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SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS

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**THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED INFLUENCER ATTRIBUTES IN THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOLLOWERS' MORAL JUDGMENTS
AND ENDORSED BRAND CHOICE**

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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SUMMARY

This doctoral dissertation investigates the relationship between followers' moral judgment and their choice of brands endorsed by social media influencers (SMIs). The study aims to understand followers' responses to SMIs' moral transgressions by employing a research methodology that encompasses a systematic literature review, qualitative interviews with SMIs, and a quantitative survey of followers.

Qualitative interviews with SMIs in Croatia unveiled the complex roles they perceive themselves to embody, driven by conflicting expectations from followers (authenticity), brands (commitment), and society (responsibility). Moral dilemmas arise from these conflicting expectations, prompting SMIs to employ various conflict-resolution strategies: downplaying a role, spotlighting a role, customizing a role, and resorting to a role.

The results of the survey with 415 followers show that followers recognize withholding negative experiences with an endorsed product as a moral issue, and this recognition prompts a negative moral judgment. Furthermore, moral judgment affects SMIs' credibility (comprised of trustworthiness and expertise), image, and reputation. These relationships (except reputation) are strengthened if followers perceive SMIs as morally accountable for their conduct. Finally, SMIs' trustworthiness and image affect purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand, while SMIs' expertise and reputation do not have a significant impact on this.

This dissertation contributes to the emerging field of influencer marketing in four ways: (1) it employs role theory to elucidate unknown complexities of the SMIs' role in this context, (2) it explains why and how moral dilemmas emerge in influencer marketing and how SMIs deal with it, (3) an ethical decision-making model from business ethics is applied to the influencer marketing context to analyze the impact of followers' moral judgment on SMIs' attributes and purchase intentions with regard to the endorsed brand, and (4) it highlights the moderating role of moral accountability in shaping the relationship between moral judgment and SMIs' attributes.

Keywords: influencer marketing, social media influencer, moral transgressions, moral dilemma, business ethics, credibility, reputation, image, moral accountability, purchase intention

POVZETEK

Ta doktorska disertacija raziskuje odnos med moralno sodbo sledilcev in njihovo izbiro blagovnih znamk, ki jih predstavljajo spletni vplivneži. Namen študije je razumeti odzive sledilcev na moralno vprašljiva vedenja spletnih vplivnežev z raziskovalno metodologijo, ki zajema sistematični pregled literature, kvalitativne intervjuje s spletnimi vplivneži in kvantitativno raziskavo sledilcev.

Kvalitativni intervjuji s spletnimi vplivneži na Hrvaškem so razkrili kompleksne vloge, za katere sami menijo, da jih utelešajo, saj jih vodijo nasprotujoča si pričakovanja sledilcev (pristnost), blagovnih znamk (zavezanost) in družbe (odgovornost). Iz teh nasprotujočih si pričakovanj izhajajo moralne dileme, zaradi katerih spletni vplivneži uporabljajo različne strategije reševanja konfliktov: zmanjševanje pomena vloge, izpostavljanje vloge, prilagajanje vloge in zatekanje k vlogi.

Rezultati ankete, v kateri je sodelovalo 415 sledilcev, so pokazali, da sledilci prikrivanje negativnih izkušenj z izdelkom, ki ga predstavljajo, prepoznavajo kot moralno vprašanje in da to prepoznavanje spodbudi negativne moralne sodbe. Poleg tega moralna sodba vpliva na verodostojnost (ki jo sestavljata zaupanje v spletnega vplivneža in njegova strokovnost), podoba in ugled spletnih vplivnežev. Ta razmerja (razen ugleda) se okrepijo, če sledilci spletne vplivneže dojemajo kot moralno odgovorne za njihovo ravnanje. Nazadnje, zaupanje v spletnega vplivneža in njegova podoba vplivata na nakupno namero do predstavljene blagovne znamke, medtem ko njegova strokovnost in ugled na to nimata pomembnega vpliva.

Ta disertacija prispeva k razvijajočemu se področju vplivnostnega trženja na štiri načine: (1) s teorijo vlog razjasnjuje neznane kompleksnosti vloge spletnih vplivnežev, (2) pojasnjuje, zakaj in kako se moralne dileme pojavljajo v vplivnostnem trženju in kako se spletni vplivneži z njimi spopadajo, (3) model etičnega odločanja iz poslovne etike je uporabljen v kontekstu vplivnostnega trženja za analizo vpliva moralne sodbe sledilcev na lastnosti spletnih vplivnežev in nakupne namere do predstavljene blagovne znamke ter (4) poudarja moderatorsko vlogo moralne odgovornosti pri oblikovanju razmerja med moralno sodbo in lastnostmi spletnih vplivnežev.

Ključne besede: vplivnostno trženje, spletni vplivnež, moralno vprašljiva vedenja, moralna dilema, poslovna etika, verodostojnost, ugled, podoba, moralna odgovornost, nakupna namera

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SMI – social media influencer

SEM – structural equations modeling

JASP – Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program

PSR – parasocial relationship

PSI – parasocial interaction

PR – public relations

CFA – confirmatory factor analysis

CR – composite reliability

AVE – average variance extracted

CFI – comparative fit index

NNFI – non-normed fit index

RMSEA – root mean squared error of approximation

SRMR – standardized root mean square residual

1 INTRODUCTION

As social media influencers (SMIs) continue to shape digital discourse, understanding the ethical¹ dimensions of their actions becomes increasingly imperative. In this doctoral dissertation SMIs' moral transgressions are examined through lens of various theories and methods. To enable a systematic approach to such a comprehensive research endeavor, a clear research problem and research questions are presented in the introduction along with the research purpose and expected contributions.

1.1 Background

SMIs are content creators with many followers, over whom they exert their influence by sharing information and product reviews (Jun & Yi, 2020; Ki et al., 2020). Over the last few years, they have become essential in companies' efforts at communicating with audiences. According to the Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report 2024, based on a survey of marketing agencies and brand representatives, the influencer marketing industry is projected to grow to approximately \$24 billion by the end of 2024, with one-fourth of respondents spending almost half of their marketing budgets on SMIs' campaigns (Geyser, 2024). While some may view influencer marketing as a reflection of corrupted social values, it is evident that the rise of influential individuals has long been a phenomenon, on that has only been further developed due to various technological advances. For instance, McGrath and Otnes (1995) find that complete strangers proactively exert informational and value-expressive influence over others, driven by a desire to be helpful and socialize. They also note this assistance is not always welcomed or appreciated, and can sometimes lead to awkward conversations or questioning the sanity of the influencer.

Individuals continue to exert influence over others' product choices, but the abundance of products and the myriad ways to reach millions of consumers instantly via social media can be overwhelming for both those seeking information, and those exerting influence. This has encouraged brands to use various signals in an attempt at brand positioning, and is how the emergence of social media and consumer hyper-connectivity has given rise to SMIs as a potential medium for passing such signals to target audience, bypassing the skepticism consumers hold towards traditional forms of advertising (Wang & Chien, 2012).

Being an opinion leader on social media is related to the extent someone is perceived as a role model for others and the information that they provide is considered useful and interesting (Casaló et al., 2018). That is why influencer marketing has been depicted as a kind of native advertising (Balaban & Mustatea, 2019), an exceptionally believable form of electronic word-of-mouth in which the commercial posts are ordinarily woven consistently into the day-by-day stories that SMIs share with their followers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017).

¹ It is important to note that the terms moral and ethical (e.g., moral or ethical dilemma) can be used interchangeably (Jones, 1991). In this thesis the term moral will prevail, especially when used in critical concepts of conceptual model (e.g., issue, dilemma, judgment, accountability).

Brands increasingly use SMIs – influential opinion leaders with many followers on social media – in order to harness their close relationships with audience members and transform these into positive attitudinal and behavioral brand responses (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Martínez-López et al., 2020).

Although complicated, word-of-mouth on social media is a cultural process with an ascertainable pattern (Kozinets et al., 2010). At first sight the use of social media for product promotion may seem a lot like similar forms of paid promotion, such as public relations (PR). However, influencer marketing is different because the existing forms of promotional efforts have more established, clearly defined and regulated relationships. In contrast, influencer marketing emerged in a specific context and cannot be identified as professional journalism or advertising (Borchers & Enke, 2022), which is why SMIs require specific academic attention.

There is considerable research on the attributes and outcomes of SMIs in various disciplines (Vrontis et al., 2021; Aw & Agnihotri, 2023; Masuda et al., 2022). However, the field of business ethics within influencer marketing is still in its nascent stage. Scholars have recently begun to focus on the ethical aspects of influencer marketing, with calls for more research on its darker aspects (Hudders & Lou, 2023; Barari, 2023). This growing interest is evident in studies exploring moral transgressions in influencer marketing, including the frameworks guiding SMIs' moral conduct (Wellman et al., 2020), the reconciliation of their consumerist and moral identities (Leban et al., 2021), their moral responsibility as perceived by followers (Cocker et al., 2021), and specific moral issues in influencer marketing (Borchers & Enke, 2022). Notably, while sponsorship disclosure and its impact on consumer outcomes have received significant attention (Vrontis et al., 2021), other questionable practices have been relatively understudied. Therefore, there is an opportunity to explore overlooked moral transgressions among SMIs and bridge the gap between research on SMIs' attributes and less explored antecedents in the domain of business and consumer ethics (see Hassan et al., 2022).

1.2 Research problem and research gaps

With the rise of influencer marketing, concerns have also arisen among followers, brands, and wider audience about how SMIs do their business. These concerns go from falsely inflating the number of followers using bots (Ujjwal, 2023) up to more significant issues such as the covert promotion of tobacco products to teenagers via SMIs to avoid government regulations (takeapart.org) or the promotion of gambling to minors (sabguthrie.info). Conflicting expectations that lead to moral transgressions in business are very common, even in traditional business practices. For example, stakeholders expect smart resource allocation in order to increase profits, employees expect businesses to nurture their work-life balance, and society expects firms to give back to the community and take care of the environment (Voegtlin et al., 2019). In business such **role conflict** is a condition of incompatible roles assigned to the focal person (Cf. Ho et al., 1997). It is prudent to expect role conflict in

influencer marketing. The line between sponsored content and social relations is now blurred more than ever (Archer & Harrigan, 2016), and both PR professionals and journalists have noted the increasing ethical concerns related to the credibility of SMIs (Antunes & Pedro Sebastião, 2020). Moreover, the tension that arises on social media when SMIs are used by brands to benefit from their inherent credibility can harm the relationship between SMIs and their audiences (Audrezet et al., 2020; Mardon et al., 2018). In this context, the maintenance of a consistent character that shows dedication and conformation to community standards and norms can reduce this tension and the related consequences (Kozinets et al., 2010), which points to the need to explore business ethics within the field of influencer marketing. Working towards this endeavor, the following two research gaps are outlined that the current study seeks to address.

First, many scholars have argued that it is in every business entity's best interest to behave ethically (e.g., Story & Hess, 2010). Researchers are therefore showing increasing interest in exploring ethics and moral issues in influencer marketing (e.g., Archer et al., 2014; Archer & Harrigan, 2016; Mardon et al., 2018; Audrezet et al., 2020; Wellman et al., 2020; Cocker et al., 2021; Leban et al., 2021; Borchers and Enke, 2022). However, recent research in this field (e.g., Cocker et al., 2021; Borchers & Enke, 2022; Mardon et al., 2023) indicates that there are many aspects of influencer ethics that have been overlooked in the literature thus far. When it comes to social phenomena involving technology this is not surprising, since ethics is the result of a developed social consensus that takes time to evolve, and rapid technological advances widen this gap even more (Wadhwa, 2014). Moreover, most research on SMIs is focused on examining followers and is quantitative in nature (Vrontis et al., 2020), leaving the moral dilemmas SMIs deal with on daily bases and how they deal with them unknown.

Second, several studies have acknowledged the differing expectations of brands and followers that SMIs must navigate (e.g., Mardon et al. 2018; Cocker et al., 2021), the tensions (Audrezet et al., 2018) and transgressions (Cocker et al., 2021) this creates, and potential negative outcomes such as feelings of betrayal (Mardon et al., 2018). Tension shapes the variety of responses to this kind of promotion because of the dual role of the communicator, who is asked to act as both a community member and marketing agent (Kozinets et al., 2010). Potential moral dilemmas that arise from commercializing public conversations have dogged SMIs from the very beginning (Archer et al., 2014), because the unique identity of SMIs enables them to be both famous and ordinary people at the same time (Jun & Yi, 2020). SMIs thus need to be very careful to preserve their reputation as independent market mavens while promoting the brands they endorse (Carr & Hayes, 2014), because followers are influenced by SMIs to the extent that they perceive them to be popular, credible, and relatable (De Veirman et al., 2017; Ki et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). However, it is still not clear how moral transgressions by SMIs affect both SMIs and the brands they endorse in the eyes of their followers.

1.3 Purpose and research questions

Against this background, the purpose of this dissertation is to bring together insights from both SMIs and followers to elucidate how SMIs' role unfolds, as well as to reveal some of the moral dilemmas related to this roles, and what the consequences of those dilemmas are. The main goal of this dissertation is to provide answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: How are topics related to ethics represented in research on influencer marketing?

RQ2: How do SMIs perceive their role given the expectations of different stakeholders?

RQ3: What moral dilemmas do SMIs face in relation to the expectations of different stakeholders?

RQ4: How do SMIs resolve the moral dilemmas arising from different stakeholder expectations?

RQ5: How is followers' moral judgment related to SMIs' credibility, image, and reputation, and purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand?

RQ6: How does SMIs' moral accountability moderate the relationship between followers' moral judgment and SMIs' credibility, image, and reputation?

In order to better understand the research questions and the context of this study it is important to note that **moral judgment** is the “degree to which a portrayal, event, or behavior is morally acceptable to the individual” (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990, p. 634). A **moral issue** is a situation in which someone's actions, when freely performed, may harm or benefit others (Jones, 1991), while a **moral dilemma** is a situation in which each available choice leads to violating a moral obligation (McConnell, 2022). A **moral transgression** is a “behaviour that involves an intentional breach of a moral principle” (Hasebe et al., 2021, p. 46), and moral accountability is the “perception of defending or justifying one's conduct to an audience that has reward or sanction authority, and where rewards or sanctions are perceived to be contingent upon audience evaluation of such conduct” (Beu & Buckley, 2001, p. 89).

In order to answer the research questions, three specific goals are set: (1) to systematically review the existing literature on influencer marketing in which ethics is implied; (2) examine the complexity of the SMIs' role as the nexus between brands and followers from the perspective of SMIs; and (3) explain followers' responses to SMIs' moral transgressions.

1.4 Methodological approach

To better serve the purpose of the dissertation, two separate methodological approaches were employed: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research made it possible to explore the phenomenon in-depth and allowed for a rich understanding of the social processes that take

place under the surface of influencer marketing. Quantitative research, as a more objective approach, allowed for testing the conceptual model and drawing conclusions that enhance the generalizability of the results and their replication.

Two separate studies were conducted: in-depth interviews with 10 SMIs and a survey among 415 followers. The interviews with Croatian SMIs aimed to explore their role complexity. These SMIs were not celebrities before gaining influence on social media, and influencer deals have now made up a significant part of their income for at least three years. Despite the sensitive topic of morality, the interviews, that lasted about an hour and offered anonymity, encouraged the respondents to share valuable insights. Through multiple rounds of coding and analysis, specific roles, moral dilemmas, and coping strategies of SMIs were identified. The survey, based on qualitative findings and the established business ethics and influencer marketing literature, was conducted by a market research agency among 415 respondents who followed at least one SMI. The data was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in the JASP software, with the results confirming the conceptual model and most hypotheses of the dissertation.

1.5 Expected contributions

By bringing together the findings from influencer marketing and business ethics, as well as combining the qualitative and quantitative methodology, this dissertation contributes to the field of influencer marketing in three specific ways.

First, it pushes the field forward theoretically by: (1) applying role theory (Biddle, 2013) in the context of SMIs thus opening up a new avenue for research on SMIs grounded in a different theoretical framework; (2) combining ethical decision-making framework well-established in business ethics (Jones, 1991) with persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) for explaining how SMIs' and brand outcomes are affected by SMIs' immoral behavior; (3) examining the role of perceived moral accountability as a moderator in the relationship between followers' moral judgment and SMIs' attributes.

Second, this dissertation contributes to the field by demonstrating how qualitative and quantitative methods can be effectively used to better comprehend the complex brand-SMI-follower relationship, at least until the knowledge accumulated about this relatively new phenomenon is in a more developed phase.

Third, the managerial contribution of this dissertation is directed at both the brands working with SMIs and the SMIs themselves. It contributes to a better understanding of the expectations followers and society have with regard to SMIs, and thus can help SMIs to maintain a positive image, credibility and reputation, which in turn can increase purchase intentions with regard to the endorsed brands. **Credibility** is defined as a "believability of an entity's intentions at particular time" (Erdem & Swait, 2004, p. 192). **Image** is a set of perceptions held in the memory about something or someone (Keller, 1993), while

reputation is a set of public judgments that can get better or worse with time based on what all stakeholders think (Siano et al., 2011). Moreover, this research provides clear evidence that perceived moral accountability plays an important role in translating followers' judgment about SMIs into attitudes towards them. It also points to the need to clearly delineate the responsibilities between brands and SMIs, and strengthen the regulative framework pertaining to this type of collaboration.

1.6 Structure of the thesis and the use of artificial intelligence

The dissertation is structured as follows. The second chapter, titled *Influencer marketing*, discusses the emergence of the concept and provides definitions of SMIs, their classification, and a brief overview of theories used in influencer marketing research. It also explores how SMIs can be considered as brands and identifies antecedents related to endorsed brand choice. The third chapter, titled *Business ethics*, explains the main concepts and theoretical underpinnings from the business ethics literature. It also discusses unethical behavior in business focused on advertising. In the fourth chapter, called *Ethics in influencer marketing*, the topic of ethics in the existing influencer marketing literature is analyzed, providing a brief overview of prevailing themes, contexts, and methods used. The fifth chapter is called *Qualitative study*, and describes the research design, analyses, and results related to the qualitative study and discusses its findings. The sixth chapter, titled *Quantitative research*, examines the purpose, context, conceptual model, and hypotheses of this part of the study, then presents the analysis, results, and discussion related to the main findings based on the conceptual model. The seventh chapter, *Implications and limitations*, outlines the main theoretical and managerial contributions of the research, and also discusses the limitations and suggests future research avenues. Finally, the last chapter, *Conclusion*, provides a brief summary of the state of the art in the influencer marketing literature based on the findings of this dissertation.

Generative artificial intelligence was used in the writing process to improve the readability and language of the manuscript. It was applied with the authors' oversight and careful review. The results were then carefully edited, as such tools can generate incorrect, incomplete or biased output.

2 INFLUENCER MARKETING

This chapter provides an overview of the basic concepts related to influencer marketing. It begins with an insight into the emergence of such marketing, followed by an overview of the various definitions and classifications of SMIs. It then proceeds with a review of theories that are often used in influencer marketing research and discusses SMIs as promotional tools. It then demonstrates how SMIs can be viewed as brands. The chapter concludes with insights into how SMIs' attributes affect the choice whether or not to purchase the endorsed brands.

2.1 Concept emergence

In early studies, SMIs were sometimes referred to as “nobodies” who became “somebodies” (Goodman, 2011), with no insight into the exact attributes or behavior required to go from a nobody to a somebody. At the time, the main concern was figuring out how this new phenomenon influenced target consumers and how marketers could reach them through strategic communication methods (e.g., Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Today we know that SMIs, once considered “nobodies”, share everyday information about products they are not always hired to talk about, but due to having a large number of followers have the power to make or break a certain brand (Cooleey & Parks-Yancy 2019), making it an important task to understand who they are and what they (can) do. The concept of a market influencer is not new, but it has evolved significantly in last two decades due to the fact many aspects of life have now moved online. Before the intense digitalization that occurred this century, the marketing literature recognized market mavens – consumers who are passionate about a product category, visit stores more often than regular consumers, and have more experience with the product than regular consumers (Abratt et al., 1995). These consumers were classified as innovators who gave the concept of influencers an initial physical visibility and functional application, and/or opinion leaders who transmitted their usage experiences and product information to their peer groups (Baumgarten, 1975). Back then, marketers were aware of the opportunity to enhance retail success by using mavens but were constrained by the existing means of communication in their attempts to reach them (Abratt et al., 1995).

The social influence market maven possesses is the most important factor that influences the related attitudes and opinions (Kaplan & Miller, 1987). Instead of just passively standing by waiting for content to be created by those who can access broadcast media, consumers now have the opportunity to become *prosumers*: active participants in content, product, and service creation; or even *adprosumers*: prosumers who are also advocates for the brand (Martínez-Sala et al., 2017). Consumers with higher self-efficacy, i.e., consumers that have more confidence in their abilities (Geissler & Edison, 2005), are more likely to become influential on social media as they are more willing to engage in spreading electronic word-of-mouth and knowledge sharing in virtual communities (Farzin & Fattahi, 2018). It seems as if SMIs have replaced what were previously referred to as role models and opinion-makers – individual who appear to interact directly with people they have influence over (Pick 2020).

Since mavens seek deeper market knowledge and economic rewards from their behavior, brand managers are advised to appeal to them (Gauri et al., 2015). What we today know as SMIs can also be considered market mavens because, in general, they tend to be knowledgeable in a given product category and seek to gain social capital and savings or eventually profits through their online activities. Due to the fast-changing, digitalized environment SMIs have arisen in, there are many other aspects to be accounted for when talking about such individuals. As organizations and brands are faced with a society that is overwhelmed with information and experiences, the practice of social network management

needs to be concentrated on generating and distributing user experiences that encourage close relationships between brands and their consumers and the wider audience. This especially applies to young people on social media, who tend to put emotions before rational decision-making (Martínez-Sala et al., 2017).

2.2 Concept definition

Back in 2012 Kumar and Mirchandani proposed a seven-step process for increasing the return on investment (ROI) of marketing on social media. Already in the second step the authors mention SMIs, putting the term “influencer” in quotation marks indicating it is a term they are using due the lack of a better expression for describing “influential individuals [...] some of whom might be inducted to spread the “right” message, from the company’s perspective” (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012, p. 56). From this step on, everything suggested that increasing ROI on social media marketing revolved around SMIs – what they share, locating them, identifying their interests, recruiting, and incentivizing them for spreading positive word-of-mouth.

Sometimes, even in more recent studies, SMIs are defined in somewhat circular definitions as people who influence others to greater extent than the average person, with only a vague idea of what they represent in the communication landscape (Almoussa et al., 2020). There are studies in which SMIs are simply described as influential social media users with many followers (Grigsby, 2020). In defining SMIs some authors focus on the number of followers they have in studies about node theory (e.g., Litterio et al., 2017; Torres et al., 2019) and the business literature (e.g., De Veirman et al., 2017), and practitioners almost exclusively rely on this metric (Bullock, 2018). However, there is still an ongoing discussion on how many followers are needed to be considered an SMI, which makes focusing on this indicator alone potentially misleading (Kay et al., 2020). It is not just the number of followers but how active they are (e.g., commenting on an SMI’s post) that makes an SMI credible and consequently influential in the sense of changing peoples’ behavior (such as purchase intention), thus making the ability to create and foster an active community around their content the most important feature SMIs must have (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

Perhaps the central notion to defining SMIs is that they are content generators with regard to a certain topic that can shape attitudes and purchase intention (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Some definitions entail earned trust as an important prerequisite for being an SMI (De Veirman et al., 2017), but not all definitions of SMIs have a positive connotation. Bloggers, for example, have been cited in relation “blogola”, a reference to the “payola” that corrupt radio DJs were paid for playing certain recordings or making positive comments on air that were presented as their own sincerely held opinions (Archer et al., 2014).

Academic interest in the issue of influencer marketing has risen tremendously in the last few of years (Vrontis et al., 2020), and with this has come a clearer notion of who SMIs were, but there is still not a straightforward and unambiguous definition on the literature. Using

many terms to describe this new phenomenon, such as the “insta-famous” (Marwick, 2015), “gurus” (Berryman & Kavka, 2017), and “micro-celebrity” (Khamis et al., 2017) hinders the quest to define SMIs. Sometimes these individuals are referred to as bloggers and influencers, although these two things are not the same (Antunes & Pedro Sebastião, 2020). Studies on SMIs usually focus on just one platform, e.g., YouTube (Miranda et al., 2019), and are defined in limited ways with reference to platform’s context (e.g., as YouTubers). Sometimes the definition is topic-specific, e.g., in the fashion industry the most important characteristics of an influencer are originality and uniqueness (Casaló et al., 2018) and the ability to convince followers to buy fashion items or change their opinion in that matter (Chetioui et al., 2020). Voorveld et al. (2018) even suggested using the term *topical media* instead of social media, since their study on a large sample of social media users suggested people use social media not for socializing as much as for topicality. Besides that, since the user experience on each platform differs to such an extent some authors consider using umbrella terms like *social media* to be misleading, and a way of losing a more important, deeper understanding of this complex phenomenon.

Lastly, SMIs regard themselves as good-looking individuals with significantly more followers on social media than other users, who can impact their audience positively and have leadership characteristics. They want to provide a positive example and inspire others by sharing (for example) their travel stories, and they see it as work that benefits them not only as a job, but also as an opportunity to explore new places and make new friends (Yilmaz et al., 2020). SMIs also describe influencing as a convenient way of working from the comfort of their home, making money and being there for their family (Archer et al., 2014). SMIs can also be defined as personalities with complex roles (content creator, opinion leader, and entrepreneur) who have many followers on one or more social media platforms (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019). A recent definition of influencers unambiguously includes the concept of payment, as they are those who post in exchange for compensation (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Although many terms are used when mentioning influencers, in a recent study by Jun and Yi (2020) they were simply referred to as “content creators with many followers on social media platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. They share tastes and information with other individuals in various fields, including fashion, beauty, hobbies and everyday life, as well as provide product reviews” (p. 803). This definition, along with the one by Ki et al. (2020) that SMIs are people “who have built a sizable social media network of followers and thereby have acquired the potential to exert their influence over their followers” (p. 1) is parsimonious and recent, and thus will be used in defining SMIs in the current study. As such, this study defines SMIs as content creators with many followers over whom they exert their influence by sharing information and product reviews.

2.3 Concept classifications

The rapid and overwhelming pace at which SMIs took over social media networks and followers' attention did not allow a careful and thorough approach to this new phenomenon as it emerged. As such, it is common for earlier research to rely on existing terms when trying to better understand SMIs. For example, some interesting insights can be derived from the literature on salespeople, since to some extent that is what SMIs are. If brands use influencers to leverage consumer engagement to get closer to consumers and build a relationship with them, they should note that each SMI as an individual can be learning-oriented (i.e., be eager to find out more about the product they endorse) or performance-oriented. Managers need to be aware that performance-oriented businesspeople do not tend to cherish relationships, and often engage in activities that are not focused on consumer satisfaction (Harris et al., 2005).

For a while, traditional celebrities were regarded as proxy for SMIs (e.g., Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014), and although it might be tempting to apply everything we know about traditional celebrities to an SMI context there is empirical evidence that audiences perceive them differently (Jin et al., 2019). Two main differences between traditional celebrities and SMIs are usually discussed. First, traditional celebrities used their fame to launch popular videos on social media and SMIs launched videos to become famous (Berryman & Kavka, 2017), i.e., traditional celebrities had public appreciation before becoming what is now termed to be an SMI. Probably the main reason for this is the different channels that enabled their influence: traditional celebrities earned their influence on broadcast media (mainly television) and SMIs became influential by posting their content on social media (Khamis et al., 2017). Second, due to daily exposure to their activities people tend to feel closer to SMIs compared to traditional celebrities (Silva et al., 2020). As such, SMIs are perceived as more approachable and down-to-earth, which makes interactions with them and their content more common (with two-way interaction being enabled with followers on social media), whereas traditional celebrities rarely connect with their fans on any direct level, let alone a personal one (Jun & Yi, 2020). Hence the relationship SMIs form with their audiences is not as one-way as it is with traditional celebrities, and by maintaining reciprocal relationships SMIs cultivate relations that are more similar to a friendship than a fanship (O'Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016), and their content often appears more credible than celebrity testimonials (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In addition, the congruence of an SMI with an endorsed brand has greater effects on their follower's behavioral and attitudinal responses than celebrity status (Martínez-López et al., 2020).

Jun and Yi (2020) offered a reconciliation of the "Are SMIs celebrities?" debate by examining the various definitions and emphasizing the main commonalities. They concluded that SMIs can be regarded as micro-celebrities because the definition of a micro-celebrity covers "...everyday, ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their

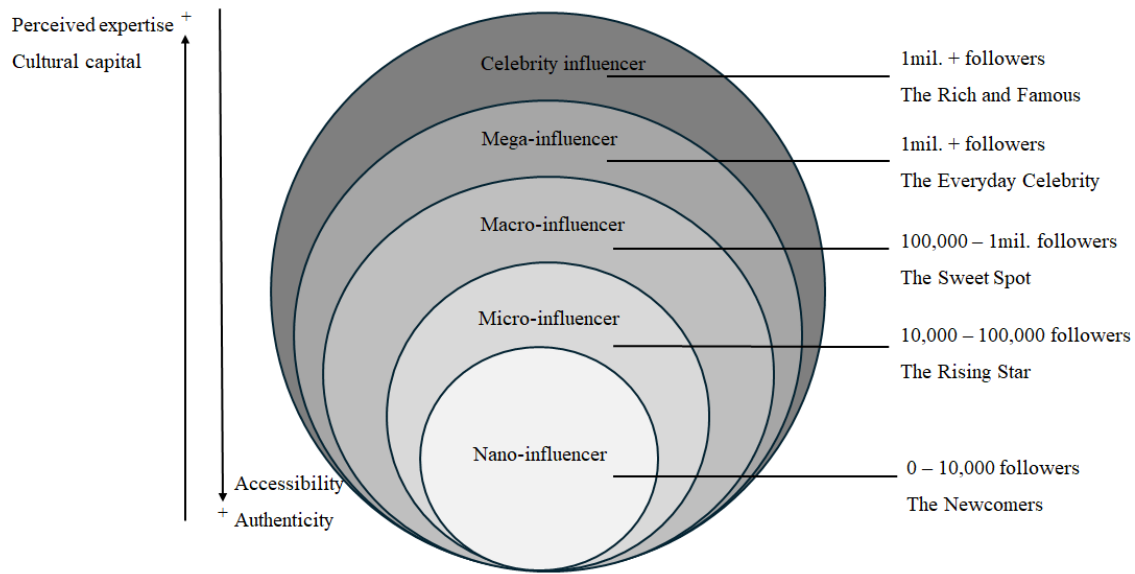
following by integrating advertorials into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events” (Abidin, 2016, p. 3).

Some see SMIs through the prism of human brands (e.g., Ki et al., 2020), and this points out to a unique feature of SMIs, because in order to be branded one must be special in some way, perhaps through special abilities or a distinctive personality. In general, human brands are people that provide a sense of attachment to those that look up to them and provide positive marketing results by earning loyalty through fulfilling their audiences’ needs (Thomson, 2006). This theoretical framework has also been used to describe the influence of sportspersons, politicians, and traditional celebrities.

Despite various approaches, there is enough evidence available to support the main form of categorization used in influencer marketing – categorization by size. There are two-, three-, and five-level classifications of SMIs. The most commonly used in academic studies is the two-level classification of micro (1,000 to 100,000 followers) and macro (100,000 to 1,000,000 followers) influencers (e.g., Schouten et al., 2019; De Veirman et al., 2017). Three-level classification distinguishes mega, macro, and micro SMIs. Micro-influencers are believed to be knowledgeable, skilled, and trustworthy enough to judge, test, and promote products and services truly worthy of endorsement (De Cicco et al., 2020), while mega influencers are treated similar to traditional celebrities (Porteous, 2018). As the field of SMIs has expanded so the categorization has become more refined. Campbell and Farrell (2020) propose two additional types of SMIs (Figure 1), nano and celebrity SMIs. Celebrity SMIs gained public recognition and fame outside and independent of social media (e.g., actors and musicians). Their large fan bases (over a million followers) and previously affirmed expertise enable them to attract sponsorship deals on their social media accounts. Nano-influencers have less than 10,000 followers and thus are perceived as very authentic and accessible, which makes them greatest drivers of high engagement rates.

Besides classification according to the number of followers, SMIs can also be categorized according to the level of professionalization, i.e., the ability to monetize their influence on social media. For example, Gómez (2019) examines research findings regarding the SMI practices and characteristics that can be monetized, and finds the first step is to have the ability to draw attention and then to establish a self-brand, and beyond that to practice self-representation (a staged representation of authenticity and emotional connection) and in the end the use of a business approach when the SMI has have gained enough credibility to maintain their success as an influencer (Gómez, 2019).

Figure 1: Five-level SMI categorization



Source: Campbell & Farrell (2020)

2.4 Theories used in influencer marketing research

This chapter provides an overview of the theories used to understand and explain why SMIs are influential, i.e., how they create and nurture their social influence. Most of these theories were used in advertising before the emergence of SMIs, especially in the celebrity endorsement and sponsorship literature. Although some of these theories are used more frequently than others, their ability to better explain the phenomenon is hard to compare since often a multi-theoretical perspective is needed to understand a certain aspect of influencer marketing. In general, some theories are used to better understand how followers' perceptions of SMI characteristics and social position are related to outcomes for the SMIs and any brands they endorse, while other theories are more frequently used for interpreting the messages conveyed by SMIs. Table 1 gives the utilized theories and examples of related corresponding studies in the influencer marketing literature.

Table 1: Theories used in influencer marketing research

Theory	Example studies	Main constructs and relationships examined
Source credibility theory	Munnukka et al., 2016	credibility→attitude to advert→brand attitude
	Teng et al., 2017	message persuasiveness→attitude change→behavioral intentions
	Lou & Yuan, 2019	credibility→trust in branded posts→brand awareness, purchase intention
	Saima & Khan, 2020	commercial versus influencer-introduced commercial→message attitudes→corporate reputation
	Kim et al., 2021	sponsorship disclosure→persuasion knowledge→message attitudes, corporate reputation
	Jang et al., 2021	level of engagement→intention to visit destination, brand attitude, purchase intention
	Dhun & Dangi, 2023	credibility, SMI-brand congruence→brand attitude, electronic word of mouth
Parasocial interaction	Lee & Watkins, 2016	Social attractiveness, physical attractiveness, attitude homophily→PSI→luxury brand value, brand/user/imagery fit, brand luxury→purchase intention
	Kurtin et al., 2018	television exposure→social attraction, task attraction, physical attraction→PSI→relationship importance
	Lou & Kim, 2019	content influence, source influence, parental influence→PSR→materialism→purchase intention
	Reinikainen et al., 2020	PRS→credibility→brand trust→purchase intention
	Sakib et al., 2020	credibility→homophily→physical attractiveness→PSI→consumer readiness→compliance intention
	Shan et al., 2020	self-SMI congruence→parasocial identification→attitude toward brand content, engagement with brand content, purchase intention
Social comparison theory	Lee & Watkins, 2016	social attractiveness, physical attractiveness, attitude homophily→PSI→luxury brand value, brand/user/imagery fit, brand luxury→purchase intention
	Jin & Ryu, 2020	photo type→consumers' envy toward SMI, PSI→purchase intention, perceived trustworthiness
	Jin et al., 2021	physical appearance social comparison, compulsive buying tendency, materialistic envy→luxury brand trust
	Hudders & De Jans, 2022	account type, content type→celebrity persona PSI, closeness of PSI, social presence
	Kim et al., 2023	SMI's gender→perceived similarity→PSI→brand attitude, post engagement
		admiration, intimacy→product attitude, purchase intention, loyalty to SMI
Social exchange theory	Holiday et al., 2020	promotional explicitness→manipulative intent→message liking
	Coco & Eckert, 2020	prior topic interest, perceived relatability, authenticity→intention to follow SMI
	Kim & Kim, 2021b	source credibility, source attractiveness→trust→loyalty to SMI, product attitude, purchase intention
	Chia et al., 2021	cost, extrinsic benefit, intrinsic benefit→SMIs' willingness to share unboxing review
	Leung et al., 2022	influencer marketing→marketing communication effectiveness
	Masuda et al., 2022	SMIs' attributes→perceived characterizations→behavioral intentions

To be continued

Table 1: Theories used in influencer marketing research (cont.)

