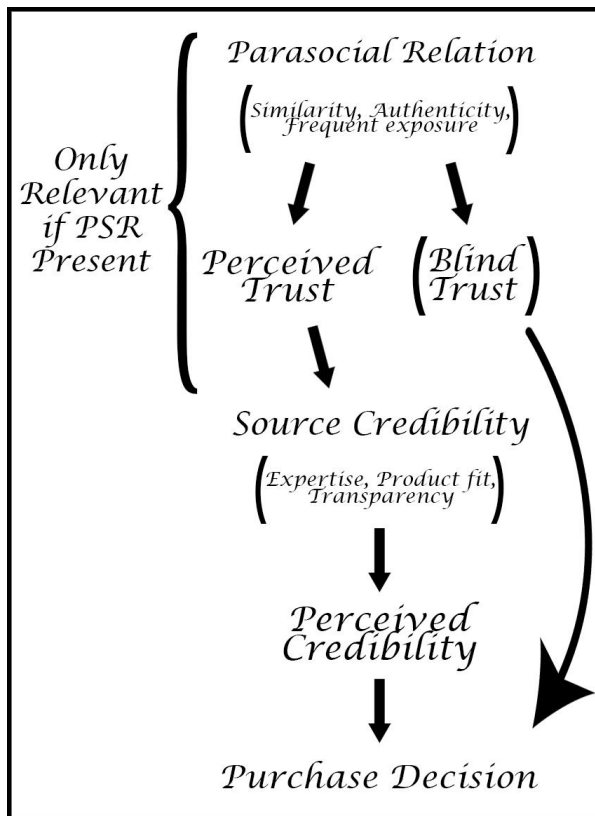


Figure 1: Illustration of Perceived Credibility through PSR (source: the authors).

Figure 1 showcases how PSRs can influence consumer trust and ultimately impact purchasing decisions. When PSRs are present, they often lead to increased trust in the SMI, which enhances the perception of the SMI’s credibility, ultimately influencing consumer decision-making, since the respondents placed high importance on the SMI’s credibility for them to act on a product endorsement. This means that PSRs operate in tandem with the perceptions of credibility, due to its potential in building trust, one of the components in source credibility theory (Cho et al., 2009). However, there are cases where these can work independently. As we identified an instance where intense PSRs resulted in “blind trust,” a concept by Breves et al. (2021b), where followers bypass the credibility evaluation stage entirely and rely solely on their emotional bond with the SMI to guide their purchasing decisions.

However, there are instances where perceived credibility alone drives consumer decision-making, independent of a PSR. This typically occurs when respondents display higher levels of skepticism toward the SMI. In such cases, respondents emphasized the SMI’s expertise within the product category and referenced external factors like positive product reviews, reflecting a more critical evaluation of the SMI’s credibility. Additionally, they tended to separate the SMI’s role as a marketer from their personal identity. This demonstrates that followers do not necessarily need to have a favorable opinion of or actively engage with an SMI to consider their product endorsements

These results demonstrate that PSRs are not uniform in their effects, as their impact on followers’ purchasing decisions varies across individuals. By illustrating PSRs as a spectrum, this study demonstrates how varying levels of emotional trust and rational evaluation influence consumer purchasing behavior, depending on the strength of the follower’s connection to the SMI. See figure 2.