Theory	Example studies	Main constructs and relationships examined
Attribution theory and persuasion knowledge model	Grigsby, 2020	disclosure label presence→likelihood post is an ad→perception of pushiness→attitude toward post→attitude toward brand
	De Veirman & Hudders, 2020	sponsorship disclosure type→advertising recognition→skepticism→source credibility→brand attitude
	Farivar et al., 2021	opinion leadership, PSR→followers' intention to purchase
	Kapitan et al., 2022	endorser type, authenticity→willingness to pay
	Darmawan & Huh, 2022	message type, disclosure presence→attitude toward the ad, intention to seek information, intention to see a doctor
	Yang et al., 2023	sequence of message presentation→endorsement authenticity→attitude towards the brand, SMIs' credibility
Self-determination theory	Jun & Yi, 2020	SMI's interactivity→SMI's authenticity→emotional attachment→brand trust→loyalty
	Vu et al., 2022	PSR→need support, SMIs' characteristic→intention to follow advice, electronic word of mouth, attitude towards finance
Elaboration likelihood model	Xiao et al., 2018	heuristic cues→information credibility→video attitude, brand attitude
	Erkli, 2022	source quality→purchase intention
	Park et al., 2023	consumer perception of virtual SMI→attitude toward the ad→electronic word of mouth→offline visit to a physical store
	Farivar et al., 2023	perceived physical attractiveness, trustworthiness, self-presence, originality, uniqueness, informativeness→intention to purchase
Human brands	Erz & Christiansen, 2018	individual consumer identity→collective blogger identity→blogger brand identity
	Jin et al., 2019	celebrity condition→social presence→trustworthiness, brand attitude, envy
	Ki et al., 2020	ideal need fulfillment, relatedness need fulfillment competence need fulfillment→attachment→attachment transfer
	Jun & Yi, 2020	SMI's interactivity→SMI's authenticity→emotional attachment→brand trust→loyalty
	Kim & Kim, 2022	homophily, social presence, physical attractiveness→attachment→loyalty to the SMI, advertising perception, advertising credibility, advertising resistance
	Malik et al., 2023	escape, self-involvement→fun, glamour, connectivity→overall perceived image
	Hsieh, 2023	SMI's distinctiveness, SMI's similarity, SMI's prestige→SMI's attractiveness→follower-SMI identification, community identification→electronic word of mouth intention, purchase intention
Social cognitive theory	Shan et al., 2020	self-SMI congruence→parasocial identification→attitude toward brand content, engagement with brand content, purchase intention
	Sokolova & Kefi, 2020	physical attractiveness, attitude homophily, social attractiveness→credibility, PSI→purchase intention
	Hamid, 2023	number of views, likes, comments, replies, perceived usefulness of information, perceived video characteristics, attitude toward purchase, perceived credibility of the information→purchase intention
	Barari, 2023	SMI type→fear of missing out→well-being

To be continued

Table 1: Theories used in influencer marketing research (cont.)

Theory	Example studies	Main constructs and relationships examined
Social capital theory	Boerman, 2020	disclosure→ad recognition→online behavioral intention, PSI, brand recall
	Reinikainen et al., 2020	PSI→SMI's credibility→brand trust→purchase intention
	Leung et al., 2022	influencer marketing→marketing communication effectiveness
Social influence theory	Xiao et al., 2018	heuristic cues→information credibility→video attitude, brand attitude
	Sokolova & Kefi, 2020	physical attractiveness, attitude homophily, social attractiveness→credibility, PSI→purchase intention
	Farivar et al., 2021	opinion leadership, PSI→purchase intention
Social presence theory	Schouten et al., 2020	endorser type→wishful identification, perceived similarity, trustworthiness, expertise→ad attitude, product attitude, purchase intention
	Barta et al., 2021	Instagram vs. virtual room→social presence→trustworthiness→product attitude, intention to follow advice→purchase intention, intention to recommend
	Kim, 2022	social presence→PSI→purchase intention, self-efficacy
	Johnson & Hong, 2023	social presence, heuristic cue→intention to click like, intention to purchase
	Chidiac & Bowden, 2023	media richness, media naturalness→authenticity, PSI→purchase intent
Congruency principle	Argyris et al., 2020	visual congruence→follower engagement with SMI's posts→follower engagement with brand's posts
	Belanche et al., 2021b	consumer-product congruence→attitude→purchase intention, intention to recommend
	Dhun & Dangi, 2022	credibility, SMI-brand congruence→brand attitude, electronic word of mouth
	Ju & Lu, 2022	congruence level→source credibility→brand attitude
Meaning transfer model	Jin et al., 2019	celebrity condition→social presence→trustworthiness, brand attitude, envy
	Torres et al., 2019	attractiveness, brand congruence→attitude toward the endorsement→brand attitude→purchase intentions
	Najar et al., 2024	trustworthiness, similarity, attractiveness→credibility→destination brand trust→destination purchase intention
Reactance theory	Hwang & Jeong, 2016	sponsorship disclosure→credibility, message attitudes
	Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019	conceptual advertising literacy, attitudinal and moral advertising literacy, perceptions of disclosures, evaluations of the sponsoring brand and the influencer
	Stubb & Colliander, 2019	landing page, disclosure type→brand attitude
	Kim & Kim, 2021a	congruence, sponsorship disclosure→affective motive inference, calculative motive inference→product attitude, advertising recognition
Two-step flow theory	Carr & Hayes, 2014	type of disclosure, third-party influence→credibility, word of mouth
	Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014	role of bloggers in brand communication
	Childers et al., 2019	agency perspective on influencer marketing campaigns
	Coll & Micó, 2019	phases of the SMIs' communication strategy
Role theory	Mardon et al., 2023	embeddedness perspective of SMIs' role

Source: Author's own work.

Considering SMIs emerged as a more credible source to challenge traditional ways of brand communication, it is not surprising that **source credibility theory** is frequently used to understand influencer marketing and its effects. This theory suggests that the persuasiveness and impact of a message depend on certain source characteristics, and mainly attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise, as imbedded in the credibility construct (Ohanian, 1990). Following the logic of this theory, Munnukka et al. (2016) added SMI similarity as another credibility dimension on social media, referring to the demographic or other factors that followers share with SMIs. In the context of influencer marketing this theory is used to understand how different SMI characteristics affect the credibility of SMIs (e.g., Kim et al., 2021), or how the perceived level of SMIs' credibility affects various attitudes, behavioral intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019), emotional attachment and presumed influence (Saima & Khan, 2020; Jang et al., 2021). For example, credible SMI messaging is positively related to greater message trust, brand awareness, purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Saima & Khan, 2020; Dhun & Dangi, 2023), message persuasiveness (Teng et al., 2017), and more positive brand attitude towards the focal brand (Jin et al., 2019).

With the development of mass media, and especially television, researchers noted that people tend to form one-way illusory relationships with the people and characters appearing on screen, interacting with them as if they knew each other personally (Giles, 2002), and this is called **parasocial interaction (PSI)**. It is not simply that people identify with these characters, but that also interact with them in some way, probably because of a lack of off-screen, real-world social interactions (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). It is common for viewers to feel a special connection with some of the characters they see on screen, empathize with them, and imagine deeper connections, such as sharing how they feel with a character they have never met (or could never meet) but have only watched on television, such as in a soap opera (Cowley & Barron, 2008). With the arrival of many popular personalities on social media, some researchers (e.g., Sakib et al., 2020; Lee & Watkins, 2016) have applied the same concept to the SMI context, and find that PSI with an SMI leads to positive perceptions of related brands. The PSI formulated with an SMI is strengthened with the presence of congruency between the images of the consumer's ideal self and influencer's image (Shan et al., 2020), and it is essential for building credibility with an audience (Reinikainen et al., 2020), as expertise and trustworthiness (i.e., credibility dimensions) are important factors that are associated with parasocial relationships (PSR) (Lou & Kim, 2019). The reason PSR fits well in the SMI context is probably because SMIs have many opportunities to interact with their followers personally, and not only as a group, and the relationship can thus become reciprocal, creating a stronger feeling of attachment in followers, so reinforcing PSR (Kurtin et al., 2018).

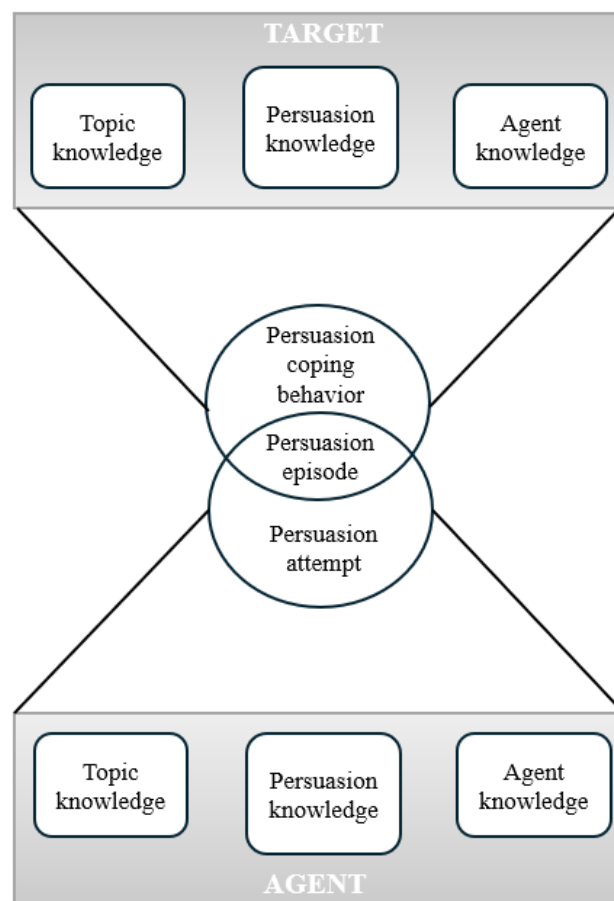
According to **social comparison theory** (Festinger, 1954), individuals perceive themselves through comparing their possessions and consumption habits with those of others, mostly people who share a similar outlook and values. They do it both with people who they perceive as better (upward comparison) or worse (downward comparison) than themselves.

In an influencer marketing context this theoretical approach is used to explain the role of upward social comparison that followers employ when looking up to SMIs. Since social media networks rely heavily on users comparing themselves to people they can easily identify with, brands endorsed by SMIs can benefit from increased brand affinity and more positive consumer attitudes because followers are constantly comparing themselves upwards in relation to their favored SMIs (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Jin et al., 2021), which influences their interactions, emotional attachment and purchase intention (Kim et al., 2023). Similarly, using social comparison theory as a theoretical basis Lee and Watkins (2016) find that followers express more favorable brand perceptions and purchase intentions when a luxury product is presented by a favored SMI, because they compare their own consumption with that of SMIs they look up to. This theory also explains unfavorable outcomes in influencer marketing: by means of upward comparison, exposure to certain ideal body types on social media results in decreased body satisfaction, negative mood, depression, and low self-esteem in followers (Bessenoff, 2016). Moreover, negative social comparisons with SMIs can lead to impulsive buying behavior mediated by anxiety (Hudders & De Jans, 2022).

Social exchange theory implies that social interaction is an exchange in which an individual takes into account costs and rewards when deciding about the relationships they will participate in within a society (Emerson, 1976). The exchange of this cost and rewards is central to the explanation of this theory where, for example, costs can be the time and effort which are exchanged for rewards, such as a sense of belonging, achievement, or status. The logic of this theory is that a relationship is going to last as long as its rewards outweigh the costs. This, as Emerson (1976, p. 359) proposed “frame of reference rather than a theory” has been extended by demonstrating that its main idea holds not only in one-to-one but in one-to-many settings such as social media, where one person can have a relationship with many others at the same time through online social exchanges (Hayes et al., 2016). From the communication exchange perspective, advertising can also be explained as an exchange in which brands form relationships with consumers by helping them make informed purchase decisions (Ducoffe & Curlo, 2000), and advertising’s value is the information and entertainment it offers (Sun et al., 2010). The application of this theory in an influencer marketing context reveals that brands need to strategically employ SMIs as a channel for transmitting persuasive messages, as SMI’s characteristics such as expertise, authenticity, and homophily present relational resources in the formation of follower trust, while physical attractiveness does not (Kim & Kim, 2021b). Leung et al. (2022) suggest that influencer marketing – as viewed through the lenses of social exchange theory – are a brand tool for leveraging SMI resources (follower networks, personal positioning, communication content, and follower trust). It has also been reported that the disclosure of a post’s commercial nature does not affect the social exchanges between followers and SMIs in any particular way, so there is no point in covert sponsorship deals (Holiday et al., 2020). However, there are studies in which this theory showed very limited potential to explain certain aspects of influencer marketing (e.g., Coco & Eckert, 2020; Chia et al., 2021).

Attribution theory is a theory that explains how people come to conclusions about the reasons for other people's behavior and events in general (Weiner, 1985). Individuals make assumptions about the motives for other agents' behavior by trying to understand if these motives are internally or externally triggered, i.e., whether the agent had done something that caused the behavior or event or something beyond their control had happened. Applied to a marketing context, it means that followers' ideas of why someone is sharing a message affects how the message is received (Kelley, 1973). In marketing communication, this theory is combined with the **persuasion knowledge model** (Friestad & Wright, 1994) to better understand how the audience will perceive messages issued by the brand (e.g., Singh et al., 2020). The persuasion knowledge model argues that over time people have developed coping mechanisms for recognizing the persuasive intent of a message as a response to commonly used promotional tactics (Figure 2). They use this mechanism to detect the persuasive intent of the messages communicated in promotional activities, and this also applies to influencer marketing as a promotional tactic in which the audience scrutinizes more SMI messages when persuasive intent is detected (e.g., Grigsby, 2020).

Figure 2: The persuasion knowledge model



Source: Friestad & Wright (1994)

This mechanism, along with the logic explained by attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), also helps people in the audience assign responsibility for SMIs' behavior (Weiner, 1985). The

perception of customer-oriented attributions leads people to believe a certain behavior was value-driven and altruistic, as opposed to suspicion-oriented attributions that lead people to believe profit-seeking is the main motive for an SMI's (Kirmani & Zhu, 2007) or brand's actions, such as socially responsible initiatives in general (Vlacos et al., 2009). Similarly, if followers infer that an SMI does not have a commercial motive for endorsing a brand they are less likely to use advertising literacy and scrutinize the message further (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). This theoretical approach is used in examining how consumers interpret influencer authenticity and credibility, influenced by factors like uniqueness, scarcity, follower numbers (Farivar et al., 2021; Kapitan et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2023), and disclosure of sponsorships (Darmawan & Huh, 2022).

Self-determination theory postulates that there are two types of motivation – autonomous and controlled (Ryan & Deci, 2002). According to the authors, autonomous motivation refers to behavior exerted with full interest and with full sense of value, whereas controlled motivation means a person is doing something to get an award or avoid punishment, both coming from some external source (Deci & Ryan, 2002). In the SMI context this theory has been used in combination with attribution theory to understand what makes people perceive SMIs as authentic. SMI authenticity is defined as “the degree to which followers perceive the influencer's passion and sincerity in content creation, as well as the strength of the influencer's internal intention” (Jun & Yi, 2020, p. 4). More specifically, those SMIs who are perceived as creating content because it gives them a pleasure to do so and they enjoy making it are perceived as more authentic compared to those who seem to do it primarily, if not solely, for commercial reasons (Jun & Yi, 2020). Moreover, self-determination theory helps understand how influencers fulfill their psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness through their content creation and interactions (Vu et al., 2022).

With the **elaboration likelihood model** Petty and Cacioppo (1986) extended persuasion studies by manipulating the quality of arguments instead of just manipulating their number. What they found is that people employ different information-processing strategies depending on the level of involvement, i.e., the level of personal relevance of the message. There is a descriptive model that accounts not only for rationality but also the irrationality of people. According to this model people process information via the central or peripheral route. Sometimes people scrutinize the information they receive (i.e., process information on the central route), and sometimes they do not scrutinize it but rely on salient cues like the spokesperson's appearance or likability (i.e., they process information via the peripheral route). This theoretical approach explains that the thought process that takes place on the central route is more predictive of attitudes and behaviors and stays more salient in the memory (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Similar to this theoretical explanation is Chaiken's (1980) **heuristic-systematic model**. Indeed, the only difference is that the heuristic-systematic model allows for both heuristic and systematic paths to co-occur with each other when people are presented with new information. In the SMI literature it is used to capture information cues and routes in a way that is conducive to better understanding the discrete

differences among factors affecting credibility evaluations (Xiao et al., 2018) and subsequent behavioral intentions (Erkli, 2022; Park et al., 2023; Farivar et al., 2023).

SMIs have sometimes been understood through the theoretical prism of **human brands**, and this theoretical approach was built on the foundation of self-determination theory. The main idea is that some people possess brandable features, and they can distinguish themselves significantly from others because these features help them fulfill other people's needs for autonomy and relatedness, and do not suppress the feeling of competence (Thomson, 2006). By meeting these particular needs in others, such people can form strong relationships with many at the time which is probably why the theory has been applied to the SMI context (e.g., Jin et al., 2019; Ki et al., 2020). In general, if people as human brands can meet other people's desire for self-governance, expertise, and closeness, then a strong emotional attachment is going to be made with a human brand (Thomson, 2006). These strong relationships have the potential to create a beneficial marketing effect: if a consumer has developed such a relationship with a brand then they will be inclined to embrace the brand's product extensions, since positive feelings from that human brand transfer to the endorsed brands, an effect known as attachment transfer (Thomson, 2006) and confirmed in an SMI context (Jin et al., 2019; Jun & Yi, 2020). Furthermore, human brands theory explains how SMIs can fulfill their followers' intrinsic needs (Malik et al., 2023). The recent application of human brands theory to influencer marketing context provides a more nuanced understanding of how SMIs build their own brands which shapes followers' responses (Hsieh, 2023). Erz and Christiansen (2018) also use this theoretical approach when exploring evolutionary trajectories in influencer marketing, with influencers going from individual consumers to becoming human brands.

The **social cognitive theory** developed from social learning theory to explain that people behave in a certain way because of their social context (Bandura, 1986). This theory explains social influence, as it considers an individual within the complex environment in which they are influenced to behave in a certain way and perform the behavior themselves. When constantly engaged in this context people confirm the attitudes and behaviors of others, and those individuals who have many people looking up to their behavior and attitudes are more influential. Accordingly, if consumers can find their ideal self in SMIs they will be more likely to conform to the behavior and attitudes endorsed by their favored SMIs (Basil, 1996). That is why a high degree of congruence between the image of an SMI and the image of the ideal self in the consumer's mind leads to more effective endorsement outcomes (Shan et al., 2020; Barari, 2023). In line with social cognitive theory, Sokolova and Kefi (2020) find that similarity plays a considerable role in facilitating the spread of persuasive messages. If an SMI holds the same values as their followers, then their branded content will be more impactful. However, a recent application of this theoretical approach shows that social learning can become less effective with the greater heterogeneity of followers' tastes, which leads to varying evaluations of the promoted products (Hamid, 2023).

Defining **social capital** is not easy, since it is defined by its function (Coleman, 1988), and in its simplest form it is “who you know” (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019). It is never one single thing, but many things that consist of some factors within the social structure that enable certain actions to be performed by the person who has social capital. Having “capital” in this context means that a person can get something valuable that would not otherwise be available to them. For example, having social capital may lead to gaining information about a job offer or the ability to influence employment decisions (Granovetter, 1995). The exact nature of such capital is contextual and up to the observer to discover (Coleman, 1988). In the social media context the number of followers is central to obtaining social capital, as a person with many followers is more likely to receive positive responses to their actions, thus further gaining social capital (Jin & Phua, 2014). There is a further bridging effect with this, as people on social media with many followers form loose but abundant social connections that provide them access to information and resources they would not otherwise have (Boerman, 2020). Studies of influencer marketing use this theoretical approach to explain the psychological underpinnings of SMIs’ influence (e.g., Reinikainen et al., 2020). However, Leung et al. (2022) found this theory also has the potential to explain the mechanisms through which SMI brand endorsements create benefits and threats.

In its original form, **social influence theory** (Kelman, 2006) recognizes three processes of social influence: compliance, identification, and internalization. Compliance is a situation in which people accept someone’s influence to gain the influencer’s approval or avoid disapproval. This type of influence relies on a means of control, like access to the physical or psychological resources that a follower needs to fulfill a need. The second type of influence according to social influence theory is identification, which occurs when followers want to define who they are by following an influencer. This self-definition through following is achieved by emulating an influencer (Kelman, 1961). As opposed to compliance influence that is extrinsically motivated (by gaining or not gaining an influencer’s appreciation), influence through identification is based on an intrinsic motivation to become more like an influencer, and is thus much stronger. Identification influence is based on an influencer’s positive qualities like attractiveness, popularity, or creativity, which followers aspire to emulate. The third type of influence according to this theory is internalization, and this is the strongest type of influence as it occurs when individuals follow an influencer because they share the same value system. The content that influencers provide for their followers enables the latter group to share a particular problem or is in line with their attitudes and values, and thus they come back for more – for them intrinsically important – content from that influencer. Social influence theory is used as a theoretical framework to understand the underlying mechanisms of SMIs’ relationships with their followers, and is usually combined with other theories (e.g., Xiao et al., 2018; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Farivar et al., 2021).

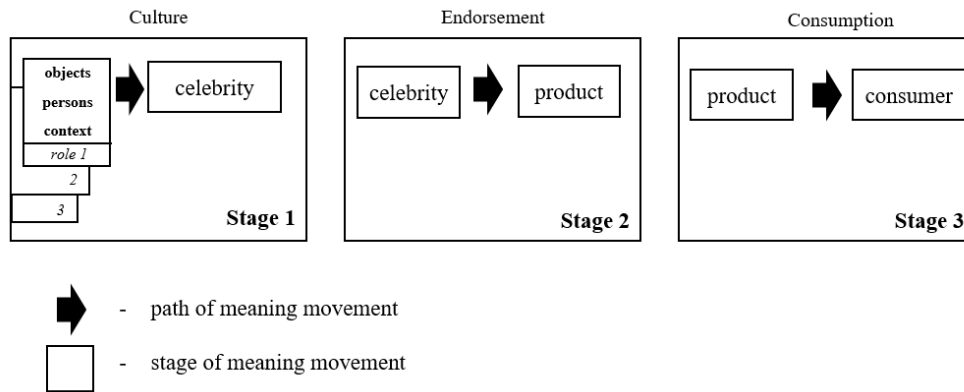
In communication theory, **social presence** is a derivative of presence, which is defined as the extent to which a person is perceived as *a person* in technology-mediated interactions

(Short et al., 1976). The social presence of another person via online channels implies that such interactions must resemble those of a human being with another human being, not a machine. This is how a deeper connection that entails trust and respect can be established (Kehrwald, 2008). Another important aspect of social presence is that the meaning of the message changes according to relational aspects, such as the nature of the relationship and emotional state of the communicator, and the lack of these non-verbal cues will probably reduce the likelihood of being misinterpreted (Riva, 2002). In the SMI context, this theory has been used to examine to what extent SMIs are perceived as virtual avatars of real people or something guided by algorithms that cannot be trusted, as well as the benefits of higher social presence in influencer marketing (Schouten et al., 2020). SMIs' ability to drive the sense of social presence can drive important outcomes (Kim, 2022), such as purchase intention (Barta et al., 2021; Chidiac & Bowden, 2023) and engagement (Johnson & Hong, 2023).

The **congruency principle** (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955) postulates that if information is congruent, it is preferred and even recalled more readily than incongruent information. The logic of this principle follows the match-up hypothesis, in which the congruency of the message is achieved through a good match between the person spreading the message and the message itself, which can have a positive effect on attitude (Baker & Churchill, 1977), and that is why this principle had been applied to the endorsement context. Specifically, a good fit between the person spreading the message and the endorsed brand could lead to a higher level of association, which is a prerequisite for positive outcomes such as good product evaluations (Till & Busler, 2000). The whole idea of native advertising, where the sponsored content is presented, as organic relies on this principle. If the audience perceives the content as congruent with the rest of the non-sponsored content they will be less likely to resist it (Argyris et al., 2020), and they will evaluate the product more favorably as opposed to what happens when the sponsored content that is not congruent with the non-sponsored content (Dhun & Dangi, 2022). In an influencer marketing context, the congruency principle explains positive attitudes and purchase intentions towards endorsed brands in the fashion industry (Belanche et al., 2021b), as well as increased follower engagement with an SMI's content (Argyris et al., 2020). However, this theory should be applied to influencer marketing with caution, since Ju and Lu (2022) find that positive brand attitude can be explained by the congruency principle only in the case of low-involvement products.

The use of product endorsement as a marketing tactic has inspired the development of several theories that attempt to explain how it works. One of these is the **meaning transfer model**, as proposed by McCracken (1989), which puts product endorsement in a broader perspective by taking into account the cultural context (Figure 3). According to this theoretical approach, cultural meaning is central as it moves through the consumer society from products to consumers and vice versa using advertising, clothing, and consumption rituals, and thus changing brand image is this way (McCracken, 1989).

Figure 3: Meaning transfer and the endorsement process



Source: McCracken (1989)

The idea is that meaning exists within the culture and needs to be transferred to goods through famous people. Applying this theory to SMIs makes sense, since SMIs use content creation to make their cultural meaning inherent to their appearance and name, which is then very salient (e.g., Abidin, 2016) and as such more easily transferrable to their followers (Jin et al., 2019). This has important implications for brands, as the right choice of SMI to engage in a campaign, i.e., the person who can convey the right message, is crucial for successful endorsements (Torres et al., 2019). Recent findings on influencer marketing also validate the explanatory power of this model for understanding the sub-dimensions of SMIs' credibility and purchase intentions (Najar et al., 2024).

Reactance theory is a cognitive bias that occurs when people ascribe great importance to the independence of their decision-making (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). Sometimes people feel like they are being told what to do, i.e., that their choices are being limited due to someone else's advice, and in such circumstances people tend to make choices that are not based on their own self-interest, but instead only because they do not want to do what someone else has told them to do, in order to preserve the sense of freedom of choice over everyday things (Brehm, 1989). In influencer marketing, this theory had been used to explain the reactions of young adults to SMIs, as adolescents are prone to reactance when the balance between the sponsored and organic content is disturbed (Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019). It has also been used to understand how different disclosure types affect purchase decisions (Stubb & Colliander, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021a). Once triggered, reactance can lower trust toward both SMIs and the endorsed brands, and encourage negative feelings towards the latter (Hwang & Jeong, 2016). This makes reactance theory an important aspect to keep in mind in influencer marketing.

According to Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), the influence of a message can be increased if it gets picked up and spread by certain people who other members of society perceive as opinion leaders. **Two-step flow theory** was one of the first to be applicable in an influencer marketing context to explain how SMIs' interpretation of information makes them more

influential on social media (Carr & Hayes, 2014; Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Subsequent studies mostly used this theoretical approach to show how brands should strategically use SMIs in their communication with audience (e.g., Childers et al., 2019; Coll & Micó, 2019).

Although mostly overlooked in this context, **role theory** is useful for understanding ethics in influencer marketing (Mardon et al., 2023). Role theory connects individual behavior to social structures, suggesting that people in complex social systems are subject to expectations that lead to roles tied to social positions (Biddle, 2013). As such, a role consists of the duties and expectations that a person must meet (Şeşen, 2015), and these roles come with norms and behaviors appropriate to them (Jones, 1991). However, roles can become problematic if the person faces role conflict (Kahn et al., 1964): a situation in which a person experiences incompatible expectations from multiple roles or a single role (Schaubroeck et al., 1989). This conflict can lead to negative outcomes, making it crucial for both practitioners and scholars to understand its causes and how to minimize it (Perrewé et al., 2004). Moreover, moral dilemmas may arise from role conflict, particularly when decision-makers must choose between conflicting moral values or duties (Kvalnes, 2019).

Role theory also has implications for business ethics because it examines how different stakeholders within business enact their responsibilities, influencing ethical decision-making (Claire et al., 2024). Expectations from others, in the form of roles, guide people's behavior, affecting both the individuals and their relationships with others (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Beu et al., 2003). Recognizing the impact of one's actions on others and accepting responsibility is crucial for activating moral norms and behavior (Schwartz, 1968). Kohlberg and Kramer (1969) explain that social approval is important for most adults, leading them to comply with roles and expectations when making ethical decisions. Therefore, ethical behavior often results from responding to others' expectations (Frink & Klimoski, 1998). However, conflicting roles can lead to unethical behavior, often masked as role morality—acting differently within a role (Gibson, 2003). In organizations with clear codes of conduct, role morality may lead individuals to accept financial and reputational constraints (Gibson, 2003). Since SMIs are not direct employees their behavior is less influenced by employer values, and they are more likely to rely on their own values to resolve any ethical dilemmas that they face (Brief et al., 1991).

2.5 The role of SMIs in brand communication

Building their online personas has enabled SMIs to become new forms of subjects on the market, a kind of entrepreneur “crafting new spaces of agency by retaining control over and reasserting their economic worth” (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, p. 4). There is a concern that theories used in PR based on relationship building and dialogue somehow fail to capture this commercial nature of SMIs (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). These theories and their applications (e.g., Hon & Grunig, 1999) imply a two-way symmetry and dialogue, but SMIs

became the third party involved. If one is to understand the complex brand-PR agency-SMI relationship, the existing PR theories might fail to explain it since, traditionally, PR was not about paying an outlet to promote a brand, but above all about dialogue and relationships. With SMIs at hand, practitioners seem to be dealing with a straightforward problem of money being the main motivator and, as a result, PR agencies face the challenge of taking control of the conversation, which is what they are hired to do at first place (Archer & Harrigan, 2016).

The fact that PR agencies and brands were not sure how to handle the now empowered and vocal “nobodies” of yesterday did not mean they can ignore them (Childers et al., 2019). As consumer conversations shifted online, social media emerged as a vital channel for disseminating corporate messages. Early research focused on identifying the most influential users of social media (e.g., Galeotti & Goyal, 2009) and exploring strategies for brands to leverage their potential (e.g., Hayes et al., 2016). It became evident that consistent, engaging content posted by influencers could foster trust and facilitate electronic word-of-mouth. Brands were thus encouraged to actively engage with loyal audiences on social media, cultivating them into brand advocates capable of amplifying brand awareness and influencing consumer behavior. This shift towards utilizing SMIs as an advertising tool was further substantiated by early research on online advertising via influential endorsers, exemplified by the work of Lin et al. (2012). Their findings highlighted the substantial impact of influencer marketing at the crossroads of marketing, sociology, and information technology, emphasizing its superior effectiveness and efficiency compared to traditional advertising strategies. Subsequent research by Godey et al. (2016) reinforced these findings by revealing significant positive effects of social media marketing on brand loyalty, preference, and price premium across diverse geographic regions. Recently, the field of influencer marketing literature has seen significant growth (Vrontis et al., 2021; Fowler & Thomas, 2023), reflected in the increasing number of studies published on the topic, and the deeper insights into the role of SMIs in brand communication that these studies have presented brought to light both advantages and disadvantages of collaborating with influencers in this context.

2.5.1 Advantages of working with SMIs

Using SMIs as a promotional tool can be beneficial for a number of reasons, which can be categorized as follows:

- Access to target audience

Drawing from basic posits of source credibility theory according to which the persuasiveness and impact of a message depend on certain source characteristics (Ohanian, 1990), collaborating with SMIs offers brands a closer relationship with the audience. This opens unparalleled access to a vast and diverse customer base, enabling targeted advertising and enhanced engagement with specific demographics (Rutter et al., 2021; Doshi et al., 2022).

By leveraging the expansive reach and diverse follower demographics of SMIs, brands can effectively tailor their marketing messages to resonate with specific consumer segments (Lou & Yuan, 2019), thereby maximizing the impact of their advertising efforts (Vanninen et al., 2022). Following the logic of elaboration likelihood theory (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), followers are less likely to scrutinize information about the brand if it is coming from cues such as likability or appearance. This is how SMIs play a crucial role in facilitating targeted communication by allowing brands to connect with a wider audience that may be otherwise challenging to reach through traditional marketing channels. This is echoed by Pourazad et al. (2023), who highlight the strategic advantage of collaborating with SMIs in enabling brands to identify and engage with their target audiences more effectively: through key performance indicators such as follower count and engagement rates, brands can gain valuable insights into the demographics and preferences of their audiences, thereby informing their marketing strategies and content creation efforts.

- Cost-efficiency

One of the key advantages of working with SMIs is the ability to achieve cost-effective advertising (Britt et al., 2020). Collaborating with SMIs enables brands to tap into authentic social connections and differentiate themselves from traditional advertising methods (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021). Unlike traditional advertising methods that often require significant financial investment, influencer marketing can offer a more efficient use of resources (Shan, 2020; Zwass, 2023). The reason for such effects is partially based in social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976): followers engage in social exchange with SMIs because their characteristics present rewards that outweigh the cost of the interaction. SMIs have already built engaged and loyal followings, meaning brands can access their audiences without the need for extensive ad spending (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Achieving higher network engagement efficiencies and creating personalized customer-centric approaches for product promotion maximizes brands' marketing budget, enabling them to achieve their branding objectives more efficiently (Rutter et al., 2021). Moreover, thanks to SMIs brands can dynamically adjust their strategies based on real-time feedback: this flexibility enables brands to optimize their marketing efforts and allocate resources more effectively, leading to increased efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Han et al., 2022).

- Influencing purchase intention

The influence of SMIs on the purchase intentions of their followers is multifaceted and depends on various factors related to the characteristics of the specific SMIs and their interactions with followers. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) offers a theoretical lens that explains the impact of SMIs on followers' purchase intention: people form a perception of themselves by comparing the things they own and consume to those owned and consumed by others, and mirror SMIs in an upward comparison. Multiple studies have highlighted the significant role played by SMIs in shaping consumer behavior and purchase decisions (Chetioui et al., 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Reinikainen et al., 2020;

Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). For example, using SMIs enables brands to strategically position themselves to drive consumer preferences and loyalty. The dynamic interaction with audience and real-time feedback via SMIs can lead to increased purchase intentions as brands adapt to meet the evolving needs and preferences of their audiences (Zwass, 2023). Working with SMIs allows brands to tap into authentic social connections and resolve market information gaps, ultimately influencing purchasing decisions (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). SMIs' ability to create engaging content and leverage their credibility can significantly impact purchase intentions with regard to the endorsed brands (Lin et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2023). Additionally, SMIs can enhance brand credibility and drive purchase intentions by creating personalized content that resonates with their audiences (Koay et al., 2021).

- Driving brand engagement

SMIs have the ability to foster PSR with their audience, due to factors such as attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, and similarity, which in turn aid brand endorsement and consumer engagement (Delbaere et al., 2021; Ashraf et al., 2023). SMIs facilitate increased engagement through promotional incentives, event information, and the emotional bonds formed during online interactions (Fan et al., 2023; Zhang & Mac, 2023; Gupta et al., 2023). Positive engagement effects stem from SMIs' high perceived social presence, which makes their messages personal despite being mediated by technology (Short et al., 1976). This heightened engagement not only drives consumer preferences but also leads to increased brand visibility and awareness (Bentley et al., 2021; Vanninen et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

Evidently, the relationships SMIs form with their followers over time enable them to offer many benefits to brands that invest in this form of advertising. However, despite the indisputable advantages of influencer marketing, there are also disadvantages that should not be ignored.