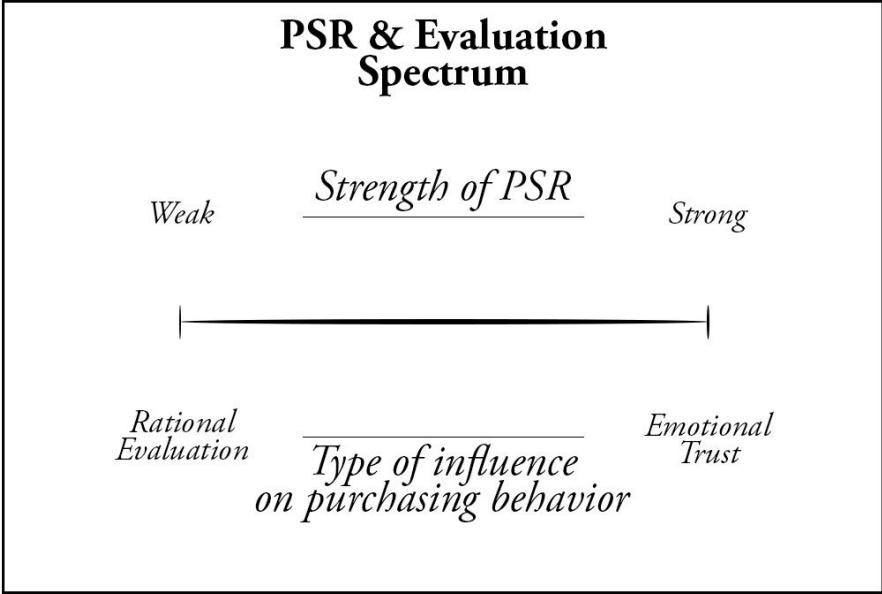


Figure 2: Illustration of PSR & Evaluation Spectrum (source: the authors).

Ultimately, PSRs influence not just how consumers perceive SMIs but also how these perceptions drive purchasing decisions, providing a nuanced understanding of the intersection between trust, credibility, and consumer behavior in influencer marketing.

This thesis’ findings provide valuable insights that extend beyond the specific respondents and SMIs examined. The dynamics of PSRs and credibility, which supports trust and influence purchasing decisions, are not confined to a single industry. These principles are rooted in universal mechanisms of trust-building and emotional connection, hence, making them transferable to various sectors where influencer marketing is employed, such as beauty, fitness, technology, and travel.

6 Conclusions

This section summarizes the main findings, addresses the research aim, and provides a conclusive statement on the role of parasocial relationships in influencer marketing.

This thesis explored how PSRs, trust, and perceived credibility interplay to influence followers' purchasing decisions in influencer marketing. Based on the findings, trust emerged as a central element, with PSRs serving as a key driver in building trust, which in turn enhanced followers' perceptions of SMIs' credibility. Additionally, credibility was further reinforced by other factors, particularly the SMI's demonstrated expertise, aligning with source credibility theory (Cho et al., 2009). The interplay between PSRs and perceived credibility in influencing purchasing decisions was demonstrated through followers who developed an emotional connection to the SMI, akin to a close friendship, fostering trust. This trust, coupled with the perception of the SMI's expertise within their niche, enhanced the SMI's credibility, which emerged as a key factor influencing purchasing decisions.

This thesis conceptualized PSRs as a spectrum, this highlights the variability in how followers engage with, and are influenced by SMIs' promotional content, ranging from emotionally driven decisions to more analytical assessments of credibility. By being on a spectrum, this allows emotional trust and rational evaluation to function both collaboratively and independently in shaping consumer decision-making.

At strong PSR levels, followers may act on endorsements more through emotional trust, sometimes leading to "blind trust", bypassing the need for critical evaluations of credibility completely, a phenomenon supported by Breves et al. (2021a; 2021b). Conversely, in cases of weak, or absent PSR levels, followers' purchasing decisions may be guided more by rational evaluations of credibility, such as the SMI's expertise and product alignment.

6.1 Managerial implications

Findings from this thesis provide a few key points for SMIs and brands utilizing or considering utilizing influencer marketing to make their campaigns more effective.

Brands should carefully choose SMI according to how well their niche and persona aligns with the product being endorsed. It is important that these align well, as this thesis' findings showcase that when SMIs are knowledgeable or have a natural connection to the product category, their promotions feel more credible and trustworthy to followers. The same applies to SMIs when selecting brands or products to promote.

The choice of social media platform also matters. Findings show that platforms like YouTube seem to help SMIs build stronger emotional connections with their audience, as they allow for longer and more personal content. Using platforms that encourage storytelling, and authenticity can make influencer marketing more impactful.

Finally, the size of an SMI's following can influence how they are perceived. While larger SMIs can reach more people, their relatability and trustworthiness might decrease as their fame grows. Collaborating with smaller SMIs, who often maintain closer and more genuine relationships with their followers, may offer a better balance between reach and credibility.

6.2 Theoretical implications

Our study provides theoretical contributions to the expanding literature on PSRs and source credibility by providing new insights through qualitative research. A key contribution lies in building upon prior research linking PSRs to source credibility (Breves et al., 2021b) and extending this connection to include followers' purchase decisions. Additionally, by employing a qualitative approach, our research complements the predominantly quantitative studies in this field, offering a deeper understanding of the psychological dynamics behind the interplay between PSRs, credibility, and consumer behavior.