2.5.2 Disadvantages of working with SMIs

Aside from gaining certain benefits, using SMIs as the communicators of corporate messages can have some drawbacks, such as the following:

- Authenticity and credibility challenges

SMIs are often considered human brands (Thomson, 2006), meaning they poses brandable features that help them stand out and meet the audience's needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Hence, maintaining a brand's own authenticity and credibility poses significant challenges for brands working with SMIs. One of the central issues revolves around the authenticity of SMIs' endorsements, particularly in light of sponsored content, as balancing professionalism with free speech is challenging (Dwivedi et al., 2018), leading to content standardization (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). SMIs' endorsements can often blur

the lines between genuine recommendations and promotional material, leading to authenticity concerns among audiences (Balaban & Szabolcs, 2022). This blurring of authenticity can undermine audience trust in both the SMI and the endorsed brand, impacting overall brand credibility (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021) and long-term loyalty (Dinh & Lee, 2021). Furthermore, any controversies that SMIs are involved with can pose risks for the brands they endorse (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2023). SMIs may engage in behaviors or endorse products that contradict their established personas or values, damaging the authenticity of both themselves and the related brands (Arnesson, 2022, Hess et al., 2022).

- Reputational risks

Following the logic of the meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989), which posits that meaning changes through society from consumers to products and vice versa, brands also face inherent risks related to their brand image and reputation when working with SMIs. One of the primary concerns revolves around the potential impact of SMIs' behavior and content on brand perception. Bentley et al. (2021) emphasize the challenges brands encounter in managing collaborations with SMIs, including potential loss of control over messaging and reputational harm. SMIs' actions, statements, or affiliations can reflect poorly on the brands they endorse, particularly if their behavior is deemed controversial (Abidin et al., 2023; Lozano-Blasco et al., 2023) or harmful (Selkie, 2022) by the audience. Loss of control over content can also lead to the erosion of message consistency, hindering the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns (Marwick, 2020; Rutter et al., 2021; Vanninen, 2022; Abidin et al., 2023). This loss of control over messaging and the associated reputational risks can lead to long-term damage to the brand's image (Kim et al., 2021).

- Operational challenges

Influencer marketing presents brands with a range of financial and operational challenges that can impact the effectiveness and efficiency of their marketing efforts. One significant challenge is the cost associated with collaborating with SMIs. Having a large follower base is the social capital that allows SMIs to receive positive responses on social media and attract business deals with brands (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019). However, Leung et al. (2022) highlight the financial burden brands face when engaging SMIs, particularly those with a lot of social capital, i.e., large follower counts. These SMIs often command high fees for their services, which can strain marketing budgets, especially for smaller brands or businesses with limited resources. Moreover, working with SMIs with high follower counts may lead to decreased brand uniqueness and attitudes for divergent products, further complicating the financial considerations for brands (De Veirman et al., 2017). Additionally, Rutter et al. (2021) emphasize the operational challenges brands encounter in selecting and managing partnerships with SMIs effectively: the process of identifying suitable SMIs, negotiating contracts, and coordinating content creation can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Brands must also contend with difficulties in accurately measuring the return on investment in influencer marketing (Bentley et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2021). The operational risks of

working with SMIs are associated with potentially overlapping with other brands, the use of hidden advertising, and challenges in selecting the appropriate SMIs (Černikováitė & Karazijienė, 2023). Brands must navigate these operational hurdles while ensuring transparency, authenticity, and alignment with their marketing objectives.

- Regulatory concerns

In recent years, influencer marketing has come under increased scrutiny due to a range of regulatory concerns. One prominent issue is the lack of transparency and disclosure surrounding sponsored content. There are many challenges brands face in ensuring that SMIs properly disclose paid partnerships, as mandated by various advertising standards and regulations (Bentley et al., 2021). Failure to disclose sponsorships properly can lead to consumer mistrust and regulatory repercussions, posing significant risks for brands and SMIs alike. In a similar vein, Černikováitė and Karazijienė (2023) emphasized concerns regarding hidden advertising, whereby SMIs fail to clearly distinguish sponsored content from organic posts. This lack of transparency can deceive consumers and violate advertising regulations, leading to legal and reputational risks for brands involved in such collaborations. Another regulatory concern relates to ethical considerations and the dissemination of accurate information. Wiederhold (2023) points out the risks associated with SMIs lacking professional training and potentially spreading inaccurate or misleading information about products or services. Brands must thus ensure that SMIs they partner with adhere to ethical guidelines and provide accurate and reliable information to consumers.

Upon discussing both the advantages and disadvantages of using influencer marketing in corporate communication, it becomes clear that this form of promotion can be very effective if approached with due diligence regarding the selection of SMIs. It is also clear that the challenging task of collaborating with the right SMI is just the start of the process, and brands should not expect that is where their work ends. On the contrary, brands should regularly monitor and manage the content SMIs' post, both about their brand and other topics, in order to ensure that authenticity is maintained and optimal outcomes are achieved. Moreover, while brands now have a lot of work to do with regard to collaborating with SMIs, the future could bring even more complications to this activity.

2.5.3 Factors influencing the effectiveness of influencer marketing

Although success is difficult to define in general, and the context of influencer endorsements is no exception to this, this subchapter presents several key factors that can help the advantages to outweigh the disadvantages in this context:

- SMIs' characteristics

SMIs are more credible than traditional promotional channels because of the insights into the private lives of the content creators that are on offer, as influencers incorporate their private interests in, for example, beauty and fashion, into the documentation of their daily

routines (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). The co-creation of value extends to the emotional attachment and perceived expertise of SMIs. Followers perceive SMIs as human brands that meet their needs for ideality, relatedness, and competence (Thomson, 2006), leading to strong emotional attachments and persuasive influence (Ki & Kim, 2019; Malik et al., 2023). This emotional connection enhances the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns by fostering trust and loyalty among followers, contributes to the persuasiveness of SMIs and strengthens followers' loyalty to them. Homophily, or the similarity in attitude, values, and appearance between followers and SMIs, is a key factor in fostering emotional attachment (Miranda et al., 2021; Ladhari et al., 2020). Additionally, followers are drawn to SMIs who provide informative, visually appealing, and expert content, further deepening their emotional connection (Ki et al., 2020).

Interactivity on social media platforms, which is a distinguishing feature of SMIs compared to traditional celebrities, fosters a sense of authenticity and emotional connection (Jun & Yi, 2020). Followers perceive SMIs as authentic individuals with whom they can relate, leading to higher levels of trust and loyalty (Jun & Yi, 2020). However, it is essential to strike a balance between authenticity and the rules of self-presentation. While disclosing personal information can enhance credibility and trust, excessive disclosure may come across as inappropriate and reduce credibility and trust (Leite et al., 2022; AlRabiah et al., 2022). Additionally, the perceived credibility and authenticity of SMIs contribute to the co-creation of value, as followers trust the recommendations and endorsements provided by influencers (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

- Contextual factors

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is not solely determined by the characteristics of SMIs, but also by contextual factors and follower characteristics. Several studies have highlighted the moderating role of contextual factors in the relationship between SMI characteristics and follower behavior. For instance, factors such as perceived behavioral control, subjective norms, and the perceived congruency of products with followers' self-image can influence the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns (Chetioui et al., 2020). Additionally, drawing on social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and two-step flow theory, follower envy towards SMIs, message process involvement, parental influence, and environmental stimuli can all affect follower responses to influencer marketing efforts (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Trivedi & Sama, 2020; Lou & Kim, 2019; Zhang et al., 2023).

Moreover, the effectiveness of influencer marketing may vary across different product categories and brand types. Studies have shown that the perceived usefulness of influencer messages differs based on product type, with luxury brands' main offer being symbolic value rather than functional benefits (Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). In some product categories, such as shoes and hair products, influencer endorsements may not have a significant impact on purchase decisions (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019). The co-creation of value occurs through various channels. Followers often share their positive experiences with

endorsed brands, corroborating the claims made by SMIs in their posts and encouraging others to make purchases (Silva et al., 2020). The interplay between SMI characteristics, campaign intent, and platform type also influences the effectiveness of influencer marketing efforts (Hughes et al., 2019). For example, while expert SMIs may be suitable for driving engagement via blogs, their effectiveness may be limited on platforms like Facebook, where the hedonic value of content is more critical for driving engagement than SMI expertise.

- Message characteristics

Research on message characteristics within influencer marketing examines the content and format of influencer marketing messages. Studies emphasize the importance of high-quality visuals, engaging text, and originality for attracting followers and driving purchase intentions (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Magno, 2017). Consistent with the congruency principle (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955), which postulates congruent messages are more preferred, SMI-brand fit also plays a crucial role in the co-creation of value. When there is a strong alignment between the values and image of the endorsed brand and the SMI, it enhances the credibility and effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns (Schouten et al., 2020). This alignment fosters a sense of authenticity and relatability, which resonates with followers and strengthens their connection to the endorsed brand. As such, congruence between the SMI and the endorsed product significantly influences brand image and advertising effectiveness (Breves et al., 2021; Schneewind & Sharkasi, 2022). However, over-commercialization and lack of transparency can lead to negative reactions from followers and undermine brand credibility (Van Dam & van Reijmersdal, 2019). The findings from these studies have substantial implications for brands and PR agencies, and it is crucial for brands to carefully select SMIs whose characteristics align with their target audience and brand image (Silva et al., 2020).

Upon discussing the key factors relevant for successful influencer endorsements for both endorsed brands and SMIs, the next subchapter discusses how SMIs themselves can be perceived as brands.

2.5.4 The future of SMIs in brand communication

Appel et al. (2020) took up the ambitious task of predicting the future of social media in marketing. Based on previous academic research, discussions with practitioners, and popular discourse analysis, they outline nine themes they believe will shape the future of social media in marketing. One of these is the inevitable rise of SMIs in the near future and their continuing presence in the marketing mix of various brands. Another theme, assigned to the far future, concerns a new form of SMIs – non-humans on social media – with the authors predicting artificial intelligence in the form of bots and virtual SMIs will soon proliferate online. Indeed, some brands have already turned to virtual endorsers, i.e., virtual SMIs that at first sight seem less likely to get involved in controversies, although in practice this has not always been the case, as virtual SMIs can still make mistakes that have negative

outcomes for the endorsed brands, such as mentioning drugs and using disrespectful language (Raphael, 2018). The fact is that behind all virtual SMIs there is still a need for human intervention, which makes them more likely to make the same, human mistakes as regular SMIs.

Thomas and Fowler (2020) examine this still under-researched aspect of influencer marketing, looking at how endorser type – real or virtual – affects consumer reactions and brand-related outcomes. Their results show that when virtual SMIs commit transgressions it negatively affects attitudes and intentions towards the brands being endorsed, and thus brands need to carefully consider what to do when such things happen. Despite this, the most recent findings on the topic show that virtual SMIs induce significantly lower appearance anxiety in followers than human SMIs (Deng & Jiang, 2023), and that using them leads to higher perceived ad novelty (Franke et al., 2023), which implies there is future for artificial intelligence in the influencer marketing business. Moreover, virtual SMIs are perceived as less responsible for the results of any endorsement (Liu & Lee, 2024).

In conclusion, while SMIs have shaken the established relationships of brands with audiences and communication agencies, they have now become an integral part of corporate communication. This makes understanding the factors related to successful SMI endorsements a crucial step towards revealing the dynamics of influencer marketing.

2.6 SMIs as brands

The same as traditional brands, SMIs can adopt a certain personality as their human brand, for example, they can be a “big sister” to their followers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). For a while it was uncommon to look at SMIs (in research) as brands of their own, but instead they were seen as a context for studying brand outcomes for the brands they endorse (e.g., Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). However, Woodroof et al. (2020) took a different perspective – the one where SMIs were regarded as separate brand entities, independent from the brands they endorse, and as such they need to maintain the positive attributes related to them.

Brands as social signals enable products to not only perform functionally but make social statements on behalf of their consumers. Both functionality and symbolic meaning are summarized in brand image (Meenaghan, 1995), and can help brands create an image that is similar to the self-image of target customers (Graeff, 1997). A brand serves as a mechanism that can help consumers reduce risk and post-purchase cognitive dissonance (Nandan, 2005). People use brands to communicate to others what they believe and stand for, what important values they foster and who they want to be (Chaplin & John, 2005). On the other hand, companies use brands to signal certain things about their own values that might not be communicated with elements of the marketing mix alone (Klein & Leffler, 1981).

The individual as a brand is not a novelty in marketing, and celebrities’ ability to attract consumer attention long ago shifted the focus of marketing research toward the relationships

formed between famous people and their audiences, with certain celebrities recognized as human brands (Thomson, 2006). In the context of ethics in influencer marketing it is important to focus on the brand attributes that are usually related to ethics and the SMIs' attributes that are related to the purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand. Among the attributes that overlap in this context are credibility, image, and reputation.

2.6.1 Credibility

In general, people will believe a certain source if they see others believing it (Metzger et al., 2010). Source credibility could be challenging to define on social media because of multiple actors and the blending of genres and content, but as ordinary social media users become SMIs they can be considered both sources and media (Balaban & Mustatea, 2019). Back in 2014, a leading academic in PR predicted a media credibility crisis would take place because of embedded content, like paid posts shared by SMIs (Macnamara, 2014). A later analysis of SMI online endorsement reconfirmed the importance of source credibility in an influencer marketing context (Breves et al., 2021).

Followers perceive SMIs as more credible than traditional celebrities, and when both are perceived as equally physically attractive and endorse the same brand, SMIs evoke a higher sense of relatedness due to their social presence (Jin, 2018). The entertainment value of influencer marketing, combined with the credibility of the SMIs, positively influences the formation of para-social relationships between followers and SMIs (Lou & Kim, 2019). The credibility of SMIs significantly affects purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand. However, this impact diminishes as PSI increases, although high PSI does not render it insignificant (Breves et al., 2019). In some influencer marketing studies credibility is equated with trust, although some argue that the exact meaning varies depending on the product category (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019). For instance, credibility emerges as the strongest predictor of followers' attitudes towards fashion influencers (Chetioui et al., 2020).

The antecedent of two dimensions of source credibility – trustworthiness and expertise – is argument quality (Miranda et al., 2021). However, the impact of argument quality differs for each dimension: expertise is more influenced by argument quality compared to trustworthiness. Conversely, trustworthiness is more closely linked to perceived homophily, indicating the degree to which followers perceive SMIs as similar to themselves. Moreover, trustworthiness has emerged as the most crucial factor for the success of SMIs, contributing to enhanced brand image, brand satisfaction, brand trust, purchase intention, and willingness to pay a premium price (Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). Furthermore, the choice of brands endorsed by SMIs is closely tied to their perceived trustworthiness, while expertise holds significant importance in fields such as sports and fitness (Balaban & Mustatela, 2019). Nevertheless, followers may occasionally question whether an SMI genuinely uses the products they endorse, leading to posts that lack credibility (Silva et al., 2020). However, if followers perceive that an SMI possesses genuine knowledge and passion for the endorsed

product category (e.g., automobiles), they are more inclined to perceive the SMI as trustworthy and attribute higher expertise ratings to them (Breves et al., 2021).

SMIs face challenges in establishing credibility, and certain factors can hinder their credibility-building efforts. For instance, sharing both positive and negative aspects of a product does not necessarily enhance perceived credibility compared to solely praising the product (De Vierman & Hudders, 2020). This finding holds true even for non-disclosed posts, with two-sided messages being perceived as less credible than one-sided non-disclosed posts. Moreover, the credibility of an advertisement can be compromised when there is a mismatch between the ideas presented by the SMI and the endorsed brands (e.g., a vegan promoting animal-based products) (Silva et al., 2020).

The disclosure of posted content, whether by the SMIs or the platforms they use, significantly affects the SMIs' credibility, as non-disclosure may be perceived as manipulative (Kim et al., 2021). Comments from followers who have used the product and whose experiences align with the claims made by the SMIs enhance the credibility of the brand, endorser, and advertising (Silva et al., 2020). Additionally, the alignment between SMIs and the endorsed brand signals to followers that the SMI is driven by intrinsic motivations rather than monetary gain, resulting in higher perceived source credibility. However, followers with extensive prior experience with an SMI, indicating a high level of parasocial interaction, may base their credibility evaluation on that experience rather than the fit between SMI and the brand (Breves et al., 2021). Moreover, if a posted content suggests a close relationship between the brand and the SMI, characterized not only by approval but also by the actual use of the product, the communicated message about the product/brand is perceived as more credible (Silva et al., 2020). Conversely, when brands control SMIs' messages then post credibility is diminished, leading to decreased interest in the brand and a lower intention to search for related information (Martínez-López et al., 2020).

2.6.2 Image

Image is a consumer-constructed concept related to brands, as individuals ascribe an image to a brand based on their own perceptions of a set of associations they have about it (Nandan, 2005). In building brand image advertisers should base their promotional activities on variety and reality, and put more emphasis on quality than glamour and exaggeration (Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). Brand image became very important in an online context because online shopping, although more convenient than going to a store, did deprive consumers of an important aspect of shopping – physical examination of the product. Therefore, consumers need to make sure what they are buying will live up to their expectations once they get it. To reduce the chance of disappointment, consumers thus rely on brand image as a critical cue minimizing financial, time and product risk (Aghekyan-Simonian et al., 2012).

Building an image aligned with identity takes time, effort and continuous investment in communication (Pavlek, 2008). Managers need to carefully examine the image of personas and events they want to be associated with and differentiate between them according to the image they convey to make sure the transferred image is aligned with the specific brand's identity and position (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). Image transfer – described by McCracken (1989) as meaning transfer that shifts between entities – is crucial in this process, as it enables marketing efforts that result in the construction of a favorable brand image.

Image is especially important for services, as these are intangible and their production cannot be separated from their consumption, so consumers rely on image more heavily than with physical products (Iglesias et al., 2017). Although business entities might be more focused on product development and market expansion, all their strategies and choices are subject to a constant scrutinizing by the public, and especially their target audiences (Sierra et al., 2010). Studying image is important since it serves as a mediator for many brand effects, such as the country of origin effect (Diamantopoulos et al., 2001). Consumers tend to show more favorable attitudes towards brands they perceive as part of their in-group rather than out-group brands. However, the moral stance of brands can even influence attitudes towards out-group brands by reducing the psychological distance with them (Choi & Winterich, 2013).

SIMs lend their image to the brands they endorse, thereby imparting characteristics, identities, and meanings to the endorsed product or service (Silva et al., 2020). For instance, negative comments about SIMs' appearance can generate high levels of engagement and potentially compromise the image of the endorsed product (Silva et al., 2020). Conversely, followers sharing positive experiences with the product in the comments section of a post can contribute to a positive image of the brand, product, and endorser.

The fit between an SIM and a brand has a positive impact on SIMs' image, particularly for followers with minimal prior experience with the SIM (Breves et al., 2019). In cases where brand managers need to engage an SIM who may not be an ideal match for their product, targeting an SIM with a strong association with their audience can mitigate skepticism among followers who already have a strong parasocial connection with them (Breves et al., 2019). Maintaining the compatibility between the image of SIMs and the products they promote is crucial, as the image of one can transfer to the other during the endorsement process (Balaban & Mustatea, 2019). SIMs' image is also affected by the perception of authenticity (Agnihotri et al., 2023) and the strength of the PSR formed with them (Breves et al., 2021; Breves & Liebers, 2022).

2.6.3 Reputation

Reputation is a social construct based on the interaction of a company with other stakeholders and intermediaries within its field (Fombrun, 2001), and it is formed as a result of a set of public judgments that can get better or worse with time based on what all stakeholders think about the company (Siano et al., 2011). The complexity of this concept

lies in the notion that it is not only derived from past behavior, but also the current expectations of other stakeholders about delivering and maintaining product and market value (Mahon & Wartick, 2003). Although an intangible asset, reputation is linked to important, meaningful and measurable outcomes. It is a base for associations and as such can yield a market-value premium, better financial results and lower capital costs (Smith et al., 2010).

Reputation, though challenging to define and measure, is a crucial asset that can confer a competitive advantage in the market (Pich et al., 2018). It serves as an indicator of performance, encompassing evaluations from all stakeholders and necessitating ongoing monitoring of key perceptions (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001). This cannot be easily replicated or established overnight, making it crucial for consumer decision-making (Branco & Rodrigues, 2006). Consumers rely on reputation when making quick or uninformed judgments about products and services, using it as a cue to navigate uncertainty in their purchasing decisions (Schinietz & Epstein, 2005). Less reputable brands often resort to low-scope cues such as warranties and pricing to compensate for their lack of reputation (Akdeniz et al., 2014). In contrast, reputable brands are viewed as less likely to make false claims, given the potential risk to their established reputation (Walker, 2010).

Despite its importance, reputation can be fragile in the context of consumer behavior, particularly concerning its role as an outcome of marketing activities (Park et al., 2014; Han et al., 2015). Research suggests that reputation is primarily formed over time, based on consumers' perceptions of a company's performance, values, and image (Da Silva Lopes, 2016). Tangible features such as product performance and design, as well as intangible aspect like values, contribute to the formation of reputation in the business sphere (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997; Keller, 1993).

More recently studies have explored reputation management in the digital realm, highlighting the strategic importance of reputation in online communities (Kim & Ko, 2012; Chierici, 2019). Reputation serves as a foundation for social exchange, driving consumer referrals and influencing consumer behavior across various online platforms (Hsu & Lin, 2008). However, the impact of reputation varies depending on the platform's social dynamics, with tighter-knit networks placing greater importance on brand reputation for viral sharing (Hayes et al., 2016).

In the realm of influencer marketing, SMIs' reputation plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions and attitudes towards brands (Archer et al., 2014). Transparent and honest reviews are essential for maintaining blogger reputation, while sponsored posts that lack transparency can lead to consumer skepticism and negative perceptions of both the post and the brand (Grigsby, 2020). Other important factors in building and maintaining SMIs' reputation are their communication skills (Taher et al., 2022), relatedness of the followers (Saldaña et al., 2023), professionalism and empathy (Shao, 2023). Similarly, online interactions and electronic contacts contribute to the formation of e-reputation, though this

area requires further exploration and operationalization (Chun & Davies, 2001; Dutot et al., 2016).

Strategic corporate communication and internal communication play vital roles in reputation building, emphasizing the importance of aligning communication efforts with brand and reputation objectives (Forman & Argenti, 2005). Additionally, strong brand reputation has been linked to increased consumer engagement and content sharing, particularly among consumers seeking to enhance their social status through consumption (Choi & Burnham, 2020). Understanding these nuances is crucial for effectively managing brand reputation and fostering consumer trust and loyalty in today's competitive marketplace.

Brand reputation is often used interchangeably with brand image, but there is enough evidence the two, although similar, are conceptually not the same thing (Chun, 2005). As opposed to brand image that captures current and fast-changing perceptions, reputation is more stable and consists of multiple images over a longer time period (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997; Keller 1993). As such, reputation is perceived as evolving over time based on performance and communication, as opposed to image that is more in the moment and can be formed through promotional activities at a given moment (Gray & Balmer, 1998). This points to the conceptually important difference that image is the most recent belief about a business entity, whereas reputation is based on value judgments about an entity formed over time, based on what it does and how it behaves. Similarly, image can be changed quickly, but reputation needs time to evolve since it is based on not just momentary impressions, but also past experiences (Chun, 2005). In business, brand image usually has a more specific influence on consumer's perceptions about product value and service quality, and reputation has a wider influence on perceived customer values and loyalty (Cretu & Brodie, 2007).

Upon revisiting the early development of SMIs, their classification, and theories and outcomes related to them, the next chapter discusses the main ideas and constructs from business ethics that are relevant in an influencer marketing context.

3 BUSINESS ETHICS

This chapter focuses on ethics in the business environment. It begins by discussing unethical behavior in business in general and then narrows its focus to ethics in advertising. Finally, the chapter concludes with a review of the ethical decision-making models that are often used as the theoretical underpinnings in business ethics research.

3.1 Ethical decision-making in business

Unethical behavior is often seen as part of doing business, and the best consumers can do is stay alert and look for alternatives to firms that engage in such practices (Mitchell et al., 2022). Grasping every aspect of (un)ethical behavior in business is an overwhelming challenge, but the metaphor of "bad apples versus bad barrel" (Trevino & Youngblood, 1990) narrowed the focus of the debate. The question at the heart of this issue is whether

people behave (un)ethically because of their personal characteristics or because of their surroundings.

In today's highly connected environment it takes more than being consumer-oriented to maintain good relationships with consumers. Recent studies in business ethics show that the incorporation of ethics in decision-making processes, i.e., institutionalization of ethics (Vitell & Singhapakdi, 2007), can be explicit or implicit. Explicit ethics in an industry or a company means ethical behavior is codified in policies, manuals, programs, committees and codes of ethics (Singhapakdi et al., 2010). In contrast, implicit ethics institutionalization represents "a work climate in which ethical behavior is understood by employees to be crucial in the makeup and functioning of the firm" (Singhapakdi et al. 2010, p. 78). Implicit institutionalization of ethics is important because in this way ethics is perceived as more important and job satisfaction is greater (Singhapakdi et al., 2010).

Unethical behavior in business is sometimes seen through the lens of theories of self-interest (e.g., Grover, 1993), but since business is a social phenomenon it needs to be regarded through that of relationships (Beu et al., 2003). Jones (1991) explains that society and ethics go hand in hand, as ethics is a set of decisions that are acceptable to the larger community. This means that by being part of society an individual accepts some basic principles such as all lives are worth living and differences among society members are respected as long as they do not interfere with each other (DeGeorge, 1999). Without commonly accepted norms and value systems people could not function as a society, and the same goes for business. The social context of business is made of agreements and institutions shared among the members, and their freedom to make profit is restricted by the values of justice, equality and truthfulness as expressed in rules, principles or codes (Lewis, 1985).

Prior research suggests it is common for people to form ethical judgments about other people's behavior (e.g., Goldberg et al., 1999). Similarly, consumers gauge the ethical behavior of companies and punish those they perceive as unethical or reward those that they perceive as ethical. However, these judgments can be biased, as people tend to judge a situation as unethical depending on the identifiability of the victim and consequences of the action, i.e., if the victim is identifiable and/or the action led to negative outcome the action will be judged as less ethical than would otherwise be the case (Gino et al., 2009). The perception of ethical accountability should thus be considered when examining (un)ethical judgments in business.

Accountability requires a source of expectations grounded in social context. This is how it is inherently related to morality. As Van Schoelandt (1993) explains, moral accountability is rooted in the idea people tend to follow moral obligations, i.e., they do what they think is right and what is expected of them in a certain situation. These obligations often include other people and rules that may or not be written, but which one feels should be followed. Hence, moral accountability implies people hold each other morally accountable to following social norms.

Being aware of the consequences of our actions for others and ascribing responsibility to ourselves are essential conditions for the activation of moral norms and moral behavior (Schwartz, 1968). Alternatively, when individuals perceive their responsibility for the consequences of their actions as only partial, they are more likely to choose a less ethical course of action (Mayo & Marks, 1990). In a similar vein, Brass et al. (1998) suggest that ethical decision-making should be studied in terms of relationships, as moral agents in business are faced with ethical dilemmas concerning their superiors, subordinates, colleagues and other stakeholders they form relationships with. They suggest it is more likely that ethical behavior will occur between people who have a strong relationship that is symmetrical in terms of power. Reputational concern also plays an important role in this context, so unethical behavior is less likely if there is a higher chance of others finding out about it. The relationship aspect of ethical decision-making suggests accountability has a strong impact on ethical behavior (Beu et al., 2003). Accountability allows more than individual and situational characteristics to guide ethical behavior in organizations, as individuals can become overwhelmed by relationship expectations to conform to the values of others rather than their own (Brief et al., 1991).

Accountability is a one way to ensure people in complex social settings engage in reliable behavior (Katz & Khan, 1978). Unethical behavior as a social phenomenon occurs in a complex process of interdependent situational, individual and relationship factors (Jones, 1991; Brass et al., 1998). Individuals are held accountable outside their work organizations by laws, rules, and salient expectation of others (Ferris & Judge, 1991). In a business context, accountability refers to the responsibility towards an audience that holds reward or sanction power over an individual, and these rewards or sanctions are contingent upon the audience's evaluation of the individual's conduct (Beu & Buckley, 2001). Along these lines, although constrained by formal organizational norms, a person's ethical behavior is also a result of responding to expectations others hold over that person in an organization (Frink & Klimoski, 1998).

Accountability works as a universal social norm that imposes on individuals a sense that they should comply with certain rules (Beu & Buckley, 2001). For example, employees make ethical decisions by keeping in mind the values of those who hold them accountable. However, if a person is not familiar with these values then they will turn to their own value system to resolve any ethical dilemmas that arise (Brief et al., 1991). Moreover, the sense of accountability is significantly greater when there is a high chance of being sanctioned for any wrongdoing (Schlenker et al., 1994). This implies that highly structured and clearly stated situations need to be outlined in specific codes of behavior, along with a mechanism for monitoring behavior, in order to elicit the favorable effects of accountability (Beu & Buckley, 2001).

3.2 Ethical decision-making models

Three decades ago, Laczniak (1983) pointed out the lack of an underlying theory for studying marketing ethics has “retarded the teaching, practice, and research of marketing ethics” (p. 8). Not long after this, several ethical decision-making models were developed (e.g., Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Rest, 1986; Trevino 1986; Jones, 1991). The proposed models enabled empirical testing of the ethical decisions made by marketing professionals because they proposed an array of variables linked to ethical decision-making (Loe et al., 2000). Central to the understanding of ethical decision-making models is comprehension of the basic concepts that constitute them. First, there are the concepts of moral agency and ethical decision-making itself. According to Jones (1991), a moral agent is “a person who makes a moral decision, even though he or she may not recognize that moral issues are at stake” (p. 367), and an ethical decision is “a decision that is both legal and morally acceptable to the larger community” (p. 367). Moral issues arise when the consequences of an individual’s decision-making affect the interests, welfare, or expectations of others (Rest, 1986).

According to these models (e.g., Dubinsky & Loken, 1989; Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Rest, 1986; Trevino, 1986), ethical decision-making has a few distinct steps. These were set out Ferrell and Gresham (1985), who acknowledged marketers encounter ethical dilemmas emerging from their social or cultural environments:

- The first step is recognition of the dilemma.
- The second, and central step of the model is moral judgment, which is impacted by individual factors such as knowledge and values, and organizational factors such as policies and reward systems.
- The third step is (un)ethical behavior.
- The last step in their model is evaluation of behavior, which goes back to individual and organizational factors forming a loop from decision-making to evaluation.

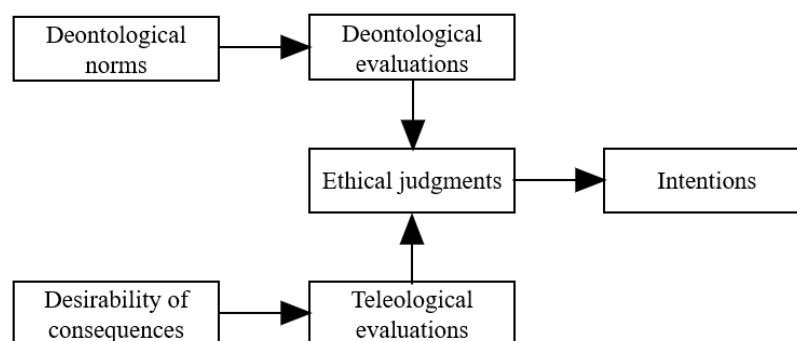
Building on the research on cognitive moral development (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977), Rest (1986) proposed a similar model that consisted of recognition of a moral issue, making a moral judgment, establishing moral intent and engaging in moral behavior, and argued each step is conceptually distinct and success in one part of the model does not imply success in the others. Trevino (1986) also proposed a model in which moral judgment is based on Kohlberg’s moral development model, but with more emphasis on individual and situational factors that moderate the relationship between one’s cognitions and ethical behavior. Dubinsky and Loken (1989) offered a model based on the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), which proposes that moral evaluation takes place in the context of moral judgment. The model starts with behavioral beliefs and outcome evaluations on the one hand, which affect the attitude towards (un)ethical behavior. On the other hand,

normative beliefs and motivation to comply affect subjective norms towards (un)ethical behavior. Both attitude and subjective norms towards ethical behavior lead to the intention to engage in (un)ethical behavior, which leads to the last step in the model – (un)ethical behavior (Dubinsky & Loken, 1989).

Hunt and Vitell (1986) offered a general theory of marketing ethics which proposed that moral judgment is based on two major philosophical approaches – deontological and teleological. It starts with cultural, industrial, and organizational environments that, combined with personal experience, affect the perception of an ethical issue, alternative forms of action and the various consequences. Then, led by deontological and teleological norms and evaluations, the individuals engage in ethical judgments, intentions, and behaviors. This model also has a loop that returns from behavior to personal experience via the actual consequences that are lived through the experience of an ethical dilemma. This model was revised in 1993 and 2006 by its authors and tested empirically many times, even outside the marketing context (Hunt & Vitell, 2006). Mayo and Marks (1990) empirically tested the relationships between deontological norms and deontological evaluations and the desirability of consequences and teleological evaluations, both of which lead to ethical judgment (Figure 4) according to Hunt and Vitell’s model (1986).

Although their theory proposed the joint influence of both deontological and teleological processes, the results of the Mayo and Marks’s (1990) study showed teleological evaluations had a stronger impact on ethical judgment. This implies that in business there is a tendency to focus on goals instead of personal norms. Sometimes managers are aware of the most ethical alternative, but they will not choose it because it leads to consequences that are not preferable (Mayo & Marks, 1990).

Figure 4: Selected relationships from Hunt & Vitell’s (1986) general model of marketing ethics



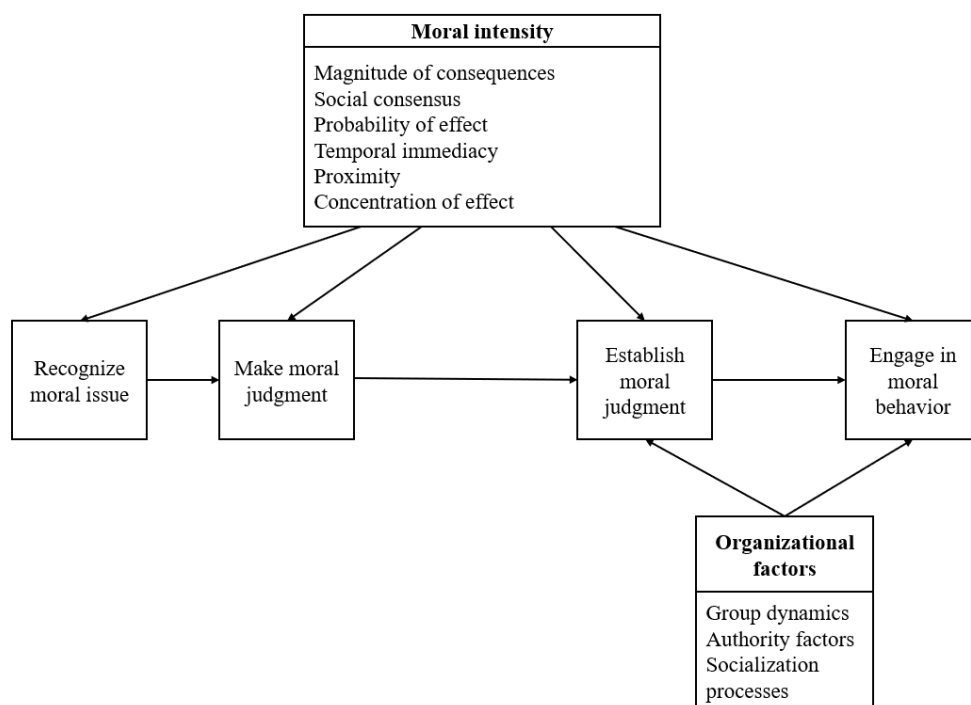
Source: Mayo & Marks (1990)

Ethical decision-making models help explain and predict behavioral intentions and ethical judgments in situations that involve ethical issues (Bakir & Vitell, 2010). These models were big step forward in understanding ethical decision-making in business, as they shifted from

normative models that assumed the existence of absolute truths about appropriate decision-making to positive models that can be empirically tested (Loe et al., 2000). They also included numerous variables that influence ethical choice, providing a theoretical base for how ethical decisions are actually made in organizations, as opposed to a normative view of what should occur. Jones (1991) noted that all of the proposed models lacked an important aspect of ethical decision-making: variables related to the ethical issue, although in practice there is a wide range of unethical deeds that can be studied in business, from stealing office supplies to releasing a dangerous product. He thus provided a synthesis of ethical decision-making models and proposed a comprehensive, issue-contingent model, and introduced a model that included six characteristics of the moral issue itself (Figure 5).

The characteristics Jones proposed were as follows: the magnitude of the consequences, social consensus, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, proximity and concentration of effect, aggregated in a new construct called moral intensity (Jones, 1991). This model is commonly used as a theoretical framework for studying ethical judgment, because ethical decisions in marketing are often situational or related to a specific issue and it is the perception of the problem that navigates the ethical decision-making process (Singhapkdi, 1996).

Figure 5: Issue-contingent model of ethical decision-making



Source: Jones (1991)

Moral judgment, a central part of ethical decision-making models that leads to the forming of moral intent and behavior (Barnet & Valentine, 2004), is determined by numerous situational and individual variables. Situational variables that influence ethical decision-

making are organizational culture (Jones & Hildebrandt, 1995), environmental influences and job context (McDevitt & Van Hise 2002). Individual variables affecting ethical decision-making are age and gender (Brady & Wheeler, 1996), locus of control (Vitell & Singhapakdi, 1990), education (Kohut & Corriher, 1994) and cognitive moral development (Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). Ethical judgment is not to be confused with one's level of cognitive moral development, as the latter a personal characteristic while ethical judgment is process oriented (Reidenbach & Robin, 1995). Moral judgment presents a cognitive load to the person facing a moral dilemma. Not all people are prone to similar moral reasoning, so moral judgment can depend on the moral development of the moral agent.

3.3 Ethics in advertising

Ethical decision-making is not a straightforward process, and as everyday situations gain complexity sometimes moral norms are not enough to guide people to ethical conduct (Beu et al., 2003). This is especially emphasized in advertising, the field of marketing in which the question of morality had even been marked as the ultimate oxymoron (Beltramini, 2003). However, instead of being an oxymoron, ethics in advertising may be more of a paradox. Constant red flags raised over ethics in advertising have led to many regulations in that field, making some consider it the most regulated industry (Drumwright, 2007). Although the importance of studying ethics in advertising is acknowledged it has not gained enough academic attention (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004), mostly because it raises complex issues over a broad area (Drumwright, 2007). In general, studying ethics in advertising has been divided into micro and macro perspectives, with the former looking at individual elements (consumer, ad, practitioner...), and the latter at advertising's effect on society (Drumwright, 2007). However, Drumwright (2019) suggested applying a "meso" level of studying ethics, focusing on an otherwise ignored segment of advertising ethics, namely the organizations or groups of organizations that play an important role in the advertising process, such as the media, clients or agencies. As boundary spanners, SMIs fit to this last category when studying marketing ethics.

Research on advertising ethics is largely rooted in the topics defined by Hyman et al. (1994), which are: (1) deception in ads, (2) advertising to children, (3), tobacco advertising, (4) alcohol ads, (5), negative political ads, (6) racial and (7) sexual stereotyping. Knowledge of what advertising ethics is from a consumer point of view is still limited (Sabhir et al., 2019), and the research that has been done focused mostly on Western markets (Drumwright & Kamal, 2016). This is problematic for two reasons. First, as the market becomes more global, broader cultural knowledge and a more nuanced understanding of ethical behavior are key to advertising success (LaFerle, 2015), and thus knowledge should not be limited to certain geographical areas. Second, with the rise of SMIs advertising has become more personal than ever, and perceptions of the audience's morality should not remain a black box in advertising ethics. However, the latest evidence shows there is now more interest in the topic, and exploring ethics in terms of following a set of community norms and rules, and the question of what these rules are in a social media context, has emerged as a growing area of

academic research (Leban et al., 2021). This new environment has also raised new issues in advertising ethics, mostly focused on privacy concerns (e.g., Boerman & Smit, 2023) and surveillance in advertising (e.g., Segijn & Strychatz, 2023).

Another aspect of advertising ethics is voluntary adherence to industry-imposed ethical standards called self-regulation. As López Jiménez et al. (2020) explain, such a self-regulating system has several advantages. It is voluntary, making it easier to implement and comply with, without needing public authority intervention while at the same time promoting high standards of accuracy and transparency. Moreover, as opposed to legislation that must be vague and broad, a self-regulation system is developed by experts in the field and as such provides guidelines that are clearer and encompass multiple situations. Self-regulation helps prevent infringements, addresses legal gaps, and is easily accessible, often online, while also saving time and resources for public authorities by reducing regulatory costs and providing extra consumer protection. However, the effectiveness of self-regulation is debated, as while it allows the industry to set its own ethical norms, it raises concerns about accountability and the potential for inadequate enforcement of ethical standards (Jansen, 2023; Ozkan, 2014). Critics argue that self-regulation may not sufficiently replace legal regulations, as it relies on the industry's commitment to ethical practices, which can vary significantly (Jansen, 2023) depending on cultural environment (Marsden, 2018). Thus, while self-regulation is a vital component of advertising ethics, its success depends on the industry's genuine commitment to uphold these standards. In the context of influencer marketing it could play a major role in the formation of ethical guidelines that are still in the nascent phase.

As SMIs become increasingly utilized as an advertising tool, their ethicality needs to be carefully positioned within the existing field. At first sight, it might seem as if it is only a matter of different media being used to convey a brand message, and that SMIs are simply doing what traditional media used to. If this were the case, the above-mentioned research findings related to advertising ethics could be transferred to an influencer marketing context without much adjustment. However, the reality is more complex. Seeing SMIs as business entities with economic (being profitable), legal (obey the law) and moral (do what is right and avoid harm) obligations (Carroll, 1991) is difficult, because the economic and legal obligations are blurred for two main reasons. First, it is not clear when and how SMIs become a business entity, and their obligations vary from contract to contract. Second, the legal obligation of SMIs is weak with regard to the existing EU guidelines on disclosing sponsorship in influencer marketing because they leave a lot of space for interpretation and implementation as opposed to the more detailed US guidelines (De Veirman et al., 2019).

Both of these factors make discussing SMIs' ethical obligations, i.e., what is expected of them, crucial to examine, and there are at least four other reasons why this is important: (1) it is ethical concepts that are transformed into legal regulation over time (Rácz et al., 2008), (2) it is not uncommon for legal practice to lag behind business practice (Drumwright, 1993), (3) regulations are formulated imperfectly with many omissions (Drumwright, 1993), and as such (4) regulations do not capture all the norms consumers expect of business entities (He

& Lai, 2014). Consequently, unethical behavior can have significant negative effects on consumers' responses, leaving them under the impression that a bad ethical reputation is related to doing business badly in general (McMurrian & Matulich, 2016). It is common that "innovation, ethical standpoint, and social behavior is now driving consumer choice, not quality and price" (Bussey, 2006, p. 17). If a business entity is perceived as behaving in alignment with its ethical obligations, then consumers are inclined to believe the final product or service of such entity is of higher quality (Elci et al., 2007), and that any communication with them is honest (He & Lai, 2014).

4 ETHICS IN INFLUENCER MARKETING

This chapter examines the ethical dimensions of influencer marketing, exploring the main topics that arise within this dynamic ecosystem. It seeks to unpack the multifaceted ethical challenges inherent in influencer marketing by providing a literature review that offers a thorough insight into the accumulated knowledge of influencer marketing ethics. After determining the scope of the research, an overview of the context and methodologies used in previous works is provided. The chapter then explores how the topic of influencer ethics has evolved and concludes with categorizing the prevailing themes.

4.1 Scope of the research

Recent research in the field of influencer marketing (e.g., Borchers & Enke, 2022; Cocker et al., 2021; Mardon et al., 2023) indicates that there are many aspects of SMIs' ethics that have so far been overlooked in the literature. The Scopus database was used to find the relevant studies, and the basic search criteria were that it had to be academic study written in English. The search was conducted without a time limit since SMIs are a new phenomena, and the sample included works published until March 2023, when data collection was performed. Given that the term influencer marketing only emerged recently, and there were a number of terminological variations in the early years of the phenomenon, the search term was not limited only to the word influencer, as shown in Table 2. Similarly, apart from the term ethic, the synonym moral was also searched for.

Table 2: Scopus search results and keywords searched

Studies using different terms for SMIs	The term used in Title, Abstract, Keywords search	Number of studies	Potentially relevant studies	Potentially relevant new studies
/	<i>influencer</i> and (ethic* or moral*)	166	84	84
Berryman & Kavka, 2017	“opinion leader” and (ethic* or moral*)	123	8	8
Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014	blogger and (ethic* or moral*)	23	8	7
Based on the term “vlogger” (e.g., Lee & Choi, 2019) meaning an influencer on YouTube	YouTube and (ethic* or moral*)	218	18	12
De Veirman et al., 2019	endorser and (ethic* or moral*)	42	2	2
Jun & Yi, 2020	“content creator” and (ethic* or moral*)	24	3	0
Khamis et al., 2017	“micro-celebrity” and (ethic* or moral*)	2	2	0
Wang, 2021	prosumer and (ethic* or moral*)	8	0	0
Marwick, 2015	“insta-famous” and (ethic* or moral*)	0	0	0
Freberg et al., 2011	“third-party endorser” and (ethic* or moral*)	0	0	0
TOTAL		606	125	113

Source: Author's own work.

All articles that appeared as a result of the search (606 studies) were reviewed in order to determine whether the topic of the study corresponds to the research area based on two criteria:

1. the study is about SMIs, i.e., people who have built a large base of followers on social media networks and therefore have the potential to influence followers (Ki et al., 2020);
2. the study touches upon ethics, i.e., the decisions that an individual makes that have the potential to benefit or harm others.

After the abstracts of all 606 studies were reviewed, studies that did not meet the specified criteria and that overlapped in the results of different searches were removed. The column “potentially relevant new studies” shows how many studies, which were relevant and not duplicates of previous searches, remained after each search. A total of 113 studies thus remained as potentially relevant, and for the final decision on their relevance it was necessary to review the complete texts. No complete texts were found for three studies and so they were removed from the sample. The remaining 110 studies were coded as relevant, not relevant or unclear (likely relevant or probably not relevant). In the case of unclear studies the initial criteria on relevance needed to be refined, and each study in the final sample had to:

- correspond to the initial search parameters (language is English and it is a scientific study) and the complete version of study must be available; although it was expected that studies that do not meet these criteria would already be removed from the sample in earlier stages, several studies were removed for these reasons only at this stage;
- study influencers on social media networks, not influencers who influence individuals in personal contact or through traditional media channels;
- study SMIs who became widely popular only by accessing social media networks, regardless of whether the field of influencing refers to their profession (e.g., doctors) or not (e.g., lifestyle influencers);
- observe the issue of ethics related to influencer marketing, regardless of whether the SMI is a moral agent.

In the end, 69 studies remained in the sample and were analyzed using the MaxQda software.

4.2 Context and methodologies used in prior research

Following Scopus classification of the research studies into one or more subject areas and further into their categories, it was found that most studies on ethics in influencer marketing were published in the subject area of Social Sciences (40), mostly in the Communications (27) category. In total, 32 studies were published under the Business, Management and Accounting subject area, mainly in the Marketing category (25). The remaining subject areas were Arts and Humanities (10), Medicine (10), Psychology (7), Economics, Econometrics and Finances (6), Computer Science, (4) Ecology (1), Decision Science (1), Engineering (1), and Health Professions (1). It is important to note that journals (and thus studies) can belong to more than one research area and category at once.

Regardless of the subject areas of the studies in the sample, the industries and themes that predominated in examining SMIs' ethics were health (i.e., physical and mental health), followed by products aimed at parents and children (mostly mom-bloggers and toy

promotions). The remaining research on ethics in influencer marketing focused on food, lifestyle, tourism, beauty or specific topics (Table 3).

Table 3: Ethics in influencer marketing – examination across industries

Industry	Studies
HEALTH	Darmawan & Huh, 2022; El Kheir et al., 2022; Fan et al., 2019; Kerr et al., 2020; Lefebvre & Cowart, 2022; Picazo-Sánchez et al., 2022; Ranpariya et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2023; Teck Chew et al., 2021; Triplett et al., 2022; White & Hanley, 2023; Willis & Delbaere, 2022
PRODUCTS AIMED AT PARENTS AND CHILDREN	Abrahams, 2012; Ahn, 2022; Archer & Harrigan, 2016; Archer, 2019; Cabezas, 2022; Choi, 2023; Jaakkola, 2020; Loose et al., 2023; Petersen, 2014; Ryan, 2022
FOOD	Castonguay, 2022; Castonguay & Messina, 2022; Choi, 2023; Harding & Day, 2020; Oliver, 2023; Paramita & Septianto, 2021; Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019
LIFESTYLE	Borchers & Enke, 2022; Jacobson & Harrison, 2020; Leban et al., 2021; Lomborg, 2012; Paramita & Septianto, 2021; Pradhan et al., 2023; Sweeney et al., 2022
TOURISM	Kerr et al., 2012; Litvin et al., 2008; Nafi & Ahmed, 2019; Pradhan et al., 2023; Wellman et al., 2020
BEAUTY	Cocker et al., 2021; Harms et al., 2022; Lewis & Christin, 2022; Mardon et al., 2018
OTHER	Bizzi & Labban, 2019 (online trading); Campbell & Grimm, 2019 (advertising regulation); De Souza-Leão et al., 2022 (entertainment industry); Djafarova & Foots, 2022 (ethical consumption); Li & Feng, 2022 (nation branding); Lysak, 2022 (the Holocaust); Maginini, 2011 (services); Robinson, 2020 (virtual SMIs)

Source: Author's own work.

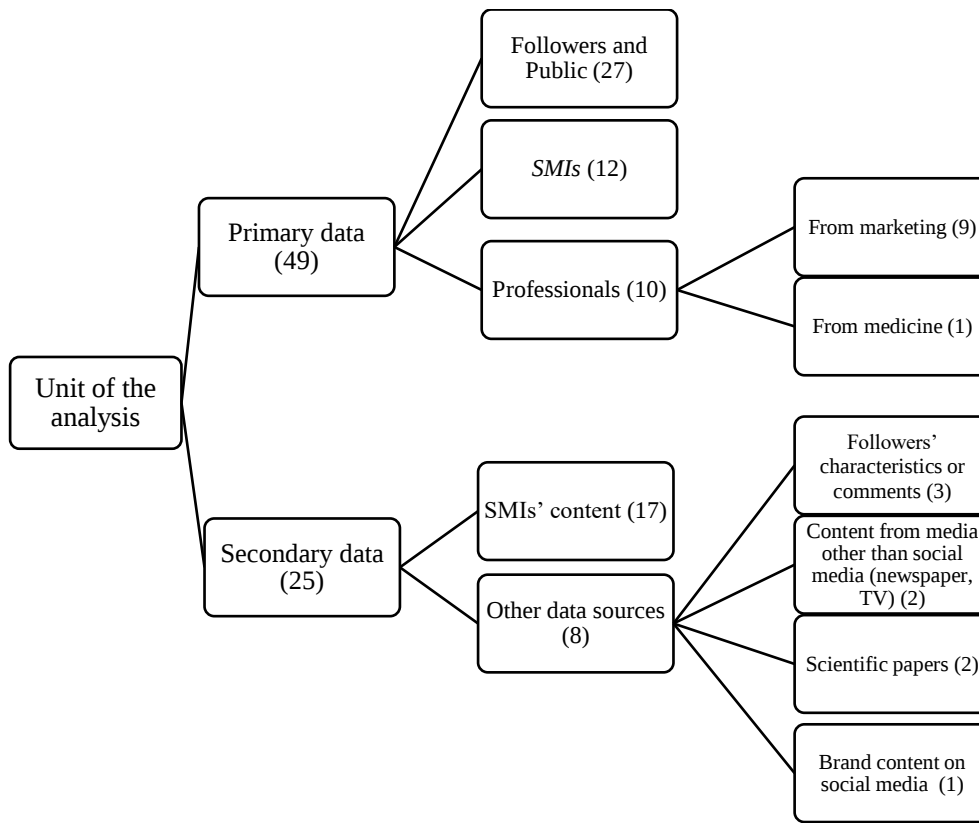
The country of research refers to the country in which the data was gathered or the country whose legislation was used in the analysis (for qualitative studies) if any of this information were clearly stated in the study. Most studies focused on a single country, although a few were cross-cultural. Most of the studies on ethics in influencer marketing were from the West, with 27 studies from the USA, 17 from Europe, and seven from Australia. Other studies were from Asia (8), Africa (1), and South America (1).

YouTube was the communication channel used by SMIs in most of the studies in the sample (27), followed by Instagram (20), blogs (16), Twitter (8), and Facebook (3), while Google+, MySpace, Sina Weibo, and TikTok were the contexts in one study each. The communication channels are mostly clearly stated in all of the studies in the sample, and they were used either for gathering secondary data (e.g., followers' responses), as a context of the research or as an example while gathering primary data. YouTube and Instagram, although the most common channels, are mainly used in the more recent studies. On the other hand, blogs were the main communication channel used in studies until 2015, which shows the major role blogs had in promoting individuals in the early stages of influencer marketing.

Qualitative methods dominate research on ethics in influencer marketing. The most frequently used approach is content analysis, which is mostly done on the content generated by SMIs and their followers on social media. This is followed by the use of interviews in six case studies, four netnographic studies and one focus group. Quantitative research in influencer marketing ethics is mostly conducted via questionnaires or experiments, in which researchers try to determine the recognition of a moral issue and/or a reaction to it. A mixed method was used in only one study examining ethics in influencer marketing.

An overview of the units of analysis shows which stakeholders have been used to gather the current knowledge about ethics in influencer marketing (Figure 6), and the results show that this knowledge is mostly rooted in primary data coming from followers and the public, while SMIs' content is mostly used as secondary data where researchers use salient and available content (e.g., comments, posts, shares) in their work.

Figure 6: Units of analysis in the context of ethics in influencer marketing (number of coded segments)



Source: Author's own work.

4.3 Evolution of ethics in influencer marketing

When analyzing the topics studied in the field of ethics in influencer marketing, an evolutionary trajectory can be observed. The topics studied at the beginning of the 2000s become more complex over time, require longer and more sophisticated methods of study and include more diverse industries. The evolution of the research topics related to the ethical aspects of influencer marketing can be divided into three phases: early, transitional and current.

The early phase begins with a study that touches upon the problem of ethics in influencer marketing, revealing the potential for generating unethical behavior within this area of activity (Litvin et al., 2008). This early work discussed bloggers in tourism, their reviews of tourist services and the potential for seemingly organic reviews to be bought. A few years later, Maginini (2011) investigated the negative consequences for a brand promoted by an unethical influencer, and a year later the related studies start to examine the acceptability of influencer marketing with regard to the type of product (Abrahams, 2012). These topics all remain relevant to this day. Interestingly, SMIs were initially seen as a potential tool against unethical brand behavior (Kerr et al., 2012), as the empowerment of SMIs on social media

was seen as an opportunity to highlight unethical brand behavior, and it was suggested that brands should monitor blogs for information about what is wrong with their products and services, so they could improve them. At the same time, Lomborg (2012) explored the idea of establishing a healthy, unobtrusive limit with regard to SMIs sharing their intimate details with their audiences, so that the communication is personal but does not become private. More specifically, the study argued that SMIs should nurture a close relationship with their followers, which implies transparent and personal communication, but notes that it is important not to disturb the balance that allows SMIs to maintain their privacy as a fundamental ethical assumption of influencer marketing. On the other hand, Lyu (2012) drew attention to the necessity of defining a framework for evaluating ethical problems on and through the Internet, with a focus on the agent's (i.e., SMIs') moral and legal responsibility. In the following years, the ethicality of mommy-bloggers using children and children's content among surfaced as moral concern in influencer marketing (Petersen, 2014) along with the complexity of the relationships among marketing/PR agencies, the brands and SMIs. The main issue arose because brands that otherwise engaged marketing/PR agencies started turning to influencer marketing, which caused disturbance in the professional marketing world. This new promotional channel created an atmosphere in which seemingly everything was allowed, and the boundaries between sponsored and organic content began to blur without anyone knowing who exactly was responsible for the harm that was both inevitable and recurring (Walden et al., 2015; Archer & Harrigan 2016).

After several relatively unproductive years for such research, in the transitional phase of 2018 and 2019 some topics from the first phase were upgraded, while some studies paved the way for the current phase of research on ethics in influencer marketing. The new issues were related to the topic of mommy-bloggers and coordinating influencing with maternal duties (Archer, 2019) on the one hand, and various techniques that SMIs can use to deceive the audience when it comes to tourist services (Nafi & Ahmed, 2019) on the other. The question of regulating the influencer marketing also gained attention, this time in two directions. The first was the question of the relationship between marketing agencies (whose activities are strongly regulated) and influencer marketing (whose activities are weakly regulated). At this point it was clear to what extent established market relations had been shaken by the arrival of SMIs, at least when it comes to advertising (Abd Rahim & Huzoore, 2018). In the second research direction, Campbell and Grimm (2019) asked how to protect the audience from SMIs' unethical behavior, especially when it comes to covert advertising. New topics in this phase are the issue of using influencer marketing for the promotion of complex services such as those in the financial sector (Bizzi & Labban, 2019) or medicine (Fan et al., 2019). Moreover, the attitude of followers towards the immoral behavior of SMIs was also starting to be investigated (Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019), and the SMIs' moral responsibility within the online community was being examined, as well as specific ethical problems that can arise in this context (Mardon et al., 2018). This is also the phase in which, for the first time, ethics in influencer marketing is noted as an area that needs to be investigated as rapidly and as thoroughly as possible (Voorveld, 2018).

The current phase of research on ethics in influencer marketing refers to works from 2020 onwards, when there was a significant increase in the number of studies compared to previous periods. The ethics of targeting children with influencer marketing (Jaakkola 2020; Castonguay, 2021; Harms et al., 2022; Loose et al., 2023) and the role of parents in such promotion (Castonguay & Messina, 2022; Bora Semiz & Paylan, 2023; Ryan, 2022) are now being questioned, and there are calls for regulation of such promotion (Choi, 2023). Identification of specific ethical problems in influencer marketing (Cho, 2020; Darmawan & Huh, 2021; Cocker et al., 2021; Borchers & Enke 2022) and the use of SMIs in medicine (Kerr et al., 2020; El Kheir et al., 2022; Ranpariya et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2023; White & Hanley, 2023; Triplett et al., 2022) are other topics that draw researchers' attention in this current phase. There is also a stream of research that thematically builds on a topic from the early phase that seemed to be abandoned in the transitional phase. This is the question of SMIs as moral role models who have the potential to raise the level of business ethics (Lewis & Christin, 2022) and be promoters of social development (Li & Feng, 2022; Mahy et al., 2022).

In the current phase, the role of SMIs in complex market relations is questioned in more detail (Davies & Hobbs 2020; De Souza-Leão et al., 2022), and their role in purchase decisions (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022) and the formation of followers' ethical beliefs have also emerged as topics of interest (Harding & Day, 2020). Moreover, the public's perception of the ethics of SMIs' business is questioned (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022), along with the ways in which SMIs harmonize their personal value system with what they do online (Jacobson & Harrison, 2020; Leban et al., 2021; Łysak 2022). The issues of the consequences of propagating ideal proportions online (Hudders & Lou, 2022; Picazo-Sánchez et al., 2022) and undergoing plastic surgery (Lefebvre & Cowart, 2022) have opened up, and the emergence of virtual SMIs is inspiring interesting discussions about their ethical responsibility (Conti et al., 2022; Robinson, 2020), even while this still remains an open question with regard to human SMIs.

4.4 Prevailing themes

Analysis of the core relationship between influencer marketing and ethics yielded a set of prevailing themes that have occupied the field thus far. As shown in Table 4 and described in detail in Grgurić Čop and First (2023), the research on ethics in influencer marketing can be divided into four main categories, each encompassing a few main themes.

Table 4: Four main categories and related themes of ethics research in influencer marketing

CATEGORY	THEMES
Ethical issues based on the dual or unclear role of SMIs	Unclear role
	Dual role
Ethical issues based on the characteristics of certain SMIs	Children as SMIs
	SMIs from medicine
	Virtual SMIs
Consequences of influencer marketing for the stakeholders involved	Consequences for followers
	Consequences for endorsed brands
	Consequences for the market and society
Prevention of ethically questionable behavior	The role of parents
	The role of lawmakers
	The role of SMIs

Source: Author's own work.

4.4.1 Dual or unclear role of SMIs

The issue of influencer marketing ethics in many studies arises from the dual or unclear role SMIs occupy in social relations, in both private and business contexts. As a consequence, SMIs are often portrayed as people who lack a work ethic and have managed to escape long-established, fundamental social and legal presumptions (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022; Davies & Hobbs, 2020) for their own benefit (Darmawan & Huh, 2021). Consequently, their role has directly affected the PR industry with the use of covert advertising that used to be punishable by law (Archer & Harrigan, 2016; Abd Rahim & Huzoore, 2018). Since SMIs exist at the crossroads of journalism, advertising and PR (Borchers & Enke, 2022), unethical behavior is almost inevitable (De Souza-Leão et al., 2022), but despite this brands which hire SMIs perceive this form of promotion valuable (Cho, 2020). Even governments have now tried to leverage using SMIs in order to spread their messages (Mahy et al., 2022). To resolve the burden of their colliding often contradictory social roles, SMIs sometimes create different identities they alternately identify with (Leban et al., 2021).

4.4.2 Characteristics of certain SMIs

Sometimes the ethical aspect of influencer marketing lies in the characteristics of the SMIs themselves. For example, if SMIs are still children then this opens up many ethical questions, as these children are exposed to the enormous burden of constant creation and are not protected by labor laws, as they cannot officially be employed (Cabezas, 2022), their homes become production sets (Ryan, 2022), and their parents become their managers instead of their primary caregivers (Archer, 2019). Medical professionals who work as SMIs can find themselves in many ethically questionable situations, which range from violating patients' privacy and posting pictures in their work hours (El Kheir et al., 2022; Kerr et al., 2020; Picazo-Sanchez et al., 2022), to giving shallow and ambiguous, or even misinformed medical advice (Ranpariya et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2023; White & Hanley, 2023). The issue of ethical responsibility in relation to virtual SMIs has already been discussed in the literature (Robinson, 2020; Conti et al., 2022), but is expected to become even more important as their number grows.

4.4.3 Consequences of influencer marketing for the stakeholders

The consequences of a complex social phenomenon, such as influencer marketing, are hard to grasp, but many studies have examined influencer marketing ethics with regard to the effects on the various stakeholders involved. For example, followers' self-image and self-esteem can be affected negatively by SMIs posting edited, unrealistic pictures of themselves (Picazo-Sanchez et al., 2022; Hudders & Lou, 2022). There are also the more immediate consequences of following the unprofessional advice given out by SMIs on financial (Bizzi & Labban, 2019) or medical issues (Ranpariya et al., 2020). Targeting children with influencer marketing has also been flagged as potentially unethical, due to children's' gullibility and lack of critical thinking (Jaakkola, 2020; Choi, 2023; Castonguay, 2022). The unethical behavior of SMIs such as covert advertising (Maginini, 2011), humblebragging (Paramita & Septianto, 2021), brand-governed content (Pradhan et al., 2023), inauthentic behavior (Lefebvre & Cowart, 2022) and moral legitimacy in general (Bora Semiz & Paylan, 2023) can also have negative consequences for the brands SMIs endorse.

The ethical aspects of influencer marketing are also related to less explicit consequences, such as circumventing laws and regulations, especially those related to advertising (Darmawan & Huh, 2021). Moreover, SMIs can misinterpret medical data and spread misinformation that is hard to debunk (Sharma et al., 2020). Even when SMIs want to contribute to society by engaging in important conversations, such as those on the Holocaust, they risk being judged as insensitive and taking advantage of a terrible event for their own gain and fame (Łysak, 2022). Some SMIs might find themselves used as promotional tools of a governing party which uses them to push forward certain messages, while suppressing others (Li & Feng, 2022).

However, it is worth mentioning that SMIs can also be used to help spark positive changes in society. For example, SMIs can drive Gen Z to buy more sustainable products (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022), although carefully crafting their content to fit their authentic, high ethical standards can be challenging, because it reduces the number of brands they can collaborate with (Jacobson & Harrison, 2020).

4.4.4 Prevention of ethically questionable behavior

Some studies in the sample focused on the prevention of the negative consequences of SMIs' unethical behavior. First, regulators need to encourage both written and verbal disclosure of paid sponsorship, especially in content aimed at younger audiences (Loose et al., 2023), who should also be informed by their parents (Harms et al., 2022; Ahn, 2022) what paid promotion entails. Existing influencer marketing regulation needs to be improved (Campbell & Grimm, 2019), but if too many restrictions are imposed then this could endanger freedom of speech (Lyu, 2012). And while some studies note that SMIs often criticize each other for supposedly unethical conduct, thus raising the ethical standards of the industry (Lewis & Christin, 2022), another possible way to address such conduct is domain-specific regulation of SMIs' sponsorship deals, depending on products they endorse (Abrahams, 2012).

Structuring the field of ethics within influencer marketing research, at least to the point the current research allows it, would make it possible to apply crucial theoretical aspects from business ethics to it. In the next two chapters a qualitative and quantitative examination of ethics in influencer marketing will be presented.

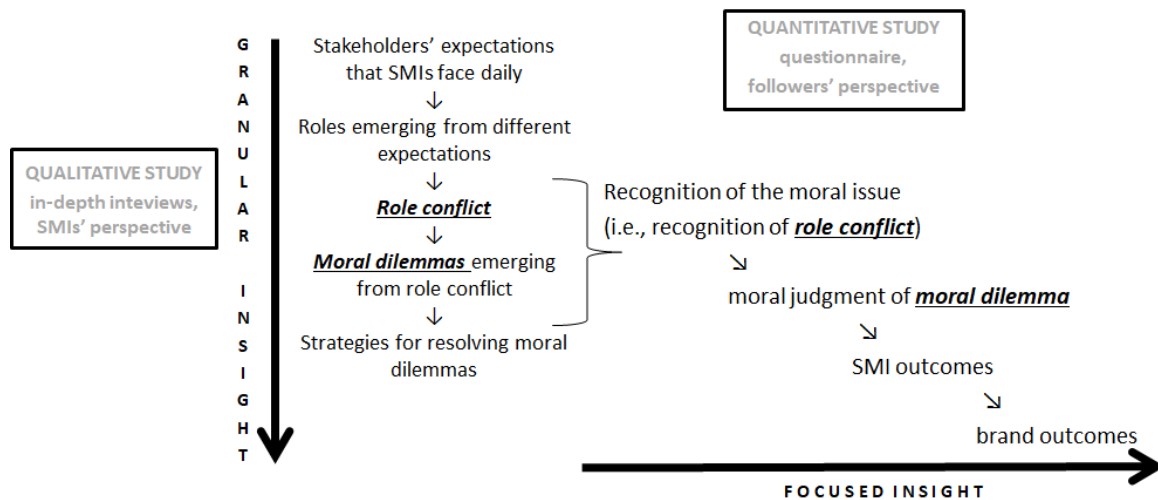
5 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON INFLUENCER MARKETING

To comprehensively address the research questions two distinct yet complementary methodological approaches are employed: qualitative and quantitative. The use of both approaches allows for an in-depth exploration of the complexities of influencer marketing, while also providing the opportunity to test and generalize findings across a broader population, thus bridging qualitative rich insight with quantitative validation.

Central to this study are the moral dilemmas in influencer marketing. The qualitative approach provides granular, multi-dimensional insights into the complex and nuanced ways in which SMIs navigate moral dilemmas. It allows for rich, contextualized understandings of how and why these dilemmas emerge, offering detailed accounts of SMIs' thought processes, strategies, and experiences when dealing with conflicting expectations from various stakeholders. In contrast, the quantitative approach offers a focused and systematic examination of the broader consequences of these moral dilemmas. By narrowing in on a specific aspect, how the breach of certain stakeholder expectations affects SMIs and the brands they endorse, this approach provides measurable and generalizable findings that quantify the outcomes of these moral conflicts across a wider population of SMIs.

Together, these methods complement one another: the qualitative study offers a context-rich exploration of the origins and lived experiences surrounding ethical dilemmas, while the quantitative study focuses on a targeted consequence, validating the implications of these dilemmas on a larger scale. This dual approach enables the research to couple exploratory depth with focused validation, providing both a detailed understanding of moral conflicts and a precise evaluation of their tangible impacts (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Methodological depth and breadth of the thesis



Source: Author's own work

It is important to note that each methodological approach requires appropriate theoretical underpinnings. In qualitative study, underlining theoretical approach needed to have the potential to understand the richness of human behavior and interactions. Hence, role theory was used as a theoretical framework for exploring SMIs' moral dilemmas. This theory allows exploring the depth of a phenomenon and deep understanding of complex issues, as its' interactional nature successfully captures meaning, context, and respondents' subjective experiences (Mardon et al., 2023). Quantitative study needs to employ theories that propose clear, testable relationships between constructs that are measurable. Hence, ethical decision-making model (Jones, 1991) well-established in business ethics was combined with attribution theory (Ross & DiTecco, 1985), persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), and image transfer model (McCracken, 1989). Using these theories allows developing conceptual model as they predict relationships between constructs that have previously been operationalized and measured.

The first study, based on in-depth interviews, would enable a deeper understanding of the nuanced roles that SMIs play, as well as the moral dilemmas they face in navigating the expectations coming from various stakeholders. This qualitative approach is particularly useful for uncovering the social processes and ethical challenges that often remain hidden

beneath the surface of influencer marketing. Given their first-hand experience with the complexities and ethical dilemmas of influencer marketing, SMIs are ideal respondents for the in-depth interviews, offering valuable and authentic insights into the phenomena under investigation.

Building on the findings from the qualitative phase, the second study employs a quantitative approach to extend the insights gained from the interviews. Given the complexity of the topic, the focus will be narrowed to specific parts of the qualitative study for further quantitative investigation. To refine the focus, a pilot study is conducted among followers to determine which moral dilemma uncovered in the qualitative phase are most relevant for testing. Once the moral dilemma is selected, it served as a reliable context for testing the following theoretical relationships: (1) followers' recognition of the moral issue (i.e., recognition of role conflict in influencer marketing) and follower's moral judgment of the moral dilemma, (2) followers' moral judgment of the dilemma and perceived outcomes related to the SMIs (credibility, image, reputation) and (3) perceived outcomes related to the SMIs and outcomes related to brands SMIs endorse (purchase intention). By testing a conceptual model derived from both the qualitative findings and existing literature on business ethics and influencer marketing, this phase allows for broader generalization and replication of the results. The data will be analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in JASP software in order to confirm the conceptual model and test the dissertation's hypotheses.

In the following two chapters, both the qualitative and quantitative studies of the thesis are presented, covering their main purpose, theoretical background, sampling procedures, methodology, analysis, results, and discussion, in which the findings of each study are placed within a broader context of an existing body of knowledge related to ethics in influencer marketing research.

5.1 Qualitative study

This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of SMIs' perceptions of their roles, the moral dilemmas they encounter, and the strategies they employ to navigate the complex web of stakeholder expectations within the influencer marketing landscape. Through qualitative interviews with SMIs, this study delves into the rich tapestry of experiences and perspectives that shape the ethical considerations and decision-making processes of influencers.