7 Limitations & future research

While this study provides valuable insights into the studied subject area, there are certain limitations that must be acknowledged to contextualize our study and guide future research.

The first limitation of the study is that the respondents mainly came through the authors' own extended social networks. This may have influenced the transferability and the outcome of the study. Since the respondents were all from the extended social networks of the authors the respondents might share similar characteristics, such as socioeconomic backgrounds, age, and education levels. This potential homogeneity among the respondents could have limited the diversity of insights from the study. Future research on the subject should explore the possibility of widening the diversity of respondents.

Another limitation of the research is the gender imbalance, with eight out of ten respondents being female. This imbalance arose from challenges in finding male participants who met the study's criteria. While this may suggest that males are less inclined to engage with SMI promotions, it limits the transferability of the findings to male audiences. The dynamics of PSRs and perceived credibility, as explored in this study, might differ across genders, highlighting the need for future research to investigate key differences in consumer behavior and attitudes toward influencer marketing between males and females. Understanding these distinctions could provide more comprehensive insights into the diverse ways PSRs and credibility influence purchasing decisions.

The variety of products purchased based on SMI endorsements represents an area that was not extensively explored in this study, as it was not central to our more narrow research aim. Despite this, it highlights a potential topic for future research. Future studies could investigate how PSRs and perceived credibility influence purchasing decisions for high-priced products compared to lower-priced products, offering valuable insights into the relationship between product characteristics and consumer behavior in influencer marketing.

Social media platforms appear to differ in their ability to facilitate the development of PSRs, with certain platforms encouraging deeper engagement between followers and SMIs. For example, several respondents highlighted YouTube as particularly effective, attributing this to its more personal and authentic content compared to platforms like Instagram, which some viewed as more superficial. This phenomenon should be further researched to detail and grasp the differences in the platforms and their ability to create strong relations between followers and SMIs.

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Appendix

Interview Questions in Swedish:

Q1: Berätta om ditt senaste köp. Hela köpprocessen, från start till slut

- Varför köpte du produkten, vad var anledningen till köpet?
- Var detta ditt första köp av en influencer eller har du gjort det tidigare? Kan du berätta om ditt första köp.

Q2: Vem är influencern? Kan du berätta om den här influencern?

- Följer du influencern? Hur länge har du följt influencern?
- Hur hittade du denna influencer, Kan du berätta om det?
- Hur kommer det sig att du började följa influencern? Kan du berätta om det?
- Kan du berätta om dina känslor och åsikter kring den här influencern?
- Kan du berätta om vad du tycker gör den här influencern speciell?
- Vem är influencern i ditt liv vardag?

Q3: Vad är din inställning till influencers generellt, kan du berätta?

Q4: Har det någonsin hänt att du velat (eller till och med faktiskt) försvarat denna influencer när andra pratat negativt om den? Har du något exempel?

- Kan du berätta om varför du kände att du ville försvara influencern?
- Om inte, vad kommer det sig?

Q5: När du pratar om denna influencer med andra (t.ex. vänner), vad pratar ni om då?

Q6: Har du någonsin träffat denna influencer? Isåfall kan du berätta om den händelsen?

- Tycker du personen verkar "approachable"? Inbjudande person

Q7: Kan du förklara hur du känner när du tittar på den här influencerns innehåll?

- Hur framstår denna influencer som person genom hennes content, enligt dig?
- Tycker du att influencern är personlig i sitt innehåll, på vilket sätt?

Q8: Kan du nämna 3 Likheter som du delar med den här personen?

- Kan du berätta om något från hennes content som du relaterar till med den här personen?

Q9: När du ser en person marknadsföra en produkt, värderar du personens kunnskap inom produktkategorin för att fatta ett köpbeslut?

Q10: Tycker du att influencern är kredibel (kunnig) i det han/hon marknadsför? Varför?

- Verkar personen ha ett bra omdöme (förmåga att skilja på bra och dåligt) inom det området? Varför eller varför inte?
- Var ditt förtroende för personens omdöme inom ämnet viktig för dig i köpbeslutet? Varför?

Q11: Verkar denna influencer som en pålitlig person? Varför eller varför inte?