5.1.1 Purpose

The purpose of the qualitative study was to provide better understanding on how SMIs perceive moral issues in influencer marketing and how their moral judgment develops based on this. More specifically, the qualitative study refers to the following research questions this dissertation seeks to answer:

RQ2: How do SMIs perceive their role given the expectations of different stakeholders?

RQ3: What moral dilemmas do SMIs face in relation to the expectations of different stakeholders?

RQ4: How do SMIs resolve moral dilemmas arising from different stakeholder expectations?

This step enables understanding SMIs' complex role in the social media environment, where the line between sponsored and organic content is almost impossible to detect. By uncovering the moral issues that SMIs identify and how they navigate their moral judgments, we gain insight into which of these issues pose moral dilemmas for them. Furthermore, the study provides an explanation for the occurrence of moral dilemmas in influencer marketing and explores how SMIs manage these challenges to continue with their endorsements.

5.1.2 Conceptual background

Despite being relatively overlooked in influencer marketing research thus far, there are several justifications for employing role theory to comprehend SMIs' complex role. Firstly, prior studies (e.g., Mardon et al., 2018; Cocker et al., 2021) suggest that SMIs may adopt multiple roles within their social position. Secondly, influencer marketing is a novel phenomenon, prompting SMIs to define their roles beyond existing conceptual frameworks (Vrontis et al., 2021). Thirdly, role theory offers insights into how the presence of various sets of expectations associated with a social position (in this case, the role of an SMI) influences the individual fulfilling that role and its potential outcomes. Fourthly, SMIs can be viewed as boundary spanners, operating at the interface of organizations and serving as intermediaries between endorsed brands and their audience (Weatherly & Tansik, 1993), and role theory has been utilized in research to elucidate the work dynamics of boundary spanners (Singh & Rhoads, 1991).

5.1.3 Sample

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to illuminate the specific moral dilemmas SMIs encounter while doing their work, since this method is a powerful tool for understanding individuals' thoughts, beliefs and experiences (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019), and the scope of the topic was not entirely new but is also not too narrow nor too broad (Guest et al., 2013). Since the study was aimed at typical cases (Flick, 2007), the condition to recruit interviewees was that they make money from influencing and have at least few years of experience of working with brands. Toleando and Avidar (2015) note that ethics is tightly linked to the cultural and social environment in which practitioners operate. That is why an important constraint was that all the respondents come from Croatia or a culturally similar society. One participant was Slovenian since, according to Hofstede's dimensions, the Slovenian social environment is similar to the Croatian one (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). Besides, this SMI resides in both Croatia and Slovenia, has Croatian heritage, and is well acquainted with the local mentality and culture, and speaks the Croatian language like a native.

Once the initial list of SMIs to consider for inclusion was obtained, those who were celebrities – like singers or actors – were excluded, as they differ in many ways from typical cases of SMIs who gained their fame on social media, not the broadcast media (e.g., Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). As a result, an initial email saying we would appreciate their participation in a study, and saying nothing about the specific topic of the research, was sent to the professional email accounts of 17 potential respondents. The initial email introduced the researchers conducting the research and the broad topic of the interview, without mentioning moral issues. In the end, 10 influencers – whose identity is to remain anonymous – agreed to take part in the interviews. Interestingly, some of the respondents stated that they would only participate if no questions were asked about their income from influencing. The main characteristics of all the respondents are shown in Table 5 based on the data at the time interviews were conducted. The size of the influencer was approximated based on the number of followers they had on Instagram, the platform SMIs most often adopt for posting content (Marwick, 2015).

Table 5: Description of the sample

Interviewee	Followers on Instagram (approx.)	Age	Gender	Topics of interest
Ana	3,000	early 20s	F	lifestyle
Marko	230,000	early 20s	M	lifestyle
Petra	74,000	early 20s	F	makeup, fashion
Ivana	67,000	mid 20s	F	travel, fashion
Helena	27,000	early 30s	F	motherhood, fashion
Dario	11,000	mid 20s	M	nightlife, hospitality
Luka	6,000	early 30s	M	business, lifestyle
Kimmy	180,000	early 20s	F	lifestyle
Martina	15,000	early 30s	F	cooking
Tina	200,000	mid 30s	F	lifestyle

Source: Author's own work.

5.1.4 Method

Given the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted via Google Meet during April 2021, with the interviews lasting approximately one hour. Since SMIs are dedicated to maintaining the image of reputable role models (Casaló et al., 2018) it is difficult to get them to talk candidly about the darker side of their business, where their

ethical issues lie (Leban et al., 2021). Social desirability refers to the tendency of respondents to come up with answers that are seen as more widely acceptable instead of those that reflect their true thoughts, beliefs and experiences (Bernardi & Guptill, 2008). Following suggestions by Bergen and Labonté (2020), several steps were employed when conducting the interviews to reduce social desirability. First, the respondents were assured their identity would remain anonymous during the whole process of the research, revealing only the parts of conversation that cannot be used to track down their identities. Second, the interviewer used indirect questions and scenarios, and hypothetical third-person situations were discussed. Third, before the interviews started the respondents were assured there were no right or wrong answers to the questions and their honest opinions were needed to study to focal issues and help the influencer marketing industry in the long run. Fourth, judgmental language that would indicate the researcher's assessment of the answer was avoided during the interviews, even when unexpected responses emerged. Fifth, it was clarified to the respondents that the interviews were very different to those they give to journalists, and instead of looking for a clickbait headline the researcher is looking for their expert opinion about the state of the art with regard to influencer marketing ethics.

The interview questions were divided in three main parts in kind of a hourglass manner, starting from more comfortable questions on general influencing to specific relationships with followers and brands and moral issues, and then returning to general influencing, future plans, etc. (Appendix B). This protocol was not strictly followed, however, as the questions were open ended and many times other issues were raised (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), there were follow-up questions, and comments were made as the researcher attempted to interpret the interviews as they still ongoing (Kvale, 1996). The aim was to gain as many details and as much episodic and semantic knowledge as possible on the moral dilemmas SMIs consider their work involves. Since the matter of moral (and even more so, immoral) action is a sensitive one, the researcher let the respondents speak freely and at length, even if they ended up saying things that were not directly related to the purpose of the interviews, so the SMIs would not feel there was any struggle for control over the discussion (Weiss, 1994). When a relaxed atmosphere has been established, the researcher guided the conversations to get to know more about the feelings, thoughts, and beliefs the SMIs had about the moral dilemmas they have experienced in their work.

5.1.5 Analysis

All the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using MAYQDA Analytics Pro software (version 20.4.1). To develop an understanding of a meta-narrative about the various stories that were obtained, the resulting data transcripts were coded (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Initially, rather than adopting an *a priori* coding system, an inductive approach was used for categorization allowing for themes to emerge directly from the data. The analysis followed the hermeneutic circle logic (Thompson, 1997), which enabled the researcher to move from intra-textual material (i.e., the experience of an individual influencer) to inter-textual material (i.e., the experience of other influencers) at the same time. This was done to make

sure the emerging themes were not idiosyncratic but had their basis in the first-hand experience of the interviewees.

Multiple rounds of analysis were conducted, each with a different unit of analysis. The first unit of analysis was the respondents and their answers related to expectations, which then yielded different roles. This allowed for various roles to emerge based on the stakeholders' expectations, as aligned with role theory (Biddle, 2013).

In the next round the units of analysis were conflicted expectations and moral dilemmas. It is important to note that the respondents talked about many issues, but not all of them qualified as moral dilemmas. In order to have a clear distinction between those issues that have a moral dimension and the potential to become a dilemma, each issue was subjected to three main questions:

1. Is there a moral dimension involved the issue, i.e., can it have negative consequences for others?
2. Is there a conflict between the expectations of different interest groups, i.e., are there two or more mutually exclusive moral values or duties?
3. Is an issue related to SMIs' collaborations?

Issues that had positive answers to all three questions were considered moral dilemmas and taken into further analysis, becoming units of analysis in the final round. The coding in the last round pertained to the conflict resolution strategies used for each moral dilemma.

After coding a mental map was created for each individual respondent. Mind mapping allowed the researcher to organize the findings from each interview by capturing the most important concepts in each narrative (Kern & Bush, 2006). The findings were then once again compared. The horizontal comparison between transcripts focused on moral dilemmas, their causes, the reasons for them, and the perceived relationship characteristics involved. The interrelationships among the codes is explained in detail in the following section.

5.1.6 Results

What follows is an overview of the key findings emerging from the coded data, with a focus on the main themes and patterns related to the research questions.

5.1.6.1 Roles emerging from stakeholders' expectations

SMIs perceive their role as an entanglement of **multiple roles**. They are constantly engaged in role construction and reinforcement, but also in role deconstruction to the point where it enables them to construct a new role without completely leaving their existing ones. They do not seem to be aware of the hierarchy of these roles, or their absolute importance. Instead, it is the interplay of these interchangeable roles that they use for navigating the otherwise unguided and insecure environment they have found themselves in. This self-made

navigation through role (de)construction can be considered a consequence of the fact no one can plan to become an SMI. It happens to them *spontaneously* (Luka), and some even find it *funny* (Martina) when others now refer to them as SMIs. Once they become aware of their influence (i.e., that they have become SMIs) they need to be *subtly direct* (Kimmy), i.e., clever enough to keep it, because *that is how you tell a good SMI from a bad one* (Kimmy).

Role construction and deconstruction are facilitated through engaging with certain strategies SMIs enact when faced with conflicting expectations. The different roles they play and strategies that enable SMIs to (de)construct a role are explained in the following sections.

SMIs are aware of the broad context and salience of their role, leading to three groups of stakeholders constantly scrutinizing them: followers, brands, and society. Keeping their position of influence requires juggling the extended expectations of all three groups of stakeholders. These expectations yield different roles that SMIs must play, as Table 6 shows.

Table 6: Stakeholders' expectations and emerging roles

STAKEHOLDERS	ROLES	SIMPLE EXPECTATIONS	EXTENDED EXPECTATIONS
BRANDS	COMMITTED BUSINESS PARTNER	boost brand awareness and sales, positive, organic and controlled brand presentation, exclusive collaborations	COMMITMENT
	JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES	dealing with uncertainty, innovative problem-solving, provide a package of many services, staying competitive (e.g., by promoting items forbidden on other media), omnipresence	
FOLLOWERS	CLOSE FRIEND	sharing private content, empathy, truthfulness	AUTHENTICITY
	ENTERTAINER	entertainment	
	RELIABLE REVIEWER	honest product experience	
SOCIETY	ROLE MODEL	conform to social norms	RESPONSIBILITY
	ADVOCATE	adding to public conversation, educate followers	

Source: Author's own work.

Meeting the simple expectations of each stakeholder group accumulates to the formation of extended expectations: for brands this is commitment, for followers it is authenticity, and for society it is responsibility. According to Biddle (2013, p. 144), a simple expectation is “an expectation involving a single modal reaction about one characteristic of an object person”, while an extended expectation is what two or more simple expectations yield as “referenced characteristic of those that precede it” (Biddle, 2013, p. 146). Emerging roles are described below, along with the corresponding simple expectations.

5.1.6.1.1 Roles driven by brands' expectations

As mentioned before, one cannot decide to become an SMI, but over time and through effort it happens for some social media users. The moment brands start approaching them, SMIs start constructing the role of a **committed business partner**. This role is the most formal one since SMIs need to make it official, unlike the other roles. They thus start a company and sign contracts for sponsorships, just like any other business entity. However, the respondents pointed out that their companies are very different to traditional ones, and it is not uncommon for brands to ask SMIs to do things that are *forbidden in Facebook's guidelines* (Tina) and *not all brands treat all influencers equally* (Kimmy).

Boundaries on what is or is not acceptable conduct vary from contract to contract, and negotiations with potential sponsors are aggravated by the absence of higher order

documents and frameworks (e.g., laws, policies, standards). As one respondent put it, regulation would *make it easier for someone who is trying to make it* (Helena) as an SMI, because brands typically frown upon requests for monetary compensation and often try to *cut prices a lot just to see how low SMIs can go* (Tina). According to the respondents, more regulation would help SMIs: (1) turn down collaboration offers without fear of losing future collaborations, (2) set prices for their work, and (3) outline what is (or is not) part of the job.

Sometimes brands expect the sponsored content to be staged and fully controlled by brand, and the respondents mentioned the terms *mercenary* (Tina) or *billboard* (Marko) for SMIs who give in. This way they emphasized the importance of retaining their autonomy in the role of a business entity in content creation for endorsed brand, instead of just posting whatever various brands (i.e., clients) want. Some even consider that turning down certain sponsorship offers is good for their influencing business, since that is a way they can protect their right to create content their own way.

If SMIs collaborate with multiple brands then some of the respondents stated that they will transition from being a communication channel to being a *sales channel*, which can over time turn an SMI into a *joke* (Luka). Most of the respondents realized how this could hurt their position as business partners in the long run as it: (1) erodes the overall image they have been constructing on social media, and (2) deters brands from contacting them in the future. However, some of the respondents had a different view and saw SMIs as business partners who should find a way to make things work with most brands, no matter what. For example, Kimmy and Marko exhibited a higher level of professionalization, meaning influencer marketing is their main and only occupation and thus they were more likely to accept the terms and conditions imposed by various brands, even if it meant going against their authentic selves (e.g., being a long-time Apple products user and then switching to Samsung).

This is an interesting paradox that kept emerging from the interviews: the more authentic, niche-oriented, and knowledgeable of a narrow topic an SMI is – the less opportunities they will have to make a living out of it. So called lifestyle SMIs that build their image on everyday products have many more opportunities to make a living exclusively from influencing than someone specialized in a certain topic:

It shows when someone wants to drain as much money as they can. I'm not doing this to get rich. It is possible, but it simply isn't my goal. My goal is to live normally of it. And you can feel it. People can see that. To promote polenta one day and next day vacuum cleaner, that is insane to me! Martina

Some SMIs in this study feel like the advanced analytics that is available on social media platforms has fostered an environment in which their every move is being closely monitored and measured to assess their work. And while they like to think of themselves as a

communication channel, brands often see SMIs as business partners who can help boost sales in ways that can be tracked using clear indicators.

Sometimes the expectations from brands are formalized with contracts that facilitate the work of SMIs, as a detailed contract gives them a sense of what they are and are not allowed to do. However, there is another side to this: many times the SMIs mentioned potential lawsuits of case they do not respect the contracts they have signed, which makes them extra careful not only when creating content for brands, but also when creating content in general. The respondents were aware of the potential effects their online conduct in general can have on brands they work with, i.e., that what they do in posts that are not sponsored might not meet the brands' expectations and have a negative influence on their position as business partners, leaving them with a bad reputation and thus less work.

Another brand expectation SMIs feel like they need to meet is the exclusivity of their collaborations in a certain product category. Sometimes exclusiveness is a part of the contract, but since brands need to pay more for exclusive representation such formal stipulations are not so common. Still, SMIs feel like it is in their best long-term interest not to promote various brands in the same product category to preserve their authenticity and give the sense of a serious business entity whose integrity is not for sale (i.e., not to become mercenary or a billboard):

*I wouldn't even think about influencing for suppliers in same product category!
It seems somehow contradictory, that is it doesn't make sense to me because I
would have to undermine one of them in a way to talk up the other one. Dario*

As already stated above, SMIs perceive themselves as a communication channel and want to build a good reputation as a business partner. That means talking negatively about brands in general is to be avoided, let alone about brands that hire them. And this is not only to preserve the reputation of a good business partner, but also to avoid potential lawsuits brands could file:

*If I don't see it working I won't tell people it was horrible, because a client can
sue me and it is a serious situation. But I won't say it's super. Tina*

SMIs as business entities want to show they are more than frivolous entertainers. However, in doing so they must remember their other roles related to different (sometimes even opposing) expectations.

Despite becoming SMIs by chance rather than intention, the respondents in this study seem to feel strongly about influencing as a job in general, as a profession where they can be their own bosses.

However, such freedom seems to come with more costs than benefits. The respondents repeatedly stated what they must do to become and remain relevant as SMIs, such as offer a

unique service, take risks and adapt quickly. All this points to another role SMIs enact: the ***jack-of-all-trades***. This role is not as official as being a business partner since it does not require an SMI to own a company by law, but it is no less important as it is a forerunner to the role of a *committed business partner*. Traces of entrepreneurial activity and behavior distinguish this role, and there are several characteristics typical of entrepreneurship that the SMIs kept mentioning as a direct response to what they feel are the brands' expectations:

Uncertainty – probably the most prominent entrepreneurial characteristic (mentioned by all the respondents) is a willingness to operate under uncertain conditions. Uncertainty marks influencer marketing as a job, as SMIs do not know how many collaborations they will have in a certain period, how much they will be able to earn per collaboration, whether they will need to go on a trip the next day to gain a sponsorship, and so on:

People don't realize that it is not like we post a picture and get paid immediately. Most of them have 30 days to pay and they take advantage of that. They do pay in the end, but you need to be careful not to have a hole where you might or might not have any money left. Petra

Innovative problem-solving – since the job of SMI did not exist until recently there are many situations that are not described in business handbooks, literature, or studies. The environment on social media is chaotic, their moves are scrutinized (especially with the rise of so-called “cancel culture”, where one can be called out for the slightest wrong move, even if the primary intention was not malicious) and potential problems keep coming up. This requires SMIs to seek solutions on their own to meet the endorsed brand's expectations, coming up with new ways of solving problems:

There was this offer for some leggings that make you look slim. Now, I don't weigh much, I am little, and honestly, I don't need it. I would never agree to this collaboration and show it on my own profile because it is lame and I am not the right person to promote this kind of product, but I agreed because they only wanted pictures and videos, so in fact I don't show it on my Instagram profile, no one knows it was me, there is no opinion of mine, they just get my pictures and video. Ana

Diverse set of skills – since the term *influencing* per se is not informative of one's exact obligations, SMIs feel that in order to stay competitive they must offer the whole package of services, not just one. It was almost like a mantra how the respondents reiterated that they are more than one person when it comes to skills. They also feel like brands now take it for granted that they do all the work otherwise delivered by four or five people with different skill sets:

They want us because they can pay less. Because if they paid a person for make-up, editing, photography, hair-styling, do you know how expensive that would be? Martina

Omnipresence – being available all the time to everyone is something SMIs deem crucial for success in their work, but is also an aggravating factor to most respondents. They mention psychological fatigue and disbalance in their personal life due to the constant interference of their job as influencers who still want to maintain a private life:

There are many days when I don't feel like creating a video, taking a picture, I just need to do it, and I would like to just cover my head with a blanket, but I need to do it because it is my job. I need to show my face constantly and it can be exhausting. Petra

Competitiveness – throughout the interviews, respondents kept comparing what they do and how they do it with other SMIs' work. They are constantly up to date with the work of other influencers to determine their relative position in relation to others, identifying practices they want to avoid and those they wish to apply themselves, searching for collaboration opportunities or ways to shape their services to fit potential partners' expectations. In addition to this, they also see other promotional channels as their direct competitors and keep comparing their offer to that of other channels, and emphasized that influencers are better choice for brands because they are cheaper, reach a more specific target audience and can promote products banned on other channels.

As shown in the results, handling a brand's expectations often requires stepping outside the boundaries of a committed business partner. This hinders SMIs' intention to stay competitive and meet the extended expectation of the brand – to stay committed.

5.1.6.1.2 Roles driven by followers' expectations

The role that SMIs believe distinguishes them from traditional celebrities is that of **close friend**. They often emphasize it is the intimate aspect of their relationships with followers that makes them more credible and likable, in contrast to traditional celebrities who seem distant and not interested in their followers' needs. This role was derived from two characteristics followers expect SMIs to have (as opposed to other promotional channels):

Acknowledging other people's struggles – this characteristic has two aspects. First, followers expect SMIs pay attention to events taking place in the offline world and adjust their content to it. For example, sympathizing with people who lost their jobs, homes or even loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic by limiting or even stopping content promoting a lavish and carefree life, luxuries and so on, because *it wasn't the right moment* (Tina).

Second, SMIs feel the need to keep providing evidence to their audiences that they are real people with real struggles, and that what they do is neither easy nor was it built overnight. It is as though they want to be very similar to their followers, as in this way they can boost their legitimacy and create an environment that fosters close relationships:

I talk openly about having a bad day and I don't see the need to get deeper into it. But they...especially the younger audience...they look at it as if we have it all figured out, but we tell them we are worried, too. Petra

Oversharing – in the role of close friend to their followers, SMIs feel like it is good from time to time let their audiences in on some details about their most private moments, such as seeking help for mental issues, posting about themselves on a bad day, etc.

Nurturing a close relationship with their followers enables SMIs to create an environment that yields other follower-related roles.

All the respondents at some point emphasized that their audiences expect SMIs to entertain them. As one respondent put it:

People see me having fun, how positive I am – no problems there, I like to have fun and say stupid stuff. So, I think that's it they always expect something cool, funny, interesting of me. Marko

But this study shows there is more to it than simply fulfilling followers' expectations to deliver entertaining content. Bearing in mind SMIs' content must be, besides entertaining, both down-to-earth and sponsored, there are two balances that SMIs strive to achieve in enacting the **entertainer** role. The first is for their content not to get too real, and the second is for their content not to get too sponsored.

Balancing reality with entertainment – it was not easy for respondents to determine the exact characteristic that makes them influential, but they unanimously consider their ability to draw the attention away from the reality to the word of entertainment to be the prerequisite for gaining and retaining their followers. Although they need to be attentive to the events in real world, SMIs need to find the right balance not to get too real. Followers expect SMIs' online space to be the shelter from things they can hear or see on other communication channels that are often full of negative news and comments so SMIs construct the role of *Entertainer*.

Balancing sponsorship with entertainment – the SMIs noted that sponsored content drives less engagement from followers than content that is not sponsored. When performing as entertainers SMIs force themselves to post content that is unrelated to their sponsorships, thus making sure the right balance between sponsored and unsponsored content is achieved, nurturing the expectation from followers that they will be able to get an uninterrupted online experience.

In retrospect, the respondents saw their beginning as SMIs as attracting people with their credible reviews of products and experiences, and thus serving as a **reliable reviewer**. The SMIs talked a lot about the expectation of their followers that they will be honest about products and experiences, because people have lost confidence in brands as a source of

information. This also entails having actual experience with any endorsed product as a basis for an honest recommendation:

If you see an influencer testifying “I have had these glasses for two years and they didn’t break”, you automatically trust him more than some PR article. Ivana

It seems like followers can get overwhelmed by the many sources of information available online, and use SMIs as a heuristic to obtain credible information, as they believe it is not contaminated with selfish interests.

5.1.6.1.3 Roles driven by social expectations

The respondents seemed to converge on the role of **role model** as the one that links them to the expectations of society. As role models they have an important function in society, as their larger fanbases look up to them without much scrutiny, and SMIs thus *inspire* (Luka) their followers. The expectation that they will conform to social norms means SMIs should not swear in their videos or praise dangerous behavior, such as drunkenness, as they need to be aware of the repercussions of their actions due to the fact many young people follow their example. If this example is not in accordance with existing social norms, SMIs feel like society will judge them negatively:

I have turned down clients like [name of a gambling company redacted]. I turned them down because I don’t think it would be OK for me, because a lot of kids follow me. I will not say five, 10-year old children, but those who have just started high school and they are still children, and I don’t think I can impose some things on them now. Marko

Another society-related role stems from the expectation to join to public conversations about questions like abortion, gay rights and similar issues. Agreement about this expectation existed among the respondents, but to limited extent: all of them think they are expected to use their online space to raise awareness about questions that have little to no social consensus, but only some feel they are expected to take a stand and tell followers exactly what to do, who to vote for, what values and ideas to adopt:

I am against abortion except in some extreme cases, it is a murder for me. These are the things I share with my followers. Ivana

Let’s look at it from business aspect rather than ethical. When you take a certain stand, you automatically lose someone, either a follower or a brand. And I think that’s OK. Luka

As **advocates** SMIs also feel a pressure to *educate* (Kimmy, Luka) their followers on certain topics, because they *identify with some of my philosophy* (Dario). It is something not all respondents saw themselves doing, but all of them acknowledged that it is beneficial for society in general if SMIs do it. The SMIs stated that they feel like they need to do this

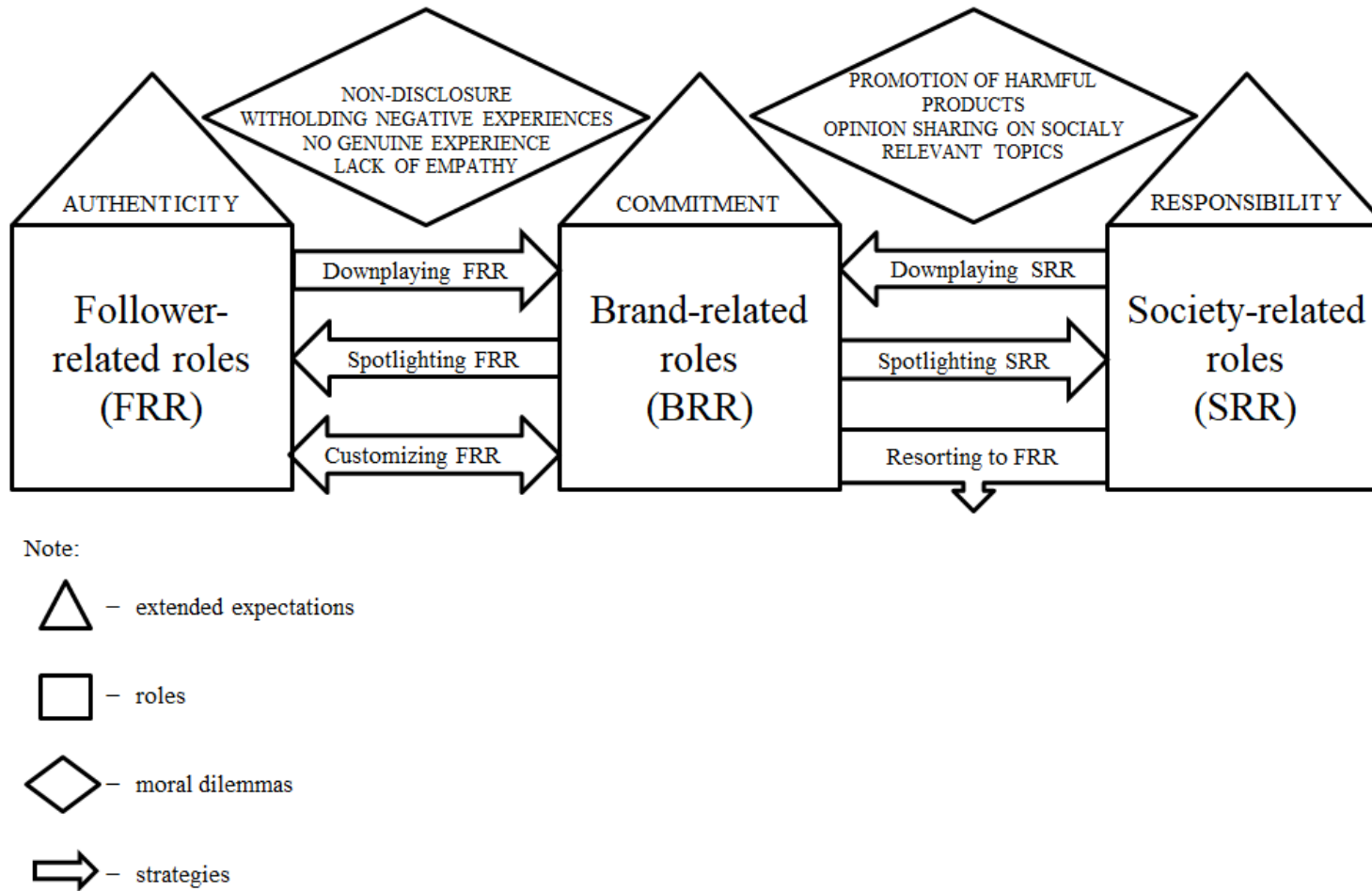
because young people follow their example and they are obligated to teach their followers something useful as a means of giving back to society, such as discussing the financial services offered by a bank to *promote financial literacy* (Tina), promoting cannabidiol (CBD) products they *believe help* (Martina) or saying *something smart* (Kimmy) about drinking and experimenting with drugs, i.e., how to do safely it because *of course they* (kids) *will try cigarettes, drink, light a joint* (Kimmy).

The *advocate* role goes beyond showing products and how to use them, as the SMIs see it as having a pedagogical dimension, and thus they can teach young adults how to smoke marijuana safely or use e-banking services. It seems as if social pressure with regard to this role is not as emphasized as with that of *role model*. This might be because the expectation for SMIs as *role models* is what behaviors to avoid, and as *advocates* SMIs are protected from greater scrutiny because the intent (to teach someone something) is regarded as noble rather than overly assertive.

5.1.6.2 Moral dilemmas emerging from role conflict

Being a professional SMI means earning money doing this job. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise that the interviewees agreed that they accept collaborations with brands whenever possible. While sometimes working as an SMI and collaborating with brands is pleasant, as the expectations of all stakeholders can be met simultaneously, but more often this is impossible, as the expectations of various stakeholder conflict with each other. Having to fulfill often conflicting expectations leads to stress when carrying out the tasks which SMIs are expected (or even contractually obliged) to carry out. When faced with conflicting expectations and trying to maximize their self-interest, SMIs often face moral dilemmas and look for solutions not to let any one group of stakeholders down. The most common moral dilemmas found during the interviews were: the promotion of a product the SMIs do not usually use; focusing only on positive product features; not disclosing a collaboration; the promotion of potentially harmful products (such as cigarettes, alcohol, and financial services); lack of empathy; and opinion sharing on socially relevant topics. These moral dilemmas stem from the conflicts among different stakeholders' extended expectations. SMIs thus employ various strategies that enable them to proceed with less guilt toward the stakeholder group whose extended expectations they are not able to fulfill (Figure 8).

Figure 8: SMIs' role conflict and conflict resolution strategies



Source: Grgurić Čop et al. (2024)

As shown in Figure 8, two types of conflict are common within SMIs' role. Each of them results in certain moral dilemmas, i.e., situations where SMIs cannot meet two extended expectations at once:

Commitment and authenticity conflict results from SMIs having the following moral dilemmas:

- hiding a sponsorship agreement (non-disclosure): faced with the expectations of both brands and followers, SMIs often find themselves in a dilemma about how much and in what way to disclose that their content is sponsored. While they believe that most followers are aware of sponsored content, they are also aware that content that does not appear like an advertisement is preferred and followers *have different opinion about it: it is not a commercial at [respondent's nickname], it is [respondent's nickname]*. (Marko)
- withhold negative a product or service experience (negative experience): the authenticity expected by followers is significantly constrained by the expectations of brands when it comes to sharing negative product experiences. Once a negative experience is gained it cannot be ignored, and at that moment the respondents are unsure of what the right course of action is because *it is a tricky area*. (Tina)
- promote products they do not usually use (no product experience): although this dilemma is more pronounced among SMIs who are more professionalized, promoting things they would not normally use is an issue for all the respondents. Even those for whom influencing is not their main source of income are not sure how to address this issue, as it may negatively impact their financial situation if they only promote products they use: *Samsung is not my cup of tea [...] but I can't make money any other way*. (Kimmy)
- not showing empathy by following a sponsored deal schedule (lack of empathy): this issue was probably more pronounced due to the timing of the interviews – during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic and shortly after some devastating earthquakes hit Croatia – but this was a dilemma for all the respondents. SMIs often feel uncomfortable promoting products at such times, but they are also aware that they are breaking their commitments to brands if they do not adhere to the posting schedule that has been previously agreed upon and, often, paid for: *In that certain period, if you're a good person [...] you won't post it [i.e., frivolous content] because it's not an appropriate post, but again this is an individual thing*. (Helena)

SMIs also often find themselves pressured not to be socially irresponsible, and thus go against the expectations society holds over them. That leads to the **conflict of commitment and responsibility** and the following moral dilemmas:

- promotion of potentially harmful products such as alcohol and cigarettes (promotion of harmful products): although it may seem like this is not a dilemma, but rather a clear situation in which SMIs know that promoting harmful products is not right, in the context where authenticity is expected of them it becomes a dilemma. Furthermore, in a situation where there are no clear restrictions, SMIs cannot always know with certainty what is harmful and should not be promoted, as in the example with vapes when SMIs ask *to present them more with 0 milligrams rather than 10*. (Marko)
- taking a firm stand in public discourse on topics without broad consensus (opinion sharing on socially relevant topics): big social reach of SMIs allows them not only to promote products but also certain viewpoints, which becomes a dilemma when it comes to views that polarize society: *I am against abortion except in some extreme cases, it is a murder for me. These are the things I share with my followers*. (Ivana)

5.1.6.3 Conflict resolution strategies

Although extended expectations can come into conflict, the respondents seem to always find a way to overcome this and proceed by making a decision. As described in Grgurić Čop et al. (2024), there are four distinct strategies that enable SMIs to proceed without feeling overwhelming guilt towards the stakeholders they have let down: **downplaying a role** (minimizing the importance of one role so it could be avoided), **spotlighting a role** (increasing the importance of a role), **customizing a role** (adjusting one of the roles to it is more aligned with the role it is conflicted with), and **resorting to a role** (using a third, non-conflicted role as an excuse to avoid both conflicted roles).

In the **conflict between commitment and authenticity**, SMIs juggle the expectations of brands and followers. Dilemmas (non-disclosure, negative experience, no product experience, lack of empathy) come down to the conflict of who they truly are and who they should be with regard to their business partners. In such cases, SMIs employ the following strategies:

- **Downplay the follower-related roles:** in the case of the non-disclosure, negative experience, and lack of experience dilemmas, SMIs appease followers' expectation that they will always be true to themselves by referring to the close relationship they have with their fanbase. They consider this relation so strong that their followers can detect dishonesty and fake or exaggerated content just by the tone of SMIs' voice or their facial expression. Moreover, SMIs often say their followers should be aware product promotion is how they make a living,

and thus reduce the expectation of the genuine promotion of products they actually use and like.

- **Spotlighting follower-related roles:** in the case of a lack of empathy, SMIs often opt for follower-related roles over brand-related ones. Since it is hard for them to downplay brands' extended expectation of commitment to a previously made business deal, they focus strongly on the importance of followers' authenticity expectation. Preserving authenticity and a close, down-to-earth relationship with followers was of much greater importance than pursuing sponsored deals to the SMIs in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic or after the earthquakes that occurred during research period.
- **Customizing follower-related roles:** customizing follower-related roles might be the most interesting strategy SMIs employ. They use it to mitigate the guilt felt at betraying followers' expectation that they will be authentic by sidestepping the initial meaning of authenticity as being truthful and transparent about themselves. Instead, they seek ways to accommodate the brands' expectations while staging authenticity, thus customizing their follower-related role to accommodate brands' – and not their followers' – expectations. For example, SMIs compensate for covert promotions by using a disclaimer instead: they emphasize the product worked *for them*, making the fact that they liked it more important than the fact they were paid to promote it. Another common way of customizing follower-related roles is cherry-picking a product from a brand that they are supposed to promote until they find the one they can work with and recommend it in an authentic manner. Cherry-picking a product while avoiding mentioning negative experience with other products from the same brand is how they customize their role towards followers while staying loyal to their brand-related roles.

The **conflict of commitment and responsibility** results in fewer dilemmas (promotion of harmful products, opinion sharing on socially relevant topics) than the previous conflict, but SMIs also employ three different strategies to deal with it:

- **Downplaying society-related roles:** similarly as with downplaying follower-related roles, SMIs sometimes reject the expectations coming from society to behave as role models, stating that their role in and impact on society are seen as much greater than they actually are. By doing this, they avoid making a clear stand in important public conversations in fear of losing collaborations
- **Spotlighting society-related roles:** some respondents put their role in society at the forefront and deem it necessary that they speak up about important issues and carefully chose their collaborators, as they are aware that many of their followers, especially young ones, rely on them on some level and imitate their

beliefs and behavior. Interestingly, the respondents were agreed about the topics of public conversation they need to be involved in regardless of their opposing points of view (liberal vs. conservative). SMIs using this strategy consider their social influence is considerable, and thus regard promoting products such as alcohol, smoking, drugs, or gambling as irresponsible and damaging to society.

- **Resorting to follower-related roles:** if faced with a dilemma of promoting harmful products SMIs find it hard to meet all of the conflicting expectations, and thus follow the authenticity appeal from the third, follower-related role. In this way they side with the brands or society depending on which decision feels more authentic, and consequently right, to them. Ignoring society's expectation of responsibility in such cases is justified by the notion that presenting their true selves is more important than hiding any part of their life for the sake of mimicking responsibility. Such decisions, however, are often accompanied by attempting to limit view by younger followers or giving tutorials on how to use harmful or under-researched products, as though SMIs were trying to compensate for promoting them, or gain social responsibility to meet the society's expectations halfway.

5.1.7 Discussion

The aim of this study was to elucidate the multifaceted roles of SMIs and to investigate the ethical challenges arising from the conflicting expectations imposed by diverse stakeholder groups, along with strategies for conflict resolution. While previous research on ethics in influencer marketing (Borchers & Enke, 2022) has framed the SMI industry within the realms of PR, advertising, and journalism, this study offers a distinct perspective. It delves into the individual dilemmas faced by SMIs, viewing them not just as industry players, but as individuals striving to balance authenticity, commitment, and responsibility.

This nuanced approach provides a micro-level examination of influencer ethics. Leveraging role theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), it deepens the understanding of the perceptions held by SMIs, an area that has received limited attention in existing research. The findings, derived from insights shared by 10 SMIs, reveal common perceptions of SMIs' roles, moral dilemmas stemming from role conflicts, and strategies for resolving conflicts. These findings align with the notion that the challenges faced by SMIs in navigating the creation of sponsored content while maintaining financial viability are often misunderstood, rather than indicative of unethical behavior (Wellman et al., 2020).

Role theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978) was used to focus on the inner conflict of SMIs' role as the driver of moral behavior. The results showed support for several common role perceptions among SMIs. Similarly, Mardon et al. (2023) used role theory to better

understand embeddedness on social media and found that SMIs play various roles which can be dysfunctional. In the present study, two main findings surfaced. First, expectations coming from different stakeholder groups are often in conflict and create a fruitful ground for role morality. Role morality (i.e., abdicating moral responsibility when acting in a certain role) makes SMIs depart more easily from their everyday notions of right or wrong (Gibson, 2003), which is why it is crucial to isolate, identify and explore moral dilemmas in influencer marketing. Second, research on SMIs in general has overlooked society as an important stakeholder shaping SMIs' perceptions and behavior. Similarly, Cocker et al. (2021) proposed that SMIs must take into account the expectations of their audiences, which are intertwined with moral obligations as a standard code of conduct that SMIs must adhere to in order to avoid potential breaches of trust.

As recognizing a moral issue is the first step in many conceptual models related to morality (e.g., Trevino, 1986; Jones, 1991), another goal of the qualitative study was to determine which moral dilemmas occur in influencer marketing. Despite many issues surfacing throughout the interviews, in total six moral dilemmas were outlined and supported with responses from all the respondents: the promotion of products without genuine experience of them (also found in Cocker et al., 2021), non-disclosure (found in Borchers & Enke, 2022; Cocker et al., 2021; Wellman et al., 2020), lack of empathy (similar to what Borchers & Enke, 2022 found), and withholding of negative experiences (also found in Borchers & Enke, 2022; Wellman et al., 2020). However, in this study two more dilemmas emerged: opinion sharing on socially relevant topics and the promotion of harmful products. These dilemmas, overlooked in research to date, present a daily struggle for SMIs who try to balance their brand-related roles with society-related roles. The reason these dilemmas are a blind spot in influencer marketing research is probably because SMIs are still not treated as a separate social role different from regular consumers on the one side, and from traditional business entities on the other.

This study's findings related to specific strategies SMIs employ when faced with a dilemma are complementary to those of Wellman et al. (2020), who proposed authenticity as a guiding principle in ethical decision-making, and to the negotiation strategies outlined by Mardon et al. (2023). Unlike negotiation strategies (Mardon et al., 2023) that are not related to SMI's morality, the strategies found in this study highlight how SMIs resolve the conflict within their role in order to retain self-image as a fair moral agent, seeking the conduct that brings the least harm to their relationships with both brands and followers.

The findings from the qualitative study correspond to some extent to those from studies that recognized the changing nature of SMIs' role (Nascimento et al., 2020; Borchers & Enke, 2022; Mardon et al., 2023). However, the findings from this study also point to

the importance and implications of the interplay of these roles. Following role theory (Biddle, 2013), these roles are constructed as responses to different stakeholders' expectations. Similarly, the findings from Leban et al. (2021) implied that SMIs need to adapt their personas in order to alleviate the impression of being frivolous consumers of luxuries.

Through the empirical evidence of SMIs' role complexity and its relation to SMIs' moral behavior, this study outlines the specifics of SMIs' role and its richness to show SMIs' complex role in society, in general, needs to be addressed carefully. Examining and understanding SMIs' role enables better predictability, depending on their various social identities and situations (Biddle, 2013).

5.2 Quantitative study

Building upon the foundation laid in previous chapters, this quantitative study offers a nuanced understanding of the intricate dynamics shaping consumer behavior in the realm of influencer marketing. Following a clear delineation of the research purpose, the context in which the study was conducted is outlined; shedding light on the specific dynamics of influencer marketing that informed the research questions. Subsequently, the conceptual model is described, with hypotheses derived to guide the exploration of followers' moral judgment and the influence of SMIs' moral accountability on brand choice.

5.2.1 Purpose

The moral dilemmas that emerged during the qualitative study provided a rich foundation for exploring followers' reactions to unethical behavior exhibited by SMIs. The qualitative study yielded rich data, revealing numerous instances of moral conflict and emerging dilemmas faced by SMIs. However, the quantitative study requires a more focused approach. Hence, only one particular moral dilemma, selected through a pilot study, will be the subject of further investigation in the subsequent quantitative study. This approach allowed for a deeper and more focused analysis while still acknowledging the broader complexities uncovered in the qualitative phase. In the quantitative study, streams of research on SMIs and business ethics are combined to deepen the understanding of the relationship between influencer marketing ethics and followers' attitudinal outcomes for both SMIs and the endorsed brand. The study also analyses the influence of perceived moral accountability in followers' moral judgment.

The purpose of the quantitative study is to answer the following research questions:

RQ5: How is followers' moral judgment related to the choice whether or not to purchase the endorsed brand?

RQ6: What is the role of SMIs' moral accountability?

A quantitative methodology was used for testing the proposed hypotheses to determine if followers' moral judgment about SMIs' moral transgressions is significantly related to the perceived credibility, image and reputation of SMIs and purchase intentions with regard to the endorsed brands. It also examines the moderating effect of perceived moral accountability.

5.2.2 Chosen context

To narrow the focus of the research from the six moral dilemmas identified in the qualitative study to one that will be used in the survey, a short pilot study was conducted among business students in Rijeka.

The short questionnaire had the definition of an SMI stated at the beginning, followed by one open question about influencer marketing (to gather the respondents' general opinions about moral issues related to this), and six questions pertaining to moral judgment with regard to each of the moral issues found in qualitative study. The respondents rated the moral issues on the five-point moral judgment scale produced by Reidenbach and Robin (1990), where 1 indicated fair/just, etc. and 5 indicated unfair/unjust, etc. The participants were recruited both online and offline across various student groups, ensuring that the same participant did not respond to the questionnaire twice.

In total 170 respondents participated in the survey. However, 21 respondents were excluded due to missing data or ambiguous answers, which left 149 questionnaires for the analysis. The average age of the respondents was 22 years old (std. dev. = 2.20). Table 7 shows means and standard deviations for their answers with regard to each of the moral issues.

Table 7: Pilot study results

Moral issue	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
withholding negative experiences	149	3.93	0.74
promoting harmful products	149	3.69	0.87
lack of empathy	149	3.59	0.90
no genuine experience	149	3.30	0.86
non-disclosure	149	3.26	0.79
opinion sharing on socially relevant topics	149	2.94	0.90

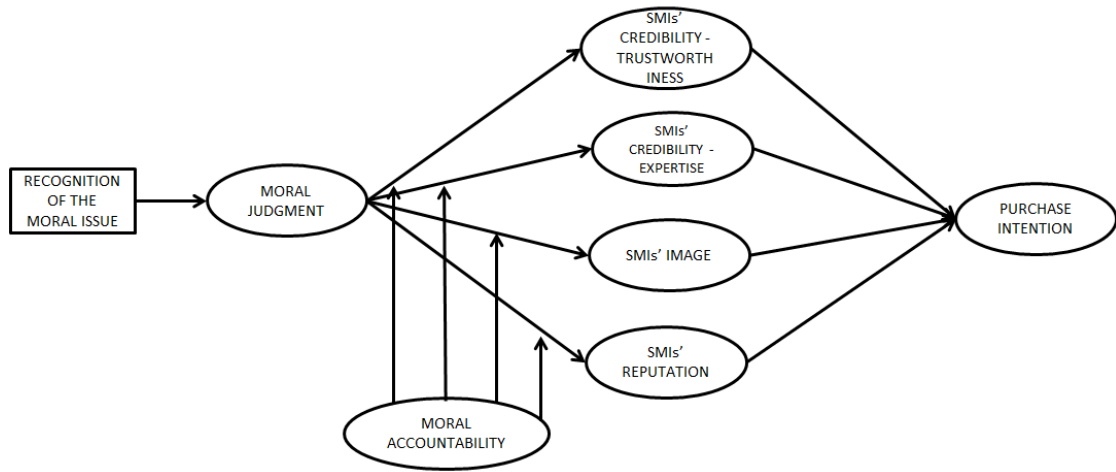
Source: Author's own work.

Hiding negative experiences with a promoted product was rated highest on the moral judgment scale and had lowest standard deviation ($M=3.93$, $sd=0.7$). As such, the moral issue of SMIs endorsing a product they had a negative experience with determines the research context of this study.

5.2.3 Conceptual model

To clarify followers' reactions to the moral issue, a conceptual model with moral judgment as a central concept driving follower responses towards SMI is proposed (Figure 9). In this conceptual model theories related to ethical decision-making are merged with the outcomes from influencer marketing literature to better understand how followers perceive and evaluate the ethical conduct of SMIs, and how these perceptions influence their attitudes towards SMIs and behavioral intentions towards endorsed brands.

Figure 9: Proposed conceptual model of followers' moral judgment outcomes



Source: Author's own work.

Models of ethical decision-making (e.g., Rest, 1986; Jones, 1991; Hunt & Vitell, 1986) propose that recognition of moral issues precedes moral judgment about an act being right or wrong. This indicates an individual must recognize a moral issue before extensively considering its morality. The central concept in ethical decision-making models, moral judgment, is the evaluation of a behavior as right (or good) or wrong (or bad) (Jin & Peng, 2021). It involves an attribution process, as morality is centered on the notion of “ought to”: a standard that indicates whether a behavior is appropriate or not (Heider, 1958). The theoretical underpinnings for studying moral judgments about other people's behavior can thus be found in attribution theory (Ross & DiTecco, 1975) combined with the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The persuasion knowledge model suggests follower's recognition that endorsement is based on selfish, commercial motives instead of a positive experience will lead to negative attitudes towards SMIs. Accordingly, if followers perceive SMI's behavior as purely egoistic and intrinsically motivated, they will be more inclined to perceive it as immoral (Ross & DiTecco, 1975). According to McCracken's (1989) concept of image transfer

in brand endorsements, the symbolic meanings associated with the endorser are passed on to the endorsed brand during promotional activities. In this sense the “meaning” is an overall assessment of what the endorser represents to the audience and how someone interprets the image of the endorser (McCracken, 1989). Following attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) and the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 2018), when faced with an SMI’s unethical conduct their followers try to cognitively evaluate the situation to prescribe the blame to the actor – i.e., the SMI – or someone else.

In an influencer marketing context, it is expected that followers will recognize the endorsement of products without genuine experience as a moral issue, because their relationship with SMIs rests on the assumption that SMIs, as opposed to brands, provide reliable recommendations (Jung et al., 2016) without ulterior motives (Koo, 2016). In return, low moral judgment affects credibility (Bhattacharya et al., 1998; Hur et al., 2013), image (Amos et al., 2008), and reputation (Zhou & Whitla, 2013). Following these theoretical underpinnings, a spokesperson’s credibility, reputation and image impact both attitudes and behavioral intentions (e.g., Bromley, 2001; Lafferty et al., 2002; Apejoye, 2013) towards the brand. While brand attitudes can account for a variety of brand impressions, behavioral intention mostly relates to purchase intention, which is defined as “an individual’s conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a brand” (Spears & Singh, 2004, p. 56). Finally, moral evaluation prompts followers to attribute responsibility to the parties involved (Shaver, 1985). If followers perceive that the endorser knowingly carried out a transgression, then they will attribute the responsibility for this transgression to them (Gupta, 2009).

5.2.4 Hypotheses

Based on the proposed conceptual model, the relationships in the model are hypothesized as follows.

Previous research showed that followers consider that SMIs have a moral responsibility to their followers to promote products they genuinely use and like, and an endorsement is perceived as highly transgressive if this responsibility is not upheld (Cocker et al., 2021; Borchers & Enke, 2022). According to Barnett and Valentine (2004), perceptions of a societal consensus that an action is wrong should be associated with judgments that an action is unethical. In the SMI-follower relationship it is common for followers to feel a special connection with SMIs, empathize with them, and imagine deeper connections with them that form parasocial interactions (e.g., Sakib et al., 2020; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Bartels (1967) suggests a business action is judged as “right” or “wrong” not in a definite sense, but in terms of another stakeholder whose expectations have been fulfilled or not.

SMIs interact with followers personally, not only as a group, and such relationships can become reciprocal, creating a stronger feeling of attachment in followers, thus reinforcing parasocial relationships and feeling of closeness (Kurtin et al., 2018). This kind of relationship makes moral agents (in this case SMIs) closer to the potential victims of unethical action (i.e., followers) and thus, according to Jones's (1991) model any unethical conduct exerted toward followers is more vivid and intense, as followers expect SMIs' intrinsic motivations and non-commercial orientation to prevail in their content (Audreze et al., 2020).

Following the logic of a well-established sequence of steps related to the ethical decision-making process (e.g., Jones, 1991; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Trevino, 1986), moral judgment follows after recognizing a moral issue. Moral judgment is the "degree to which a portrayal, event, or behavior is morally acceptable to the individual" (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990, p. 634). Through the process of moral judgment, individuals assess actions as either right or wrong (Jin & Peng, 2021), based on what should be considered appropriate conduct, i.e., comparing actual behavior to a standard of moral conduct (Heider, 1958). Previous studies indicate that people regularly make ethical evaluations of others' actions (e.g., Goldberg et al., 1999). Similarly, consumers assess the ethical conduct of companies and either penalize those they view as unethical or reward those they perceive as ethical. Following this logic, it is anticipated that followers who recognize a moral transgression will form more negative evaluations of such behavior. Drawing on this reasoning the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Followers' recognition of an SMI's moral transgression is negatively related to their moral judgments of the SMI's moral transgressions.

Hayes et al. (2016) found that in online video advertising reciprocal altruism and trust are important factors that build and strengthen relationships between related parties. This finding is consistent with social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976), because it indicates people on social media expect intangible rewards in return for following and sharing content. The most important expectation for relationship building turned out to be trust (Molm et al., 2000) upon which is based credibility (Hur et al., 2013), a concept consisting of trustworthiness and expertise (Erdem & Swait, 2004). From the perspective of the responsible behavior of business entities, credibility relates to consumers' expectation of morally justifiable behavior (Hosmer, 1995; Vlachos et al., 2009). In line with source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1991), consumers see SMIs as credible sources because they think SMIs express their genuine opinion of a brand experience (de Veerman & Hudders, 2020). In general, studies have shown consumers are very interested in the underlying motives business entities have for conducting certain behavior (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). If a business entity performs an activity that is viewed as purely benevolent consumers attribute intrinsic motivations to it. However, if an activity is perceived as attaining business goals consumers ascribe extrinsic

motives to it (Du et al., 2010). Attribution theory suggests consumers believe SMIs are intrinsically motivated to promote a brand if they really like it (Mishra et al., 2015).

According to Hon and Grunig's guidelines (1999), credibility is a construct related to ethical conduct, and Nelson and Park (2015) found a perception that the source is acting ethically generates fewer negative perceptions of credibility compared to when it is perceived as acting unethically. Respecting and nurturing ethical values within a community helps generate moral capital based on the evaluations of community members, as it minimizes consumer skepticism and makes business entities appear to be sincere (Vlachos et al., 2009). Credibility implies the believability of the information that is given (Ismagilova et al., 2020), as expressed through trustworthiness and expertise (Newell & Goldsmith, 2001). Following attribution theory and the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), we argue that followers have not only developed mechanisms for recognizing the persuasive intent of SMIs, but also engage in moral evaluations of their conduct, which affect both dimensions of SMIs' credibility in the following way:

H2a: Followers' moral judgment of an SMI's moral transgression is positively related to the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI.

H2b: Followers' moral judgment of an SMI's moral transgression is positively related to the perceived expertise of the SMI.

Ethical responsibility in business helps enhance symbolic image (He & Lai, 2012), and any unethical behavior has the potential to severely damage the totality of a business's intangible assets, including the image (Fan, 2005). The endorsement literature shows that the unethical behavior of endorsers can negatively affect the image of the endorsed brand (Lohneiss & Hill, 2014). Businesses convey their core values that resonate with their target population through their image (Jalivand & Samiei, 2012). Although engaging in activities such as advertising and PR were traditionally considered as crucial in forming such an image, genuine consciousness and consistent ethical behaviors, i.e., putting ethics at the core of the business instead of at its margins, can also foster the development of positive brand image (Iglesias & Ind, 2016). In a specific case Jeanes (2015) showed that in moral brand culture the moral narrative has the potential to reduce resistance to the brand, enabling the company to "do the right thing". The impact of unethical conduct on a firm's image is immediate and negative (Sierra et al., 2010), while the ethically responsible actions of a company impact its symbolic image more than its functional one (He & Lai, 2014). Social image is related to how well a business and its values are accepted within a society (Biel, 1992). The socially responsible activities of a firm enhance the image of the firm's products (Salehzadeh et al., 2016), and the image of a company is positively influenced by actions which adhere to the principles of corporate social responsibility (Esmaelipour & Barjoei, 2016; Arslan & Zaman, 2014). Corporate social responsibility has many aspects, one of which is the

implementation of moral principles, and an organization with moral obligation towards customers has a more positive image (Arendt & Brettel, 2010). Consumers form various associations about a business through direct or indirect interactions with it (Iglesias et al., 2019). Thus, if a company wants to build an image of an ethical entity, it must portray an ethical commitment in these interactions (Rindell et al., 2011). Previous research showed followers perceive SMIs as human brands (e.g., Ki et al., 2020), and it is safe to assume the effects established in the branding literature will apply to SMI context, and thus the following is hypothesized:

H3: Followers' moral judgment of an SMI's moral transgression is positively related to their perceived image of the SMI.

Business ethics entails nurturing the relationship between firm and society, driven by values of correctness and equity (Gazzola & Colombo, 2014). Reputation in business can be enhanced through responsible business behavior, which takes into account the interests of all stakeholders instead of only aiming to achieve selfish goals (Lai et al., 2010; Hsu, 2012; Hur et al., 2013). Ethical behavior signals respect for human values and enables the firm to achieve a coherent reputation (Mella & Gazzola, 2015). It is the perception of an ethical brand that mediates the relationships among a product, service quality and reputation (Alwi et al., 2017). Ethical issues always influence business transactions and the reputations of everyone involved in a relationship (Bendixen & Abratt, 2007). Irresponsible behavior, such as unethical conduct, for example greenwashing (Correa et al., 2017), has been proven to damage brand reputation. In contrast, and Kim and Kim (2019) showed that brand reputation is to an extent the result of perceived transparency in brand communication. Specifically, the endorsement literature suggests morality is key in reputation building (Zhou & Whitla, 2013). On the bases of these arguments the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Followers' moral judgment of an SMI's moral transgression is positively related to the perceived reputation of the SMI.

Purchase intention on social media relies, among other things, on the credibility of the endorser (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019) through the audience's perception of the endorser's attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise (Weismueller et al., 2020). An SMI's credibility affects their followers' purchase intentions with regard to the endorsed brands in various conditions (e.g., Chetoui et al., 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Schouten et al., 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019), and this effect decreases as PSI between an SMI and their followers strengthens. However, it is not insignificant even with high PSI (Breves et al., 2019). Based on these findings the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5a: The perceived trustworthiness of an SMI is positively related to their followers' purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.

H5b: The perceived expertise of an SMI is positively related to their followers' purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.

The unethical behavior of endorsers can damage the image of the endorsed brand (Lohneiss & Hill, 2014), and brand image influences purchase intention (Fombrun, 1996; Lafferty et al. 2002; Esch et al., 2006; Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). The SMIs' image transfers to brands in the endorsement process (Lohneiss & Hill, 2014; McCracken, 1989), and such image transfer plays a pivotal role for SMIs in boosting their followers' intention to purchase the endorsed brand (Chi et al., 2009). As endorsers, SMIs must demonstrate sincerity when promoting a product in order to increase purchase intention (Woodroof et al., 2020). It is thus expected that the stronger the positive image associated with an SMI, the greater the likelihood that their followers will opt to purchase the endorsed brand. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: The perceived image of an SMI is positively related to their followers' purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.

Responsible and ethical behavior in business, i.e., respect for moral norms and values, is a prerequisite for building and maintaining a good reputation (Worcester & Dawkins, 2005). Moreover, unethical conduct has the potential to override a reputation built on product and service quality (Bromley, 2001). In an online context, consumers rely heavily on the reputation of the source of information to form their behavioral intentions, such as purchase intention, as it decreases perceived risk (Kim & Lennon, 2012). Reputation is built on the information flow that takes place among consumers, and often this flow creates a halo effect (Forgas & Laham, 2016), which refers to a situation in which people use one trait or impression to base their overall judgment about someone, even if presented with opposing arguments. This can take place in influencer marketing to transfer negative attitudes towards the source (i.e., SMI) into negative brand evaluations, because all forms of brand communication, including influencer marketing, can be a source of brand beliefs. Consumers are more inclined to believe and recall information obtained from informal channels and peers than the brand itself, and due to the increased credibility of such information this form of promotion can have greater effects on the ethical perceptions of a brand (Worcester & Dawkins, 2005). If such communication seems company-initiated and self-glorifying it fosters mistrust in what is communicated (Berry & McEachern, 2005), because self-promotion is recognized as an ulterior motive. In a case like this a boomerang effect (Roehm & Tybout, 2006) may take place, as the intended positive effect backfires and damages brand reputation. Following the logic of the aforementioned studies, SMIs endorsing a product they had negative experiences with and focusing on just the positive aspects will impact not only SMIs, but the brand they endorse:

H7: The perceived reputation of an SMI is positively related to their followers' purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.

Some authors (e.g., Liu et al., 2015) state that brands should be the ones responsible for disclosing a sponsored SMI relationship, while others assume it is the SMI who needs to reveal this information (e.g., Boerman et al., 2017). According to the theory of moral responsibility (Fischer & Ravizza, 2000), a moral agent can be seen as responsible for something done without coercion, i.e., if they were able to act differently at the time of action, and thus the moral agent is seen as blameworthy if the action is perceived as unethical. In the context of influencer marketing, both SMIs and endorsed brands can be regarded as morally responsible if followers perceive their actions as violating a moral obligation not to cheat or lie for personal advantage. Social network theory combined with role theory explains the role of social relationships in conveying information, influence and evoking of attitudinal and behavioral changes based on perceived moral accountability (Liu et al., 2015). Engagement in a social relationship implies certain expectations that are held by others with regard to an individual, and these expectations yield roles that individuals then enact in social media networks (Katz & Kahn, 1978), for example the role of an SMI. These expectations guide people's behavior that affects both the role sender (i.e., person holding the expectation, usually someone the moral agent regularly interacts with), the moral agent and their relationship (Katz & Kahn, 1978). As cognitive moral development suggests (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977), most adults operate at the second level of their cognitive development. In this stage social approval is key and individuals try to comply with the roles and expectations of others when making ethical decisions, which makes accountability a possible gateway to more ethical behavior (Beu & Buckley, 2001). For example, unethical behavior is lower in strong relationships based on intimacy, trust, reciprocity, and cooperation (Granovetter, 1973). Moreover, if a relationship is multiplex, i.e., people form a relationship on more bases (e.g., in an SMI context the SMI can pose as both a friend and a reviewer), it leads to more moral accountability and can deter unethical behavior among those involved (Brass et al., 1998).

Moral accountability, defined as the “perception of defending or justifying one's conduct to an audience that has reward or sanction authority, and where rewards or sanctions are perceived to be contingent upon audience evaluation of such conduct” (Beu & Buckley, 2001, p. 89), is applicable to the context of SMIs, because it is the followers' attribution of blame for immoral conduct that generates negative outcomes.

Instead of clear prescriptions, moral accountability requires a source of expectations grounded in a social context (Van Schoelandt, 2018), and for SMIs these expectations come from various stakeholders, including followers (Mardon et al., 2018; Cocker et al., 2021). The fundamental attribution error (Ross, 2018) indicates people tend to over-emphasize internal, personality-based explanations for other people's behavior, while underestimating situational explanations. Hence, moral accountability represents a boundary condition between moral judgment and SMIs attributes: the more followers find SMIs morally accountable, the stronger the positive relationship between moral

judgment and an SMI's attributes. Based on this notion moral accountability (i.e., followers' perception of blameworthiness) for conducting unethical behavior, it is proposed that perceived moral accountability will serve as a moderator between moral judgment and SMIs' outcomes:

H8a: Moral accountability positively moderates the relationship between moral judgment and the perceived trustworthiness of an SMI.

H8b: Moral accountability positively moderates the relationship between moral judgment and the perceived expertise of an SMI.

H8c: Moral accountability positively moderates the relationship between moral judgment and the perceived image of an SMI.

H8d: Moral accountability positively moderates the relationship between moral judgment and the perceived reputation of an SMI.

5.2.5 Measures

All items were adopted from the previous literature and revised to fit the influencer marketing context. All questionnaire scales were presented in Croatian as the research was conducted in Croatia. The questionnaire is included in Appendix C. Table 8 shows all the concepts and related items used in the study.

The survey opened with questions on the frequency of the respondents' Instagram usage followed by a definition of SMIs based on previous research (Jun & Yi, 2020; Ki et al., 2020): *Influencers are people who have built a large base of followers on social media and thus have the potential to influence their followers. Brands sometimes pay them for promotion of products. They were not famous people before their engagement with social media.* This way the respondents would not confuse SMIs with traditional celebrities with many followers on social media, which is important given that there are substantial differences between them when it comes to their relationships with followers (Jun & Yi, 2020). A question regarding following at least one influencer on Instagram followed this, and the respondents were also asked about their tendency to follow an SMI's advice in general (using the scale from Belanche et al., 2021a) to make sure the sample was homogenous in that sense. After that the respondents had to read the following text: *Sometimes influencers have a negative experience with the product they need to promote. However, they don't mention it in their posts but focus only on the positive aspects of the endorsed product.*

With the described situation in mind, the respondents were asked to answer four questions about their intention to buy such a product. Purchase intention is often used

as a dependent variable in an SMI context (see Vrontis et al., 2021), so there was no reason to adapt this measure. The related items used in this dissertation were also used in a recent study by Hsieh (2023): I would buy such a product / I would have the intention to buy such a product / I would be interested in buying such a product / It is likely that I would buy such a product.

SMIs' credibility was measured using a scale proposed by Onahinan (1990). The original scale has three dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. However, the attractiveness dimension was omitted from this research, as its focus is on perceptions about influencer marketing as an industry. Specifically, the intention of this study is for respondents to consider SMIs as collectively constituting the broader notion of SMIs. Therefore, examining the dimension of attractiveness, which typically refers to physical appearance, would be inappropriate as it is challenging to attribute physical attractiveness to the industry itself. Hence, only the trustworthiness and expertise dimensions were involved in questionnaire. The trustworthiness dimension was measured using five items (dependable, honest, reliable, sincere, trustworthy), as was the expertise dimension (expert, experienced, knowledgeable, qualified, skilled), which were all evaluated on a five-point Likert scale. It is important to note that in the first dimension (trustworthiness) the item "sincere" was omitted in the Croatian version of the questionnaire, as it translates to the same word as the item "honest".

To measure SMIs' moral image a six-item scale developed by Brunk (2012) was used, consisting of the following items: ...respect social norms / always adhere to law / are socially responsible / avoid damaging behavior at all costs / are a good business entity / make a decision only after careful consideration of the potential positive or negative consequences for all those involved. SMIs' reputation was measured following the methodology of Zhou and Whitla (2013), and the respondents answered three items on a five-point scale: SMIs that hide negative experiences and focus only on positive ones when promoting a product have no integrity / deserve little respect from me / I am skeptical towards SMIs that hide negative experiences and focus only on positive ones when promoting a product. All items were reversed in the analysis.

Table 8: List of all scales with references

Construct	Item
Purchase intention (Hsieh, 2023) <i>If an influencer hides negative experiences and focuses only on positive experiences when promoting a product...</i>	I would buy such a product.
	I would have the intention to buy such a product
	I would be interested in buying such a product.
	It is likely I would buy such a product.
SMIs' credibility – trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990) <i>Influencers who hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences when promoting a product are...</i>	dependable.
	reliable.
	honest.
	trustworthy.
SMIs' credibility – expertise (Ohanian, 1990)	Expert.
	Experienced.
	Knowledgeable.
	Qualified.
	Skilled.
SMIs' moral image (Brunk, 2012) <i>Influencers that hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences when promoting a product...</i>	respect social norms.
	always adhere to the law.
	are socially responsible.
	avoid damaging behavior at all costs.
	are good business entities.
	Make a decision only after careful consideration of the potential positive or negative consequences for all those involved.

To be continued

Table 8: List of all scales with references (cont.)

Construct	Item
SMIs' moral reputation (Zhou & Whitla, 2013)	Influencers that hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences when promoting a product have no integrity.
	Influencers that hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences when promoting a product deserve little respect from me.
SMIs' moral reputation (Zhou & Whitla, 2013)	I am skeptical about the virtues and values of an influencer that hides negative experiences and focuses only on positive experiences when promoting a product.
Followers' moral judgment (Tansey et al., 1994) <i>When influencers hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences when promoting a product it is...</i>	Unfair/fair
	Unjust/just
	unacceptable to my family / acceptable to my family
	not morally right / morally right
	traditionally unacceptable / traditionally acceptable
	culturally unacceptable / culturally acceptable
Issue recognition (Barnett & Valentine, 2004)	If influencers hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences when promoting a product that is an ethical issue.
SMIs' moral accountability (Steinbauer et al., 2014)	Influencers are responsible for promoting only those products they had no negative experiences with.

Source: Author's own work.

Moral judgment was measured on a uni-dimensional, six-item moral judgment semantic differential scale (Tansey et al., 1994) combining the moral equity and relativism dimensions (Reidenbach et al., 1991; Tansey et al., 1992) of the original Reidenbach and Robin (1988) scale. The items of the scale were: unfair/fair, unjust/just, unacceptable to my family / acceptable to my family, not morally right / morally right,

traditionally unacceptable / traditionally acceptable, and culturally unacceptable / culturally acceptable. Recognition of the moral issue found in most ethical decision-making models (e.g., Jones, 1991) was measured with one item, as in previous research (e.g., Valentine & Barnett, 2007; Rousselet et al., 2020). The item, measured on five-point Likert scale, was adapted to the research context as follows: If SMIs hide negative experiences and focus only on positive ones when promoting a product it is an ethical issue. Moral accountability was also measured with one item (Steinbauer et al., 2014): Influencers are responsible for promoting only those products they had no negative experiences with. At the end of the questionnaire the respondents were asked to answer the demographic questions.

5.2.6 Data collection

The marketing ethics literature treats moral judgment as issue- or situation-related, and one's perception of an ethical problem is significant in this context (e.g., Rest, 1986; Hunt & Vitell, 1986). Ethical decision-making models are complex, specifying numerous constructs and interrelationships, and Hunt and Vitell (1990) suggest testing only parts of any model at one time. In this study, the focus is on recognition of immoral acts and moral judgments about this. A realistic scenario was described to a carefully selected sample of respondents that follow SMIs on Instagram. Similarly, although concepts such as reputation and image rely on the perception of all stakeholders, the most pragmatic way to measure them is focusing on the immediate customers (Wartick, 2002; Cretu & Brodie, 2007), in this case followers.

Once prepared, the main questionnaire was first administered to 16 students and one marketing professor who took the time to revise it, check for clarity and comment on it. Their feedback was mostly affirmative, with only some remarks regarding spelling and one related to question clarity. Their responses were taken into consideration, and after it was revised the main questionnaire was administered by Valicon, a market research agency. The sample was representative with regard to age and gender, with five generational cohorts: 18-28, 29-38, 39-48 and 49-58. To make sure the data came from a relevant sample of respondents, only adults who use Instagram and follow at least one SMI on the platform were surveyed. The research was focused on Croatian respondents because cultural differences can contribute to differences in moral judgment (Graham et al., 2016).

First, the respondents answered the questions about their frequency of using Instagram and following SMIs' advice in general. The next part of the survey had questions related to both the independent and dependent variables. At the end, the respondents were asked to answer the demographic questions (on gender, age, education, place of residence, etc.). The data was analyzed using JASP 0.18.1.0. (JASP Team, 2023) software. Since the data was collected by a market research agency, initial conditions for participation (18-58 years old, living in Croatia, using Instagram, following at least one Instagram

influencer) had to be met in order to proceed with the survey, and there was no missing data in the final output that was analyzed.

5.2.7 Sample description

In total, 415 valid responses were obtained for the main survey and 58% of the sample was female (Table 9). The respondents' average age was 36.5 years old (std. dev. = 10.58). The respondents mainly came from Zagreb (32%) followed by Dalmatia (20%), Slavonia (16%), Central Croatia (11%), North Croatia (10%), and Istria and Primorje along with the hinterland (10%). Over two thirds of the sample (76%) lived in an urban area while the rest lived in a rural area. Although coming from different parts of Croatia, the respondents' main characteristics – including their age and how active and fashionable – they are, did not differ depending on where they came from.

Table 9: Description of the sample

	FREQUENCIES (%)	
GENDER	Male	43
	Female	57
REGION	Slavonia	17.9
	Central Croatia	9.6
	North Croatia Hrvatska	10.7
	Zagreb	30.3
	Istria, Primorje and the hinterland	10
	Dalmacia	21.6
TYPE OF TOWN	Urban	71.5
	Rural	27.7
	Prefer not to answer	0.8

Source: Author's own work.

Most of the sample had finished high school (38%), or had a graduate (28%) or undergraduate (19%) degree. Slightly over 10% of the sample finished crafts school and a minority of respondents had either a postgraduate degree, PhD or ended their education after primary school. The majority of the sample was employed in a company (72%) while 8% of them were students, 5% were unemployed, 3% were retired, a bit over 2% were craftsmen, and the rest were either still in school, entrepreneurs,

freelancers, agricultural workers, homemakers or disabled. Almost half of the employed respondents (43%) were employees without immediate subordinates, 14% were employees who directly supervise the work of others, 12% had a leadership position at the sector level and 2% a leadership position at the company level.