- Vad har du för tankar kring hans/hennes marknadsföring, känns den genuin? Med tanke på att den är gjord i vinstdrivande syfte?

Q12A: Om du tänker tillbaka på innan/när du började följa denna influencer, har ditt förtroende för personen ökat i takt under tiden du följt personen? På vilket sätt, varför/ varför inte.

Q12b (Om de gjort mer än 1 köp) Om du nu tänker tillbaka på ditt senaste köp. Hur var den resan om du jämför med första gången? Var du någonsin tveksam på personen eller produkten? Har ditt förtroende ökat under denna tid? Isåfall, varför tror du det?

Q13: Vi skulle nu vilja att du återkopplar till ditt köp. Berätta storyn igen från början till slut.

- Vad var anledningen till köpet?

Q14: Hur stor påverkan hade influencern i ditt köp?

- Har denna intervju gett dig en inblick i ditt förhållande med denna influencer?
- Har din uppfattning om varför du köpte produkten ändrats under intervjuens gång?

Interview Questions in English:

Q1: Tell us about your most recent purchase. The entire process, from start to finish.

- Why did you buy the product? What was the reason for the purchase?
- Was this your first purchase from an influencer, or have you done it before? Can you tell us about your first purchase?

Q2: Who is the influencer? Can you tell us about this influencer?

- Do you follow the influencer? How long have you been following them?
- How did you come across this influencer? Can you tell us about that?
- Why did you start following the influencer? Can you explain?
- Can you describe your feelings and opinions about this influencer?
- Can you explain what you think makes this influencer special?

Q3: What is your general opinion about influencers? Can you elaborate?

Q4: Have you ever felt the need (or actually acted on it) to defend this influencer when others spoke negatively about them? Can you give an example?

- Can you explain why you felt the need to defend the influencer?
- If not, why is that?

Q5: When you talk about this influencer with others (e.g., friends), what do you talk about?

Q6: Have you ever met this influencer? If so, can you tell us about that experience?

- Does the influencer seem to be approachable?

Q7: Can you explain how you feel when you view this influencer's content?

- How does this influencer come across as personal (personality) through their content, in your opinion?
- Do you think the influencer is personal in their content? In what way?

Q8: Can you mention 3 qualities that you share with this person?

- Can you describe something from their content that you relate to?

Q9: When you see someone promoting a product, do you value their expertise in that product category when making a purchase decision?

Q10: Do you think this influencer is credible (knowledgeable) in what they promote? Why?

- Does it seem like the person has good judgment (the ability to distinguish between good and bad) in that area? Why or why not?
- Was their judgment important to you in making the purchase decision? Why?

Q11: Does this influencer seem like a trustworthy person? Why or why not?

- What are your thoughts on his/her marketing? Does it feel genuine, considering that it is done with a profit-driven purpose?

Q12A: When you think back to before or when you started following this influencer, has your trust in the person increased over time as you've followed them? In what way, and why/why not?

Q12B (for those who made more than one purchase): Now, thinking back to your most recent purchase, how did that experience compare to the first time? Were you ever doubtful about the person or the product? Has your trust increased during this time? If so, why do you think that is?

Q13: We would now like you to reflect on your purchase. Tell the story again from beginning to end (why did you choose this particular product, and why from this specific influencer?).

- What was the reason for the purchase?

Q14: How much influence did the influencer have on your purchase?

- Has this interview given you any new insights into your relationship with this influencer?
- Has your perception of why you bought the product changed during the course of this interview?

Evaluation of Respondents' PSR Levels

The following table provides additional context, here we have created a table summarizing our interpretation of each respondent's PSR levels. It is important to note that this table serves as a general guide, constructed based on findings related to PSRs. The interpretations presented here are subjective and should be viewed as flexible, as they may not fully align with all outcomes or conclusions of the study.

PSR Level: Refers to the researchers' interpretation of the intensity of each respondent's PSR with their respective influencer. This is evaluated on a five-point scale ranging from Low to High.

Table 3: The researchers' interpretation and evaluation of the respondents' PSR level.

Respondent	Pseudonym	PSR Level
1	Peter	Moderate
2	Tracy	Moderate - High
3	Douglas	Moderate - High
4	Sarah	High
5	Grace	Low - Moderate
6	Olivia	Moderate
7	Lucy	Low
8	Julie	Low
9	Lovisa	High
10	Felicia	Moderate