More than half of the respondents were married (48%) and 15% lived in a partnership, while 28% were single and the rest were divorced, separated, a widow/widower or unwilling to answer. Just over 55% had children. Over half of the sample had a personal disposable income of between 500 and 1,500 euros a month, followed by those who had less than 500 euros (23%). Household income for almost 36% of the respondents varied between one and two thousand euros followed by those who had from two to three thousand euros (21%) and those who have less than one thousand euros of household income (19%). Most of the household shopping for daily consumption (food, drinks and household goods) was done by the respondents just as much as the other household members (46%), followed by the respondents who did most of the shopping for the household (32%) and those who were the only ones doing it (12%). Less than 7% of respondents mainly had someone else do the shopping for daily consumption for them. The respondents mostly (46%) estimated that they contribute to the household budget as much as other household members, 28% stated they are the ones contributing most to the household budget, and 22% said that someone else contributes most. The remaining 3% of respondents chose not to answer this question.

The average household size in the sample was 4.24 individuals. Most respondents (28%) lived in a three-person household, slightly less lives in four-person household (27%), 21% shared a household with just one other person, and 15% of the sample lived in a five-person household. The rest of the respondents lived either alone (6%) or in a household with more than eight people. With regard to the description of the financial situation that best describes the respondents' households, 38% declared that their income was sufficient to buy household appliances, but they would hardly be able to afford to buy a car (Table 10). For little over 30% of the respondents the household income was sufficient for buying food and clothing, but hardly for buying new household appliances. For 19% of the respondents the household income was enough for everything except for buying a new apartment or holiday home. Only 5% of respondents could buy a new apartment or holiday home if necessary. The rest of the respondents (around 8%) could barely afford food, or if they could afford food they could not afford new clothing.

Table 10: Financial status of the respondents

	FREQUENCIES (%)	
FINANCIAL STATUS	The income of our household is barely enough for food.	3.7
	The income of our household is enough for food, but we can hardly afford new clothes.	6.9
	The income is enough for buying food and clothes, but at the moment, we would find it hard to afford a new TV or refrigerator.	34.0
	The income is enough for buying household appliances, but we would find it hard to afford a new car.	35.3
	The income is enough for everything except buying a new apartment or cottage.	16.3
	If necessary, we could afford to buy an apartment or holiday home.	3.7

Source: Author's own work.

Over 98% of the respondents said they use the Internet every day and well over 41% use Instagram multiple times a day. More than half of the sample stated they shop online at least once (37%) or multiple times (29%) a month.

5.2.8 Results

In this subchapter the results from the quantitative study are presented in three sections, covering the measurement model, hypotheses testing, and mediation analysis.

5.2.8.1 Measurement model

Before testing the structural model, the measurement model was assessed including all the latent variables. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to purify the scales and assess the reliability and validity of each construct's measures (Table 11). All the constructs exhibit a high Cronbach's alpha, indicating high internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), significant results for Bartlett's test of sphericity, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is well above the recommended 0.6 cutoff (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 11: CFA and scale reliability of latent constructs

Items	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	KMO	Bartlett's test of sphericity	CR	AVE
PI.1	0.819	0.925	0.843	< .001	0.911	0.718
PI.2	0.843					
PI.3	0.870					
PI.4	0.856					
CRED1.1	0.784	0.939	0.916	< .002	0.913	0.568
CRED1.2	0.822					
CRED1.3	0.830					
CRED1.4	0.838					
CRED2.1	0.846					
CRED2.2	0.864					
CRED2.3	0.846					
CRED2.4	0.833					
MOR_IMG.1	0.778	0.891	0.898	< .001	0.906	0.587
MOR_IMG.2	0.796					
MOR_IMG.3	0.769					
MOR_IMG.4	0.814					
MOR_IMG.5	0.729					
MOR_IMG.6	0.820					
MOR_REP.1_R	0.644	0.738	0.654	< .001	0.802	0.579
MOR_REP.2_R	0.880					
MOR_REP.3_R	0.740					
MOR_JUD1	0.774	0.916	0.882	< .001	0.931	0.647
MOR_JUD2	0.815					
MOR_JUD3	0.841					
MOR_JUD4	0.862					
MOR_JUD5	0.863					
MOR_JUD6	0.865					

Source: Author's own work.

Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion was used to evaluate the discriminant validity of the constructs. Following this, the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct should exceed the correlation coefficients of the corresponding constructs. In this dataset this condition is met (Table 12), confirming the discriminant validity between the constructs.

Table 12: AVE, the square root of AVE (in bold), and correlations between constructs (off diagonal)

	AVE	PI	CRED	IMG	REP	JUDG
PI	0.718	0.85				
CRED	0.568	0.62	0.75			
IMG	0.587	0.57	0.69	0.77		
REP	0.579	0.23	0.27	0.23	0.76	
JUDG	0.647	0.42	0.54	0.59	0.25	0.80

Source: Author's own work.

After running the separate CFAs for each construct separately, the overall measurement model was evaluated. The ratio between Chi-Square and degrees of freedom χ^2/df was 2.7, which is below the recommended 0.3 cutoff indicating model parsimony (Kline, 2005). Comparative fit index (CFI) is one of the indicators least affected by sample size (Fan et al., 1999), and this was above 0.9 (CFI=0.941), indicating a good measurement model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999), as well as the non-normed-fit index (NNFI=0.933). The root mean square of approximation (RMSEA) which indicates how well the assumed measurement model would fit the population matrix is 0.065, also indicating a good fit (MacCallum et al., 1996; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) was 0.041, indicating a good fit even according to stringent thresholds that go below 0.05 (Byrne, 2013; Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2000).

Given the nature of the study, both dependent and independent variables were obtained by self-reported data and as such are susceptible to the negative effect of common method bias. This bias occurs when responses vary because of the use of a common scaling approach on measures that were derived from a single data source. The main assumption is that the results showed effects that would otherwise not be observed, i.e. that the common method drives the observed effects more than the hypothesized cause (Fuller et al., 2015). To reduce common method bias, the survey was conducted by a professional agency which ensured the anonymity of the results was guaranteed to each participant. To examine common method variance, the single common method factor approach was used (Podsakoff et al., 2003) and a new measurement model was tested on all the items in a single factor. This model showed poor fitness with χ^2/df rising to 12.11 (with 15 additional df), CFI falling to 0.602 and NNFI to 0.569, while RMSEA and SRMR rose to 0.164 and 0.106, respectively. Apart from that, Harman's test, a statistical control suggested by Kock et al. (2021) was employed. The results from this test showed that single-factor solution accounts for 36% of the variance, which is below the recommended threshold of 50%. These results indicate the measurement model is less likely to be affected by the common method bias.

Social desirability can also impact the use of questionnaires in research, as it is a natural tendency of respondents to come up with answers that are more widely acceptable instead of those that reflect their true thoughts, beliefs and experiences (Bernardi & Guptill, 2008). To reduce the impact of social desirability in the questionnaire, two steps were taken. First, the anonymity of the respondents was ensured, encouraging honest answers without fear of judgment (Bergen & Labont, 2021), and was further reinforced by using an independent agency to collect the data instead of reaching out to respondents personally. As the effect of social desirability is high in self-reported measures, the second step to reduce this bias, as suggested by Walzenbach (2019), involved designing the questionnaire around a scenario. This hypothetical situation shifted the focus from the respondents' actions to those of others (i.e., SMIs), allowing the respondents to assess the moral values of others rather than their own.

5.2.8.2 Hypotheses testing

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships among the constructs of the conceptual model. Various fit indices (Table 13) were used to assess the appropriateness of the hypothesized model. Since all of them take into account different aspects they all offer different perspectives, but each has its own drawbacks and they should thus always be examined together rather than relying on one specific index. The goodness-of-fit statistic indicates how well the conceptual model replicates the observed covariance matrix (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2000). It varies between 0 and 1 and values above 0.9 indicate an appropriate fit (Hooper et al., 2008). This study's GFI of 0.953 thus indicates a good fit (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007; Sharma et al., 2005).

Table 13: Fit indices for the baseline and moderated models

Fit indices	Baseline model	Moderated model
GFI	0.970	0.953
CFI	0.934	0.914
NNFI	0.926	0.905
RMSEA	0.066	0.072
SRMR	0.168	0.108

Source: Author's own work.

The CFI of the structural model assumes that all the unobservable variables of the model are uncorrelated and then compares the sample covariance matrix to this new, null model (Hooper et al., 2008), and it is among the fit indices least affected by the sample size (Fan et al., 1999). In this study it exceeds the value of 0.9 (CFI=0.914), ensuring the model is not misspecified and indicating a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Similarly, using the null model (in which all latent variables are uncorrelated), the Non-Normed Fit Index compares the Chi-Squared statistics of the model to the those of the null model,

and this study's NNFI is 0.905, indicating an acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1998). The RMSEA indicator shows how well the hypothesized model would fit the population covariance matrix (Byrne, 1998), and this study's RMSEA is 0.072, indicating a good model fit (MacCallum et al., 1996; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The SRMR measures the difference between the residuals of the sample covariance matrix and the hypothesized covariance matrix, and in this study this indicator is 0.108. SRMR values up to 0.08 are usually deemed acceptable (Hooper et al., 2008) in combination with other fit indices meeting their thresholds, and thus an SRMR of 0.1 can be accepted (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

The results (Table 14) indicate that followers' recognition of SMIs' moral transgression is related to lower moral judgment (H1: $\beta = -0.320$, $p < 0.001$), and thus, H1 was supported. Furthermore, moral judgment is related to perceived trustworthiness (H2a: $\beta = 0.615$, $p < 0.001$), expertise (H2b: $\beta = 0.564$, $p < 0.001$), image (H3: $\beta = 0.694$, $p < 0.001$), and reputation (H4: $\beta = 0.375$, $p < 0.001$), offering supports for hypotheses H2a to H4. Purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand is affected by SMIs' trustworthiness (H5a: $\beta = 0.521$, $p < 0.001$) and SMIs' image (H6: $\beta = 0.246$, $p < 0.001$), and so hypotheses H5a and H6 were supported. However, SMIs' perceived expertise (H5b: $\beta = 0.018$, $p = 0.735$) and reputation (H7: $\beta = 0.022$, $p = 0.463$) are not related to purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand. As a result, hypotheses H5b and H7 were not supported. Holding SMIs accountable for hiding negative experiences and focusing only on positive experiences when promoting a product strengthens the relationship between followers' moral judgment and perceived SMIs' trustworthiness (H8a: $\beta = 0.108$, $p = 0.007$), expertise (H8b: $\beta = 0.141$, $p = 0.005$), and image (H8c: $\beta = 0.132$, $p = 0.004$). The effect of moral judgment on SMIs' reputation is not moderated by perceived SMIs' moral accountability (H8d: $\beta = -0.114$, $p = 0.053$). Moral accountability affects the relationship between moral judgment and SMIs' perceived expertise, followed by the perception of trustworthiness, and image, thus supporting hypotheses H8a, H8b, and H8c, while hypothesis H8d was not supported. The detailed regression results are given in Appendix D.

Table 14: Hypotheses testing results

Hypotheses	Std. Est. (p)	Supported/ Not supported
H1: Followers' recognition of an SMI's moral transgression is negatively related to their moral judgments of the SMI's moral transgressions.	-0.320 (< .001)	Supported
H2a: Followers' moral judgment of an SMI's moral transgression is positively related to the perceived trustworthiness of the SMI.	0.615 (< .001)	Supported
2b: Followers' moral judgment of an SMI's moral transgression is positively related to the perceived expertise of the SMI.	0.564 (< .001)	Supported
H3: Followers' moral judgment of an SMI's moral transgression is positively related to their perceived image of the SMI.	0.694 (< .001)	Supported
H4: Followers' moral judgment of an SMI's moral transgression is positively related to the perceived reputation of the SMI.	0.375 (< .001)	Supported
H5a: The perceived trustworthiness of an SMI is positively related to their followers' purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.	0.521 (< .001)	Supported
H5b: The perceived expertise of an SMI is positively related to their followers' purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.	0.018 (0.735)	Not supported
H6: The perceived image of an SMI is positively related to their followers' purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.	0.246 (< .001)	Supported
H7: The perceived reputation of an SMI is positively related to their followers' purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.	0.022 (0.643)	Not supported
H8a: Moral accountability positively moderates the relationship between moral judgment and the perceived trustworthiness of an SMI.	0.108 (0.007)	Supported
H8b: Moral accountability positively moderates the relationship between moral judgment and the perceived expertise of an SMI.	0.141 (0.005)	Supported

To be continued

Table 14: Hypotheses testing results (cont.)

Hypotheses	Std. Est. (p)	Supported/ Not supported
H8c: Moral accountability positively moderates the relationship between moral judgment and the perceived image of an SMI.	0.132 (0.004)	Supported
H8d: Moral accountability positively moderates the relationship between moral judgment and the perceived reputation of an SMI.	-0.114 (0.053)	Not supported

Source: Author's own work.

To ensure the effects are primarily observed due to the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable, control variables are introduced. Control variables improve the validity of results by ensuring they are not confounded by extraneous variables that could skew the findings, thus increasing their precision (Wysocki et al., 2022). The control variables used in the model were followers' gender, education, region, frequency of Instagram usage, and age, as previous research indicates followers' age affects purchase intention with regard to the products SMIs endorse (Sharma et al., 2024). Besides, young followers are less likely to scrutinize SMIs' behavior due to closer relationship with them and less developed critical skills (Garwol, 2020), which can impact their moral judgment of such behavior.

5.2.8.3 Mediation test

In addition to testing the direct relationships, the indirect relationships were also examined through a *post hoc* test of mediation. The mediating effects of SMIs' trustworthiness, expertise, image, and reputation were thus tested (Table 14). The results show there was no direct effect of moral judgment as a predictor of purchase intention ($\beta = 0.051$, $p = 0.336$). This does not mean this relationship cannot be mediated (Kenny et al. 1998; Pardo & Román, 2013), but indicates the mediation could be indirect-only (Zhao et al., 2010). The indirect effects of SMIs' trustworthiness, expertise, image, and reputation as mediators of the relationship between moral judgment and purchase intention were tested. The results show that SMIs' trustworthiness ($\beta = 0.266$, $p < 0.001$) and image ($\beta = 0.145$, $p < 0.001$) were partial mediators of this relationship, while SMIs' expertise ($\beta = 0.011$, $p = 0.705$) and reputation ($\beta = 0.009$, $p = 0.375$) were not. The total effect followers' moral judgment had on purchase intention is significant ($\beta = 0.428$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 15: Mediation test

					95% confidence interval	
	std. est.	std. error	z-value	p	lower	upper
Direct effect						
MORAL JUDGMENT→ PI	0.051	0.053	0.962	0.336	-0.053	0.155
Indirect effects						
MORAL JUDGMENT→ TRUSTWORTHINESS→ PI	0.266	0.039	6.738	< .001	0.189	0.343
MORAL JUDGMENT→ EXPERTISE →PI	0.011	0.028	0.379	0.705	-0.045	0.066
MORAL JUDGMENT→ MORAL IMAGE →PI	0.145	0.037	3.883	< .001	0.072	0.218
MORAL JUDGMENT→ MORAL REPUTATION →PI	0.009	0.011	0.888	0.375	-0.011	0.030
Total effect						
MORAL JUDGMENT→ PI	0.482	0.051	9.482	< .001	0.383	0.582
Total indirect effect						
MORAL JUDGMENT→ PI	0.431	0.044	9.748	< .001	0.345	0.518

Source: Author's own work.

These results will be the basis for the following discussion, which will help contribute to the reduction of ethical dilemmas and space available for unethical behavior in the context of influencer marketing.

5.2.9 Discussion

Ethics in influencer marketing has mostly been examined on the individual level of SMIs, through certain case studies, interviews with SMIs or netnographic examinations of specific profiles (e.g., Mardon, 2018; Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019; Brestovansky & Sekerešová, 2022; Mahy et al., 2022), that way omitting the followers' outcomes (Cho, 2020). This research fills this gap by combining the two: it uses followers' perceptions to gain insights into business ethics within the influencer marketing industry. It begins with the SMIs' perspective because determining the context is crucial for drawing conclusions about ethics (Beu & Buckley, 2001). In the quantitative study, the followers' moral judgment was not based on a specific case but on the overall judgment of business ethics in influencer marketing as a reaction to moral transgressions, regardless of an individual SMIs' characteristics. Although SMIs have made brand promotion very personal, over the past ten years they have also built a sizeable industry and thus are judged through lens of that industry.

Building on the findings of the qualitative study, a survey conducted with 415 respondents revealed the consequences of moral transgressions in influencer marketing. The connection between followers and brands was examined using a combination of established ethical decision-making models alongside the persuasion knowledge model, meaning transfer, and attribution theory. The present study contributes to understanding the mechanisms behind predicting an important outcome on social media – followers’ purchase intention. The results underline the role of moral judgment as a driver of SMIs’ attributes, some of which (SMIs’ trustworthiness and image) translate to purchase intention, while others (SMIs’ expertise and reputation) remain at the SMI level. This distinction is significant, as it shows which SMIs’ characteristics are important in examining SMIs’ outcomes in contrast to those that are important in examining endorsed brand outcomes in influencer marketing ethics.

Following the theoretical bases of ethical decision-making (Jones, 1991), the proposed conceptual model confirmed followers’ recognition that SMIs endorsing a product they had a negative experience with will be related to the moral judgment that such an endorsement is wrong. This result confirms the close relationship between the recognition of the issue and moral judgment (e.g., Barnett & Valentine, 2004; Hollingworth & Valentine, 2015), and points to two further things: first, followers recognize SMIs’ behavior may harm or benefit others; and second, followers perceive SMIs have a choice not to proceed with such behavior. Hence, followers perceive SMIs as moral agents (Jones, 1991), not merely leverage for brands and PR agencies that use them in their communication strategies, and so the results draw more attention to influencer marketing as a stand-alone industry rather than another industry’s communication tool. This thus puts SMIs under a spotlight where monitoring and exploring the boundaries of their (un)ethical actions is possible.

Credibility emerged as an important concept from the earliest research on influencer marketing (Macnamara, 2014; Breves et al., 2021), and it is crucial to understand its relation to outcomes related to SMIs and endorsed brands. Both the trustworthiness and expertise dimensions were affected by followers’ moral judgment that the promotion of products SMIs have a negative experience with is unethical. This finding is an extension of a netnographic study by Cocker et al. (2021), in which the authors found followers perceive inauthentic endorsements as a moral transgression which erodes credibility, and a similar study which linked the promotion of products without having any experience of them to decreased content credibility (Silva et al., 2020). By demonstrating this effect of moral judgment on SMIs’ credibility, this dissertation provides further support for these findings: if SMIs are judged to have acted morally and ethically they are likely to be seen as more credible, while moral transgressions damage their credibility.

This study found that SMIs' image is affected by followers' moral judgments, echoing the results of previous research which found that maintaining ethical responsibility in business is integral to enhancing symbolic image and protecting intangible assets (Fan, 2005; He & Lai, 2012; Iglesias & Ind, 2016). In the context of influencer marketing, such findings are especially important as SMIs in most cases do not have a product or physical place that can help in building a brand image, making the associations that they create in their followers' minds their most valuable asset. Furthermore, nurturing a positive image by avoiding moral transgressions enables SMIs to convey their core values to their audiences. Sierra et al. (2010) showed that unethical conduct has an immediate and negative impact on image in business. This dissertation builds upon their discoveries by examining a specific type of social media marketing that spans both earned and paid social media channels. Consequently, the findings joining moral judgment and SMIs' image have significant relevance given the growing overlap between these two forms of social media marketing.

In the proposed model, support was also found for the effect of moral judgment on SMIs' reputation. This result highlights the importance of reputation in tightly knit communities on social media (Hayes et al., 2016), and how it can be affected by a lack of honesty in content creation (Archer et al., 2014) due to activation of followers' persuasion knowledge (Grigsby, 2020). Reputation entails nurturing relations with all included stakeholders (Fombrun, 2001), and it is a result of judgments about an individual's behavior affected by the interplay of past behavior and present expectations (Siano et al., 2011), and as such is affected by followers' moral judgment. Taken together, the results indicate that followers' moral judgment has a positive relation with multiple SMI outcomes: the higher the degree to which an SMI's behavior is morally acceptable to the individual, the higher the perceived credibility, image, and reputation of the SMI.

Out of the two observed credibility dimensions only trustworthiness had a positive impact on purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand. Following the logic of the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), moral judgment works as a signal of persuasive intent which in turn reduces the purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand as it is followers' coping mechanism against the persuasive intent. However, in the context of SMIs' moral transgression another credibility dimension, expertise, is not related to purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand. The reason persuasion knowledge activated coping mechanisms only in the case of the trustworthiness dimension might be that the expertise dimension of SMIs' credibility is affected by argument quality more than trustworthiness is (Miranda et al., 2021). The study design was such that respondents could not assess argument quality because the focus was on a specific situation that occurs in influencer marketing as an industry, not on individual level. On top of that, SMI-brand fit also enhances the perception of SMIs' expertise (Ardley, 2022), and the respondents could not evaluate it in general. Besides

that, expertise in influencer marketing is related to specialization and dedication to a certain niche of promoted products (Randers et al., 2023). As the qualitative study also indicated, the Croatian market is small and SMIs often cannot afford to stick to one niche but collaborate across different product types and post various kinds of content, which erodes the perception of expertise (Rutter et al., 2021). It thus might be that the collective perception of SMIs' expertise in smaller markets where specialization is rare is not enough to drive purchase intention.

The perception of SMIs' image positively affects the purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand, in line with previous findings (Lohneiss & Hill, 2014). Such findings are in line with McCracken's (1989) concept of image transfer in brand endorsements, which assumes meaning shifts between entities. Based on this, the present study shows that followers' perceptions in the event of a moral transgression also constitute meaning that can transfer from an SMIs' attribute to the purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand. Previous research examined the opposite relationship: how immoral actions committed by brands can impact attitudes towards the endorser (Hur et al., 2018). In a similar vein, but closer to the present study, Lee and Kwak (2016) examined how a moral transgression committed by a public figure can affect brands associated with them. In both cases, the researchers focused more on moral reasoning and the interplay of product judgments and moral judgment. In contrast, the emphasis of this study is intentionally on followers and understanding how their perception is related to the purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand in influencer marketing, which represents uncharted territory for both SMIs and brands, leaving much space for unethical behavior (Gibson, 2002). In such circumstances, how followers perceive the image of the SMI is the most reliable factor in determining the impact of unethical behavior on both the SMI and the intention of followers to purchase the endorsed brand.

Contrary to previous findings, this study found that SMIs' perceived reputation is not related to purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand. The results of this study point to the need for regarding SMIs' reputation and image separately, although they are commonly used interchangeably (Chun, 2005). Image changes faster and easier, while reputation takes time to build and sustain (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997; Keller, 1993). The branding literature suggests that image is more related to perceived product value, and reputation to values in general (Cretu & Brodie, 2007), which makes this finding surprising as morality is about values in general. However, it might be that these general values are so abstract that they are more difficult to assess than image and credibility. Additionally, SMIs' reputation will transfer to purchase intention if followers see SMIs as a reflection of themselves (Önem et al., 2024), and putting SMIs in the position of moral agents committing a moral transgression might have been difficult to identify with. Moreover, the way reputation in business is formed might hinder the results with regard to its relationship with purchase intention. Reputation is

formed on descriptive, informational and inferential beliefs, rather than a rational process and reasoning (Brunk, 2010). Descriptive beliefs are based on first-hand experiences, informational beliefs are formed on the information one gets from various sources, and inferential beliefs are heuristics that take place when descriptive and informational beliefs are scarce (Bruner, 1973). Given that the respondents were asked about the reputation of SMIs as an industry, the lack of descriptive and informational beliefs might push them to use inferential beliefs about SMIs' reputation, which could be based on the overall notion of SMIs as lacking traditional work ethics and societal tension regarding this new form of employment and the related legitimacy of SMIs' careers (Syed, 2019). Hence, it might be the case that the reputation of SMIs is still rather low, and more time is needed for SMIs to establish a foundational and stable level of reputation within their industry, which would then allow the effect to transfer to outcomes such as purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand. Besides, the relationship between reputation and purchase intention might not be linear or there are diminishing returns where it only matters to followers up to a certain point, and the focal moral transgression might lower than that threshold. This result should not discourage researchers from seeking further insights into the relationship between reputation and purchase intention, as consumers, and in this case followers, play a crucial role in spreading reputation (Brunk, 2010), making it undeniably connected to SMIs' performance.

Mediation analysis shows that when followers make moral judgments about SMIs' moral transgressions they judge their value system and this is reflected in perceived credibility, image, and reputation. However, it is the changes evoked in their trustworthiness and image that followers link to the endorsed product. One major finding concerns the role of different credibility dimensions as mediators between followers' moral judgment and the purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand. The trustworthiness SMIs built over time, which is not as reliant on argument quality (Miranda et al., 2021), works as a mediator between followers' moral judgment and the purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand. This corroborates previous findings of trustworthiness as an important predictor of purchase intention (e.g., Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2020). The results of this study thus point to the potential role followers' moral judgment plays in building (or breaking) an argument SMIs are trying to develop. Similarly as expertise, SMIs' reputation is affected by followers' moral judgment, but it did not mediate between the judgment and purchase intention. Although both SMIs' image and reputation are prone to changing under the pressure of followers' moral judgment, they develop differently with regard to this influence.

The moral accountability assigned to SMIs for an immoral act when endorsing a product strengthens the effect followers' moral judgment has on SMIs' trustworthiness, expertise, and image. This is an important finding, which shows SMIs are held liable

for the endorsements and content they post. In well-established industries, such as journalism or advertising, existing codes of ethics provide principles of conduct, but SMIs mostly rely on individual experience (Wellman et al., 2020), and often fail to understand what their moral accountability is. However, embracing moral accountability is a key to finding an effective balance between efficacy and moral conduct (Kim, 2017).

While it may not have been immediately the case upon the emergence of SMIs, their actions have become subject to greater scrutiny as they evolve. This is somewhat expected given the fact that the responsibility for negative outcomes of unethical behavior is positively correlated with the power and status of an influencer (Kennedy & Anderson, 2017; Sanders et al., 2018). The application of attribution theory (Weiner, 1980) and fundamental attribution error (Ross, 2018) helps to explain why meeting followers' expectations grounded in the social context is crucial for maintaining the perception of a credible source with a good reputation and image. Moreover, followers who judge SMIs' conduct as immoral perceive SMIs' behavior as performed voluntarily (i.e., without coercion), without taking into account circumstances (Ross, 2018) that may have played a part in such conduct (e.g., contract with a brand or the risk of potential lawsuits).

Interestingly, the relationship between followers' moral judgment and the perceived moral reputation of SMIs' was not affected by moral accountability in the current study, although prior research suggests this is the case (e.g., Carroll & Olegario, 2019). Both accountability and reputation are relational concepts pertaining to the interaction of the actor and those holding him or her accountable (Bovens, 2007). Accountability is about management of expectations (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987), and reputational concerns are central to account-giving and account-holding (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016). However, the relationship between accountability and reputation is complex and takes time to develop (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016), so it might be that it will take more interactions between followers and SMIs to develop a stable form of accountability that will have effects on SMIs' reputation. Additionally, since SMIs are a relatively new phenomenon, people may not hold them as accountable as they would long-established companies. This could result in the population variance being greater than the sample variance. As Aguinis and Stone-Romero (1997) suggest, even a small difference between sample and population variance can reduce the moderating effect. Expanding the range of possible responses for measuring SMIs' moral accountability in future studies could help address this issue. Moreover, while individuals are generally held accountable outside their work organizations by laws, rules, and the salient expectations of others (Ferris & Judge, 1991), SMIs may not fully grasp the extent of their accountability due to the ambiguous and often conflicting expectations placed on them. This lack of clarity can prevent them from effectively managing these expectations and, as a result, hinder the development

of robust accountability perceptions that would significantly impact the relationship between moral judgment and reputation.

With SMIs' sponsorship deals on the rise and the disclosure of such deals being harder to recognize (Cocker et al., 2021), some studies suggest that SMIs' endorsements will result in higher purchase intention (Mardon et al., 2023) because followers will not care about sponsored deals. However, our results show followers still expect SMIs to be candid about the satisfaction they feel for the endorsed product, as they hold them morally accountable for the creation of honest content, and penalize dishonesty in the endorsed brand's presentation with lower perceived credibility, image, and reputation, some of which will in turn jeopardize the purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.

After having discussed the results of the study, its research implications for theory and practice are outlined in the next chapter, along with the limitations.

6 IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In this chapter, the theoretical contributions to previous research in the field of influencer marketing is outlined. Additionally, practical implications based on the research results are provided, research limitations are highlighted, and directions for further research in the field are suggested.

6.1 Theoretical implications

Partially following the recent suggestions by Golder et al. (2023), this dissertation is grounded on a real-world marketing phenomenon, and the research approach used in this study examined the specificities of SMIs' role rather than adopting the preconceived idea that SMIs are merely a new form of sales personnel, PR, or just another paid commercial. The dissertation also followed the advice from Drumwright (2019), who suggested advertising ethics should be studied from the, often overlooked, "meso" level. SMIs as boundary spanners belong to this level, and studying influencer ethics requires balancing SMIs' impressions and the conflicting expectations followers, brands and society have about the influencer marketing industry. This dissertation advances the understanding of ethics related to influencer marketing among both SMIs and followers. Allowing a dual perception (i.e., from both SMIs and followers) of the same problem (i.e., moral issues in influencer marketing) enabled the multiple contributions of this dissertation, stemming from the three main methodological approaches applied: content analysis of existing literature on ethics in influencer marketing, ten interviews with SMIs, and a survey conducted on 415 followers.

Firstly, grounding this dissertation in role theory (Biddle, 2013) within the context of SMIs provides a theoretical framework that diverges from conventional theories related

to the message or sender, offering a novel perspective on the relationships that have emerged with the advent of influencers. Influencer marketing has disrupted social and market dynamics, and applying such a lens to the influencer marketing context makes it possible to capture a broader perspective on these interrelationships. The application of role theory indicates that SMIs have indeed established a stable status within society. However, despite this development, many aspects of their role remain unclear, fueling conflicts within it. Furthermore, the results indicate that SMIs are perceived as part of an industry that extends beyond the individuals enacting it and, as such, they are expected to fulfill responsibilities towards society, in addition to those towards followers and the endorsed brands. This insight underscores the need to expand the understanding of SMIs in influencer marketing literature to encompass their evolving role as responsible business entities. This highlights the importance of considering SMIs not only as individuals creating content, but also as professional entities with ethical responsibilities and obligations.

Secondly, the thesis introduces seven specific roles that SMIs enact in relation to their stakeholders and specific to their social position. Doing so expands role theory into the digital realm and deepens the understanding of SMIs' social position, which is more fluid than previously assumed. Understanding which roles SMIs interpret and fulfill plays a crucial role in shaping their behavior and outcomes. Similarly, Mardon et al. (2023) acknowledge the complexity of holding multiple roles simultaneously. The role dyads they described to capture the different interaction SMIs have with followers and brands partially correspond to the notion of conflicted expectations found in this study. However, their research discusses role multiplicity in embedded entrepreneurship, while this thesis recognizes that SMIs juggle various roles, such as brand endorsers and social commentators, which can lead to moral dilemmas. Besides, Mardon et al. (2023) propose the role shifts of embedded entrepreneurs affect the roles of non-entrepreneurial members within a collective, leading to role conflict and reduced benefits for those members. This study provides a more nuanced view and together they contribute to understanding implications of role shifts within the system: role conflict arises when SMIs attempt to disembed from a collective by adopting new roles that contradict the existing expectations which leads to moral dilemmas. Additionally, while Mardon et al. (2023) find that in re-embedding via role negotiation both SMIs and followers employ strategies to overcome the dysfunctional roles of SMIs, this study focuses more on the strategies that enable SMIs to shift between roles and resolve moral dilemmas. These conflict-resolution strategies partially correspond to neutralization techniques (Sykes & Matza, 2017), i.e. strategies individuals use to justify their deviant behavior to avoid guilt or shame. Nevertheless, the conflict resolution strategies found in this study do not necessarily aim to abolish guilt but rather to resolve the moral dilemma emerging from role conflict.

Thirdly, this dissertation refines the insights gained so far about moral issues in influencer marketing. By going beyond earlier findings on the moral issues existing in influencer marketing, this dissertation shows which moral issues pose dilemmas for those whose perspective matters most – the SMIs themselves. In doing so, it elucidates which moral issues in influencer marketing become moral dilemmas and how. Furthermore, such insights expand our understanding of how SMIs confront moral dilemmas. This knowledge is crucial because the business of SMIs is fraught with such dilemmas, and understanding the strategies they employ to navigate them provides valuable insights into the operational dynamics of their business.

Fourthly, this study links the antecedents from moral decision-making models (Jones, 1991), i.e., moral recognition and judgment, with the well-established influencer attributes (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2021b; Bu et al., 2022; Chidiac & Bowden, 2023). In alignment with established theoretical frameworks of ethical decision-making, the findings suggest that when SMIs endorse a product despite having a negative experience with it, their followers are more inclined to morally judge this endorsement as unethical. This outcome emphasizes the intrinsic link between specific ethical dilemmas and moral evaluations, as highlighted in prior research (e.g., Barnett & Valentine, 2004; Hollingworth & Valentine, 2015), particularly within the context of SMIs concealing adverse experiences. Hence, another contribution of this study to the literature is in revealing that such moral judgments significantly impact the perceived attributes of SMIs. Moreover, the application of basic assumptions from the persuasion knowledge model obtained an insight so far overlooked in the literature: followers' moral judgment of SMIs' behavior is a cue for recognition of a persuasive attempt, which then backfires by affecting endorsed brand outcome (i.e., purchase intention). The hypotheses related to SMIs' credibility, image and reputation illustrate how followers' moral judgment serves as a link between two streams of literature, those on business ethics and influencer marketing. Both dimensions of credibility, namely trustworthiness and expertise, were observed to be influenced by followers' moral judgments regarding the promotion of products with which the SMI had negative experiences. These findings build upon the insights gleaned from a netnographic study by Cocker et al. (2021), which identified non-genuine endorsements as moral transgressions detrimental to credibility, and similar research linking endorsements lacking an experiential basis to diminished content credibility (Silva et al., 2020). Moreover, moral judgment also exhibited associations with an SMI's image, echoing the findings from previous investigations across various domains, including employee and company perceptions (Dib-Slamani et al., 2023), leadership assessments (Fehr et al., 2015), consumer behavior studies (Brunk, 2012), and analyses of celebrity endorsements (Lee et al., 2020).

Fifthly, in testing the proposed relationships concerning the concealment of negative experiences, the findings provided partial support for the established associations

between SMIs' attributes and their followers' purchase intention toward the endorsed brand. Notably, only trustworthiness demonstrated a positive impact on purchase intention, while expertise did not. While previous studies typically examine SMI expertise within specific industries or for individual SMIs, this dissertation focused on SMIs' general expertise, which may have posed challenges for respondents' assessment. SMIs are often perceived as superficial and lacking in professional expertise (Dean, 2023), rather than as individuals with specialized knowledge and skills. In a business context, image can undergo rapid changes and is closely linked to perceived product value. Consequently, changes in an SMI's image are reflected in their followers' purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.

Sixthly, the dissertation highlights the significance of the moral accountability attributed to SMIs for their unethical conduct, particularly when endorsing products they have had negative experiences with. This finding underscores that SMIs are perceived as responsible for the endorsements and content they share. Unlike well-established industries, like journalism or advertising, where codes of ethics offer clear guidelines for conduct, SMIs often rely on personal experience and may lack understanding of their moral accountability. However, embracing moral accountability is essential for achieving a harmonious balance between effectiveness and ethical behavior in this domain.

Seventhly, the qualitative and quantitative approaches used in the thesis are highly complementary. By adopting this methodological approach, a more comprehensive understanding of the same issue (i.e., moral dilemmas in influencer marketing) is gained from two different respondent groups. The qualitative phase provided deep, nuanced, and context-rich insights directly from SMIs, who are at the center of the ethical conflict. In contrast, the survey enabled the empirical testing of the qualitative insights, particularly focusing on the conflict between authenticity and commitment, with a specific emphasis on withholding negative experiences as a moral dilemma. By integrating the findings from both studies, this dissertation not only offers a richer understanding of the SMIs' roles and moral dilemmas, but also highlights how these ethical challenges influence followers' perceptions and behaviors towards both SMIs and the brands they endorse. Such an approach provides a rich, multi-dimensional perspective on the issue, and helps to validate and generalize the findings across different groups involved in influencer marketing sphere.

In the end, findings from both the qualitative and quantitative studies jointly challenge the neoclassical view of business entities as solely focused on profit maximization, and point toward stakeholder theory as suitable for capturing novel business relationships. Stakeholder-related theories are a collection of frameworks and perspectives that emphasize the importance of considering various parties, or stakeholders, in the

decision-making processes of organizations, making business and ethics inseparable from one another (Valentinov, 2023). Stakeholder-related theories acknowledge anyone who is formally or informally affected by a business entity as a stakeholder. SMIs exemplify this approach because they make promotion personal and embody the idea that business is fundamentally about human relationships. The joint findings of this thesis show that SMIs recognize the importance of balancing expectations from followers, brands, and society to make it on the market, and followers punish their actions if they judge them as immoral. The thesis thus complements the idea that nurturing relationships has priority over profit-seeking. More specifically, it highlights the application of instrumental stakeholder theory: fostering relationships with stakeholders, guided by ethical norms like fairness and trustworthiness, can result in enhanced financial performance (Hendry, 2001). Moreover, the findings indicate that SMIs need to nurture what Jones et al. (2018) call close relational capability, an asset that is hard to imitate and thus is a source of sustainable competitive advantage. This is an intention to rely on relational contracts, joint wealth creation and high levels of mutual trust.

The findings of this study broaden the range of the existing influencer marketing literature and confirm that the moral aspect of influencer marketing plays a big role in shaping perceptions about SMIs, which in turn affects purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brands. These results are important because they help understand how moral evaluations affect the relationship between SMI-related outcomes and brand-related outcomes from the followers' perspective. Alongside the aforementioned theoretical contributions, the dissertation also offers several managerial insights, as outlined below.

6.2 Managerial implications

Given the specific nature of SMIs' role, the managerial implications of this study are aimed at several interest groups: SMIs, brands and PR, and policymakers.

As results of this study point out, SMIs are still looking for their place in the complex environment of social media, and the burden of conflicting expectations leaves them confused, exhausted and often crossing the boundaries of their comfort zone. To relieve the moral issues emerging from role conflict SMIs should consider which of the stakeholders' expectations they will prioritize, and then commit to this. Their role should not be as varied as it is now, but they need to anchor themselves in either brand-related roles, follower-related roles, or society-related roles. This is not to say they should abandon other stakeholders' expectations, but instead they should make it clear and be consistent which expectations they prioritize. That way they will reduce the frequency of moral dilemmas they encounter and consequently reduce the use of the strategies that enable role-switching. As the results of this study show, not meeting

expectations while pretending to meet them (i.e., employing various role-switching strategies) harms SMIs credibility, image, and reputation. Prioritizing one group of stakeholders over the others might also help SMIs position themselves within a specific industry, as positioning between industries (e.g., as a travel SMI, fashion SMI etc.) might not be enough as influencer marketing grows as an industry. Clear and consistent prioritizing of a certain stakeholder group can help SMIs position themselves not only in relation to followers, but also brands that would then need to adjust their expectations when approaching them, leaving less room for immoral business practices that are perceived as dishonest and manipulative.

SMIs should also be aware that the results of this study show that followers hold them morally accountable if they endorse a product they had a negative experience with, i.e., they do not perceive SMIs as victims of circumstance in which they are forced to do something against their will. Instead, followers see SMIs as full-fledged moral agents who should stay true to themselves and their audiences, disclosing their honest impressions of the products they endorse, even if negative. On top of that, SMIs must be aware that not meeting followers' expectations of authentic product endorsement reflects more negatively on them, in terms of lower credibility, image, and reputation, than it reduces the purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand.

Upon their emergence, SMIs stirred the already murky waters of PR. Following the results of this study, brands and PR agencies can be relieved to some extent, as apparently immoral SMIs' behavior reflects mostly on the influencers themselves. However, despite holding SMIs morally accountable in cases of immoral action, some of these negative effects are related to purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brands. Thus, if brands and agencies want to make the most of their collaborations with SMIs, they should work on setting the ground rules and drawing boundaries in terms of their own expectations for such arrangements. That way the space for unethical conduct will be reduced, SMIs will be more confident in what they do, and overall the influencer marketing industry will maintain (or even gain) credibility, image, and reputation, which serves as a lever to further enhancing the results of any collaboration.

6.3 Public policy implications

Policymakers play a crucial role in setting the boundaries of not just acceptable, but permissible conduct for both SMIs and brands. As shown in this study, the current legislative framework makes moral issues and dilemmas almost a daily struggle for SMIs and leaves followers with less trust in this novel form of advertising. This dissertation outlined specific situations which present moral hazards in influencer marketing, which is the first step towards building unambiguous directions that will facilitate both the work of SMIs and working with SMIs. Special attention needs to be paid to the promotion of harmful products and SMIs' opinion sharing on socially

relevant topics. These moral dilemmas mean that SMIs often hold opposing, but very strong positions, and indicate that a third-party (i.e., policymakers) needs to intervene and set the ground rules for everyone.

A code of ethics should be established for SMIs that sets out clear expectations for ethical conduct. This code should include guidelines on authenticity, truthfulness in endorsements, and responsibility to the audience. Creation of such standards requires collaborating with industry stakeholders and making adherence a requirement for partnerships with brands. Moreover, regulatory bodies could promote education and training programs for SMIs on the importance of moral accountability and the impact of their actions on their credibility and image. These programs could help SMIs navigate the moral dilemmas they face and make more informed ethical decisions. Public awareness campaigns would help educate consumers about the potential biases in influencer marketing and the importance of critically assessing endorsements. Such campaigns could help mitigate the impact of moral transgressions by SMIs and empower followers to make more informed choices.

Public policy could also incentivize brands to partner with SMIs who adhere to ethical guidelines. This could be done through certifications or recognition programs that highlight brands committed to working with trustworthy and accountable SMIs. Such initiatives could encourage more responsible practices in the industry. Social media platforms should be encouraged to develop and enforce policies that promote ethical behavior among SMIs. This could include mechanisms for reporting unethical behavior, penalties for non-disclosure of endorsements, and the promotion of transparent SMIs' practices.

Governments should establish regulatory bodies or extend the jurisdiction of existing ones to monitor influencer marketing practices more effectively. This could include periodic audits of SMIs' content for compliance with ethical standards and transparency regulations. Last but not least, governments should continue to support projects that explore business ethics in influencer marketing. Ongoing research could inform the development of policies and guidelines that evolve with the changing landscape of social media and marketing practices.

6.4 Research limitations

This study has several limitations related to the research approach that was applied. First, the systematic literature review on ethics in influencer marketing was only conducted on English-language articles published in scientific journals. Since the topic is rooted in real-world problems and influencer marketing is generally a hot topic, such a narrow focus could deprive the review of interesting findings that can be found in books, conference proceedings, dissertations or professional articles. Second, only the

Scopus database was used. Although it is expected that the most prominent research in social sciences will be found there, articles relevant to the topic might have been overlooked in this way. Third, the terminology used in influencer marketing research varied considerably until recently, even in terms of even naming SMIs unequivocally. As such, the keywords used in the search for relevant literature might have missed some studies that fit the search content-wise, but were omitted due to terminological inconsistencies.

The qualitative part of the dissertation had three main limitations. First, since the topic of morality is a sensitive one and no one is yet sure what SMIs' obligations are, the responses in the interviews might have been affected by the social desirability bias. Second, all interviews were conducted with Croatians whose followers are mainly from Eastern Europe. On the one hand, this was the only way to get results that provide common ground for drawing relevant conclusions. On the other hand, this is a limitation because different cultural backgrounds might yield different dilemmas and strategies that SMIs employ, and steer the direction of the research in other way. The third limitation of qualitative study is related to coding and data analysis. In this study this was mostly done by one person, although having more researchers more deeply involved would bring a variety of perspectives and interpretations that could provide a better understanding of the concepts and relationships among them.

The limitations related to the quantitative study pertain mostly to the sample, choice of research context, and measurement of constructs. First, the sample was limited to people from Croatia who follow at least one influencer on Instagram. This made most sense, since the first part of the study (interviews with SMIs) was also conducted in Croatia. However, it brings the same potential cultural biases when it comes to moral judgment and makes applying construct measures harder because of the language differences. On top of that, Instagram was chosen as it was mostly used for SMIs' collaborations at the time of research proposal. However, lately more and more SMIs have turned to TikTok instead.

Second, the research context was narrowed to just one moral dilemma SMIs encounter, and it was not a novel dilemma found in the first part of the study. The reason for this is that the promotion of harmful products and opinion sharing on socially relevant topics as novel and interesting dilemmas emerged from the expectations that society has, not from the followers' expectations. Since the contribution of this dissertation needed to stay primarily in marketing literature, the dilemma that emerged as a result of followers' expectations was chosen.

Third, although constructs related to morality used in structural model were well established in previous research, their measures are rather old and are not the most appropriate ones for the structural equation modeling applied in this study and many others. For example, recognition of the moral issue is a basic construct in models related

to ethicality in business context. However, it is a one-item construct that, when modeled in a structural model, seriously threatened the representativeness of the whole model. Similarly, moral judgment is a three-dimensional construct with two dimensions measured with only two items. Such dimensions are under-identified, i.e., they provide less information to the model than needs to be estimated for them. However, in the absence of reliable scales for measuring the previously mentioned constructs, the scales were used although they might not be the most appropriate when combined with using structural equation modeling as the chosen form of statistical analysis.

The fourth limitation of the study is related to the research design. First, all control variables were related to followers' characteristics, while it is possible that the characteristics of SMIs' such as the industry they belong might partially explain the variability in dependent variables. Second, social desirability should be more explicitly addressed in similar research. For example, including a widely used short form of the Marlowe-Crowne social desirability scale (Reynolds, 1982) in the questionnaire would help control for social desirability bias. Third, employing a cross-sectional research design has limitations due to endogeneity and the inability to capture causal relationships between constructs. Besides, it allows for measuring constructs such as followers' purchase intention only at a single point in time, which is not a fully precise measure given that purchase intention is not static. A longitudinal study of the same issue would help identify causality and provide more reliable results for the proposed conceptual model. This and other future research suggestions are discussed in the following subchapter.

6.5 Directions for future research

A systematic review of the literature on ethics in influencer marketing revealed that existing research on influencer ethics is mostly examined through the theories of mind, identity, communication and persuasion. Universal theories of justice and morality used in business ethics or consumer ethics field need to be more explicitly applied to an influencer marketing context, with a clear distinction as to whether SMIs are examined as business entities or consumers in a particular study. Currently most research on influencer ethics comes from Western countries, which presents a bias given that ethics is closely related to social norms that differ among cultures. The narrow focus of these studies makes it hard to apply their results in further research. Conversely, in terms of research context there is a high dispersion of industries, communication channels, and scientific fields of research dealing with the topic. Future research should monitor in which industries and on which communication channels SMIs dominate. For example, although TikTok is an increasingly used channel of influencer marketing, it is neglected in research of influencer ethics, and thus it is recommended that more emphasis is placed on it in the future.

Among the topics that have so far emerged in influencer research, there is a lack of research that analyses regulatory frameworks in influencer marketing. Moreover, the emergence of virtual SMIs has given rise to a completely new field of research on influencer ethics, but so far only a few studies have engaged with it. Future research should integrate influencer marketing research with philosophy to explore boundaries of virtual SMIs' moral responsibility. The discussion should discern who is the one making decisions, the team behind the virtual SMI's account or the virtual SMI (i.e., algorithm) itself. If virtual SMIs start making their own decisions, independent of the team that first programmed it, it opens other questions regarding their consciousness and intention to commit moral transgression. Once it happens, research on virtual SMIs will represent a cutting-edge and distinct area of study, diverging significantly from the established theories and assumptions in influencer marketing literature. Given the lack of a prior, comparable body of knowledge, this research will undoubtedly be challenging and may require innovative approaches. However, the importance of exploring this emerging field cannot be overstated, as it holds significant implications for both academic understanding and practical application in the evolving digital landscape. Artificial intelligence in influencer marketing extends beyond virtual SMIs. Although virtual SMIs are its' most salient application, artificial intelligence includes other things that have the potential to disrupt influencer marketing. Some of the examples are usage of deep fake that creates very realistic but entirely fake content and chatbots that automatize personalized interactions with followers. Future research should consider how the development of these tools will affect relational outcomes in influencer marketing and explore its' ethical implications related to followers' and SMIs' psychological wellbeing and privacy concerns.

Methodologically, most research on influencer ethics is based on primary data coming from the public and followers. As suggested by the example of this study, SMIs as crucial actors should be more explicitly included in influence ethics research, along with other professionals related to it (e.g., PR managers, policymakers). The issue of ethics is a matter of social consensus and unspoken agreements, which is why including everyone involved is crucial for pushing the field forward.

Various new research questions and propositions stem from the findings of this study. First, other moral issues, besides omitting negative experiences, could be used in the conceptual model that would combine ethical decision-making models with outcomes related to SMIs and endorsed brands. The focus could also be shifted to the moral issue itself using dimensions of the moral issue from Jones' (1991) issue contingency model. This would allow for comparison between moral issues. For example, future propositions could posit that the perceived proximity of the moral issue is higher in the case of non-disclosure than when promoting harmful products, or that the perceived magnitude of consequences is higher for issues stemming from the conflict with society-related roles (SRR) while perceived social consensus is higher for issues stemming from

conflict with follower-related roles (FRR). Second, a more granular examination should test how role conflicts manifest across different audiences, industries, product types, etc. For example, proposing that withholding a negative experience and promotion with no experience would be perceived as more immoral in the case of high-involvement products makes sense. Third, the strategies that SMIs use to resolve moral issues also present an avenue for research. These strategies could serve as a moderator in the relationship between followers' moral judgment and various attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g., attitude towards an SMI or endorsed brand, engagement with the SMI, product purchase, etc.). Moreover, the combination of identified moral issues and strategies could be empirically tested to examine which strategy makes an issue be seen as less unethical. On the one hand, future research hypotheses could assume that spotlighting FRR is less efficient in mitigating negative outcomes than spotlighting SRR, as SRR could be interpreted as related to the greater good. On the other hand, SMIs seem to have the strongest argument for resorting to SRR, which indicates a hypothesis proposing more favorable outcomes when using this strategy over others makes sense in the case of the promotion of harmful products and opinion sharing on relevant topics. Moreover, the views of stakeholders other than followers should be empirically tested. Since it was previously overlooked, insights from the broader audience (i.e., society) could offer important theoretical insights. In the end, insights from brands related to the identified moral issues and strategies that SMIs use when facing moral dilemmas would close some of the gaps in influencer marketing research and bring it closer to the management and entrepreneurial literature. In terms of specific moral dilemmas, new studies should also address the problem of promoting potentially harmful products and SMIs' opinion sharing on socially relevant topics. These two issues present a research opportunity with contributions that go beyond the field of influencer marketing, as they are related to society's expectations, and their implications can be applied in various research fields. It is also necessary to apply theories related to the broader social consensus to an influencer marketing context in order to explore the full potential of SMIs' society-related roles.

Follower characteristics that are usually related to moral judgment (e.g., cognitive moral development, religiosity, moral consciousness, moral attentiveness) should be considered in future influencer marketing ethics research. Moreover, as ethics is related to culture, cross-cultural studies of ethics in influencer marketing could provide interesting insights into the appropriateness of SMIs' conduct and its impact on SMIs and the brands they endorse. As SMIs form an industry of their own, concepts well established in branding, management, and international marketing should be applied to this new context. For example, future research could address whether the country of origin affects the perception of an SMI as immoral, or how the perception of job stress is related to the moral judgment of SMIs.

Future research looking into followers' moral judgment of the moral issues in influencer marketing should pay more attention to control variables and common method bias. For example, including control variables related not only to followers as respondents but also to SMIs' characteristics, such as the type of product they promote, number of followers, demographics, etc., could affect the results of the study. Moreover, a longitudinal study should be employed as this offers several advantages over a cross-sectional design. Collecting repeated measures from the same subjects has the ability to track changes over time, thus providing insights into the dynamics of causal relationships (Laird, 2022). In the case of ethics in influencer marketing it would help to better capture if followers' perceptions of the moral judgment and moral accountability of SMIs show any pattern or trajectory, such as growth or decline over time. As opposed to a cross-sectional design that suggests associations between variables, a longitudinal approach would help identify causal relationships between followers' moral judgment and outcomes related to SMIs and the brands they endorse. Moreover, a repeated measures design increases statistical power, allowing for the detection of smaller effects that might be missed in cross-sectional studies (Rast & Hofer, 2014). Given that three of the hypotheses of the conceptual model were not supported by the cross-sectional data, a longitudinal study design might gain additional insights about these relationships.

Future research should also be careful when examining whether SMIs' credibility is an antecedent or outcome. Credibility is a complex construct with various proposed dimensions, but its importance in the context of SMIs is unclear. However, it is important to consider the difference between its various dimensions, as this dissertation showed trustworthiness worked as a moderator in the relationship between followers' moral judgment and purchase intention with regard to the endorsed brand, while expertise did not.

In addition, the influencer marketing literature could benefit from multilevel research approaches commonly applied in management studies. This is valuable because multilevel research allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between individual influencers, their followers, brands, and broader societal factors.

The last recommendation for future research refers to the measurement of well-established constructs in business ethics. The use of more complex statistical analysis requires reexamining under-identified measures of important constructs in business ethics, such as recognition of the moral issue and moral judgment. At present now, their application is made more difficult by complex but frequently used statistical analysis.

7 CONCLUSION

Influencer marketing has made advertising more personal than ever, with regular individuals transitioning into businesses overnight. Years of research may not suffice to determine whether SMIs' complex relationships in society should be regarded as more personal or professional. It is possible that SMIs themselves may not even be aware of this distinction. However, this does not imply that they should not be held accountable for their actions on their own terms. Rather, it signals a need for extensive scientific inquiry, inclusive discourse among all stakeholders, and, above all, tolerance.

Currently, the relevant discourse is hindered by the widespread belief that SMIs lack a work ethic, are self-serving, and engage in numerous unwanted and potentially illegal practices. While there may be some truth to this perception, it is crucial to ascertain whether it applies to certain SMIs in most situations, most SMIs in some situations, or if there is a third option that has yet to be uncovered. This is a challenging task, given the myriad problems and issues associated with researching ethics in influencer marketing. The field lags behind current research on influencer marketing as a whole, and we have yet to fully grasp the potential of SMIs and establish mechanisms (such as laws and employment relations) to regulate their behavior.

Despite these challenges, new platforms, artificial intelligence tools, and virtual SMIs are rapidly emerging. While research in this area may be limited at present, as demonstrated by this dissertation, combining unprecedented circumstances with well-established theoretical concepts can propel the field forward.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Daljši povzetek

Vloga zaznanih lastnosti vplivnežev v odnosu med moralnimi sodbami sledilcev in izbiri priporočenih blagovnih znamk

Namen te doktorske disertacije je združiti spoznanja spletnih vplivnežev in sledilcev, da bi pojasnili, kako se vloga spletnih vplivnežev odvija, kakšne so moralne dileme, povezane z njo, in kakšne so posledice teh dilem.

Spletni vplivneži so ustvarjalci vsebin s številnimi sledilci, na katere vplivajo z deljenjem informacij in ocen izdelkov (Jun in Yi, 2020; Ki idr., 2020). Blagovne znamke vse pogosteje sodelujejo s spletnimi vplivneži; gre za strategijo uporabe vplivnega mnenjskega voditelja s številnimi sledilci na družbenih medijih, da izkoristijo njihov tesen odnos s člani občinstva ter ga spremenijo v pozitivne odzive na blagovne znamke v smislu odnosa in vedenja do njih (Lou in Yuan, 2019; Martínez-López idr., 2020). Glede na primerjalno poročilo o vplivnostnem trženju za leto 2024 (Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report 2024), izvedeno med trženjskimi agencijami in predstavniki blagovnih znamk, naj bi vrednost panoge vplivnostnega trženja do konca leta 2024 zrasla na približno 24 milijard ameriških dolarjev, pri čemer naj bi četrtnina vprašanih skoraj polovico svojih trženjskih proračunov porabila za kampanje s spletnimi vplivneži (Geyser, 2024). Podatek ni presenetljiv glede na to, da so lahko zaradi obilice izdelkov in nešteti načinov za takojšnje doseganje milijonov porabnikov prek družbenih medijev preobremenjeni tako tisti, ki iščejo informacije, kot tisti, ki uveljavljajo svoj vpliv. Takšne okoliščine so blagovne znamke spodbudile k uporabi različnih signalov kot poskusu pozicioniranja blagovnih znamk. Tako je pojav družbenih medijev in hiperpovezljivosti porabnikov prinesel spletne vplivneže kot potencialni medij za posredovanje signala ciljnemu občinstvu, ki zaobide skepso porabnikov do tradicionalnih oblik oglaševanja (Wang in Chien, 2012).

Čeprav je zapleteno, je širjenje informacij od ust do ust na družbenih medijih kulturni proces z določljivim vzorcem (Kozinets idr., 2010). Na prvi pogled se zdi, da uporaba družbenih medijev za promocijo izdelkov močno spominja na podobne oblike plačanega trženjskega komuniciranja, kot so odnosi z javnostmi (PR). Vendar je vplivnostno trženje drugačno, saj imajo obstoječe oblike promocijskih prizadevanj bolj uveljavljene, jasno opredeljene in urejene odnose. Vplivnostno trženje se je pojavilo v posebnem kontekstu ter ga ni mogoče opredeliti kot profesionalno novinarstvo in oglaševanje (Borchers in Enke, 2022). Zato je treba spletnim vplivnežem nameniti posebno akademsko pozornost.

Utemeljitev za raziskave

Obstaja veliko raziskav o lastnostih in rezultatih spletnih vplivnežev na različnih področjih (Vrontis idr., 2021; Aw in Agnihotri, 2023; Masuda idr., 2022), vendar je področje poslovne etike v okviru vplivnostnega trženja še vedno v začetni fazi. Znanstveniki so se pred kratkim začeli osredotočati na etične vidike vplivnostnega

trženja, pri čemer pozivajo k več raziskavam njegovih temnejših plati (Hudders in Lou, 2023; Barari, 2023). To naraščajoče zanimanje se kaže v študijah, ki raziskujejo moralno vprašljiva vedenja na področju vplivnostnega trženja, vključno z okviri, ki usmerjajo moralno ravnanje spletnih vplivnežev (Wellman idr., 2020), usklajevanjem njihove porabniške in moralne identitete (Leban idr., 2021), njihovo moralno odgovornostjo, kot jo dojemajo sledilci (Cocker idr., 2021), in posebnimi moralnimi vprašanji na področju vplivnostnega trženja (Borchers in Enke, 2022). Opaziti je, da sta bila razkritje sponzorstva in njegov vpliv na porabniške rezultate deležna precejšnje pozornosti (Vrontis idr., 2021), medtem ko so druge sporne prakse razmeroma slabo raziskane. Zato obstaja priložnost za raziskovanje spregledanih moralno vprašljivih vedenj med spletnimi vplivneži in zapolnitev vrzeli med raziskavami o lastnostih spletnih vplivnežev ter manj raziskanimi predhodniki na področju poslovne in porabniške etike (glej Hassan idr., 2022).

Raziskovalni problem

Z razmahom vplivnostnega trženja so se med sledilci, blagovnimi znamkami in širšim občinstvom pojavili pomisleki glede tega, kako spletni vplivneži poslujejo. Ti pomisleki segajo od pripomb o lažnem napihovanju števila sledilcev z boti (Ujjwal, 2023) do obsežnih vprašanj, ki med drugim zadevajo prikrito promocijo tobaka med najstniki s spletnimi vplivneži, da bi se izognili vladnim predpisom (takeapart.org), ali promocije iger na srečo med mladostniki (sabguthrie.info). Nasprotujoča si pričakovanja, ki povzročajo moralno vprašljiva vedenja v poslovanju, so zelo pogosta tudi v tradicionalnih poslovnih praksah. Deležniki na primer pričakujejo pametno razporejanje virov, ki povečuje dobiček, zaposleni pričakujejo, da bodo podjetja skrbela za njihovo ravnovesje med delom in zasebnim življenjem, družba pa pričakuje vračanje skupnosti in skrb za okolje (Voegtlin idr., 2019). V poslovanju do takega konflikta vlog pride zaradi nezdržljivih vlog, dodeljenih osrednji osebi (prim. Ho idr., 1997). Pri vplivnostnem trženju je smiselno pričakovati konflikt vlog. Meja med sponzoriranimi vsebinami in družbenimi odnosi še nikoli ni bila tako zabrisana (Archer in Harrigan, 2016), strokovnjaki za odnose z javnostmi in novinarji pa opozarjajo na vse večje etične pomisleke, povezane z verodostojnostjo spletnih vplivnežev (Antunes in Pedro Sebastião, 2020). Napetost, ki nastane na družbenih medijih, ko blagovne znamke uporabijo spletne vplivneže, da bi izkoristile njihovo svojstveno verodostojnost, lahko škoduje odnosu med spletnimi vplivneži in njihovim občinstvom (Audrezet idr., 2020; Mardon idr., 2018). To napetost in njene posledice je mogoče zmanjšati z ohranjanjem doslednega značaja, ki kaže predanost in skladnost s standardi in normami skupnosti (Kozinets idr., 2010), kar nakazuje potrebo po raziskovanju poslovne etike v okviru vplivnostnega trženja. Pri prizadevanjih za to sta opisani dve raziskovalni vrzeli.

Prvič, mnogi znanstveniki trdijo, da je v najboljšem interesu vsakega poslovnega subjekta, da ravna etično (npr. Story in Hess, 2010). Raziskovalci zato kažejo vse večje zanimanje za raziskovanje etičnih in moralnih vprašanj na področju vplivnostnega

trženja (npr. Archer idr., 2014; Archer in Harrigan, 2016; Mardon idr., 2018; Audrezet idr., 2020; Wellman idr., 2020; Cocker idr., 2021; Leban idr., 2021; Borchers in Enke, 2022). Vendar sodeč po nedavnih raziskavah na področju vplivnostnega trženja (npr. Cocker idr., 2021; Borchers in Enke, 2022; Mardon idr., 2023) obstaja veliko vidikov etike vplivnežev, ki so bili v dosednji literaturi spregledani. Pri družbenih pojavih, ki vključujejo tehnologijo, to ni presenetljivo, saj je etika rezultat razvitega družbenega konsenza, ki potrebuje čas za razvoj, hiter tehnološki napredek pa to vrzel še povečuje (Wadhwa, 2014). Poleg tega so raziskave o spletnih vplivnežih osredotočene na preučevanje sledilcev in so kvantitativne narave (Vrontis idr., 2020), zaradi česar moralne dileme, s katerimi se spletni vplivneži vsakodnevno soočajo, in način njihovega reševanja niso znani.

Drugič, več študij je potrdilo različna pričakovanja blagovnih znamk in sledilcev, med katerimi morajo krmariti spletni vplivneži (npr. Mardon idr., 2018; Cocker idr., 2021), napetosti (Audrezet idr., 2018) in moralno vprašljiva vedenja (Cocker idr., 2021), ki jih povzročajo, ter morebitne negativne posledice, kot je občutek izdaje (Mardon idr., 2018). Napetost povzroči različne odzive na tovrstno promocijo zaradi dvojne vloge komunikatorja, ki mora delovati kot član skupnosti in trženjski agent (Kozinets idr., 2010). Potencialne moralne dileme, ki izhajajo iz komercializacije javnega pogovora, spremljajo spletne vplivneže od njihovega začetka (Archer idr., 2014), saj jim njihova edinstvena identiteta omogoča, da so hkrati slavni in običajni ljudje (Jun in Yi, 2020). Meja, po kateri morajo spletni vplivneži hoditi, da ohranijo svoj ugled neodvisnih strokovnjakov za trženje in hkrati predstavljajo blagovne znamke (Carr in Hayes, 2014), je tanka, saj sledilci sprejemajo vpliv spletnih vplivnežev, če jih dojemajo kot priljubljene in verodostojne ter se z njimi lahko poistovetijo (De Veirman idr., 2017; Ki idr., 2020; Schouten idr., 2020; Sokolova in Kefi, 2019). Vendar še vedno ni jasno, kako se sledilci odzovejo na prekoračitev te meje, tj. kako moralno vprašljiva vedenja spletnih vplivnežev vplivajo tako na vplivneže same kot na blagovne znamke, ki jih predstavljajo.

Raziskovalni cilj in vprašanja

Glede na to je glavni cilj te disertacije zagotoviti odgovore na naslednja raziskovalna vprašanja:

RV1: Kako so teme, povezane z etiko, zastopane v raziskavah o vplivnostnem trženju?

RV2: Kako spletni vplivneži dojemajo svojo vlogo glede na pričakovanja različnih deležnikov?

RV3: S kakšnimi moralnimi dilemami se soočajo spletni vplivneži v zvezi s pričakovanji različnih deležnikov?

RV4: Kako spletni vplivneži rešujejo moralne dileme, ki izhajajo iz pričakovanih različnih deležnikov?

RV5: Kako je moralna sodba sledilcev povezana z izbiro predstavljene blagovne znamke?

RV6: Kakšna je vloga moralne odgovornosti spletnih vplivnežev?

Opozoriti je treba, da je moralna sodba »stopnja, do katere je prikaz, dogodek ali vedenje za posameznika moralno sprejemljivo« (Reidenbach in Robin, 1990, str. 634). Moralno vprašanje je situacija, v kateri lahko dejanje nekoga, če ga svobodno izvede, škoduje ali koristi drugim (Jones, 1991), medtem ko je moralna dilema situacija, v kateri vsaka razpoložljiva izbira vodi v kršitev moralne obveznosti (McConnell, 2022). Moralna odgovornost je »zaznavanje zagovarjanja ali utemeljevanja svojega ravnanja pred občinstvom, ki ima pristojnost nagrajevanja ali sankcioniranja, in kjer je zaznati, da so nagrade ali sankcije odvisne od ocene občinstva o takem ravnanju« (Beu in Buckley, 2001, str. 89).

Da bi odgovorili na raziskovalna vprašanja, smo si zastavili tri specifične cilje: (1) sistematično pregledati obstoječo literaturo o vplivnostnem trženju, v katero je vključena etika; (2) preučiti kompleksnost vloge spletnih vplivnežev kot veznega člena med znamkami in sledilci z vidika spletnih vplivnežev; (3) pojasniti odzive sledilcev na moralno vprašljiva vedenja spletnih vplivnežev.

Raziskovalne hipoteze

Da bi zožili fokus raziskave s šestih moralnih dilem, opredeljenih v kvalitativni raziskavi, na eno, ki bo uporabljena v anketi, je bila med študenti poslovnih ved na Reki izvedena kratka pilotna študija. Skupaj je bilo za analizo pridobljenih 149 veljavnih odgovorov. Prikrivanje negativnih izkušenj s predstavljenim izdelkom je bilo na lestvici moralnih sodb ocenjeno najvišje in je imelo najnižji standardni odklon ($P = 3,93$, $so = 0,7$). Moralno vprašanje spletnih vplivnežev, ki predstavljajo izdelek, s katerim so imeli negativno izkušnjo, tako določa raziskovalni kontekst te študije.

Da bi pojasnili odzive sledilcev na moralno vprašanje, je v nadaljevanju predlagan konceptualni model z moralno sodbo kot osrednjim konceptom, ki spodbuja odzive sledilcev na spletne vplivneže (slika 1). V tem konceptualnem modelu so teorije, povezane z etičnim odločanjem, združene z izsledki iz literature o vplivnostnem trženju, da bi bolje razumeli, kako sledilci dojemajo in ocenjujejo etično ravnanje spletnih vplivnežev ter kako ta dojetanja vplivajo na njihov odnos do spletnih vplivnežev in vedenjske namere do blagovnih znamk, ki jih predstavljajo.

Modeli etičnega odločanja (npr. Rest, 1986; Jones, 1991; Hunt in Vitell, 1986) predlagajo, da pride do prepoznavanja moralnih vprašanj pred moralno sodbo o pravilnosti ali napačnosti dejanja. To pomeni, da mora posameznik prepoznati moralno vprašanje, preden začne obširno razmišljati o njegovi moralnosti. Moralna sodba, osrednji pojem v modelih etičnega odločanja, je vrednotenje vedenja kot pravilnega (ali dobrega) ali napačnega (ali slabega) (Jin in Peng, 2021). Vključuje proces pripisovanja (atribucije), saj se moralnost osredotoča na pojem »dolžnosti«: standard, ki označuje,

ali je vedenje primerno ali ne (Heider, 1958). Teoretične temelje za preučevanje moralnih sodb o vedenju drugih ljudi tako lahko najdemo v atribucijski teoriji (Ross in DiTecco, 1975) v kombinaciji z modelom znanja o prepričevanju (Friestad in Wright, 1994). Model znanja o prepričevanju nakazuje, da bo sledilčevo spoznanje, da predstavitev (izdelka ali storitve) temelji na sebičnih, komercialnih razlogih namesto na pozitivni izkušnji, privedlo do negativnega odnosa do spletnega vplivneža. Če bodo sledilci vedenje spletnega vplivneža dojemali kot povsem egoistično in notranje motivirano, bodo bolj nagnjeni k temu, da ga bodo razumeli kot nemoralno (Ross in DiTecco, 1975). Po McCrackenovi (1989) predstavi o prenosu podobe pri predstavljanju blagovnih znamk se simbolni pomeni, povezani s predstaviteljem, med promocijskimi dejavnostmi prenesejo na predstavljeno blagovno znamko. V tem smislu je »pomen« celotna ocena tega, kaj predstavitelj predstavlja občinstvu, in kako si nekdo razlaga podobo predstavitelja (McCracken, 1989). V skladu z atribucijsko teorijo (Weiner, 1985) in temeljno atribucijsko napako (Ross, 2018) poskušajo sledilci, soočeni z neetičnim ravnanjem spletnega vplivneža, kognitivno ovrednotiti situacijo, da bi krivdo predpisali akterju ali nekomu drugemu.

V kontekstu vplivnostnega trženja se pričakuje, da bodo sledilci prepoznali predstavljanje izdelkov brez pristnih izkušenj kot moralno vprašanje, saj njihov odnos s spletnimi vplivneži temelji na predpostavki, da spletni vplivneži v nasprotju z blagovnimi znamkami zagotavljajo zanesljiva priporočila (Jung idr., 2016) brez skritih motivov (Koo, 2016). V zameno pa nizka moralna sodba vpliva na verodostojnost (Bhattacharya idr., 1998; Hur idr., 2013), podobo (Amos idr., 2008) in ugled (Zhou in Whitla, 2013). V skladu s temi teoretičnimi izhodišči verodostojnost, ugled in podoba predstavnika vplivajo na stališča in vedenjske namere (npr. Bromley, 2001; Lafferty idr., 2002; Apejoye, 2013) do znamke. Medtem ko lahko s stališči do blagovne znamke pojasnimo različne vtise o blagovni znamki, se vedenjska namera večinoma nanaša na nakupno namero, ki je opredeljena kot »posameznikov zavestni načrt, da si bo prizadeval za nakup blagovne znamke« (Spears in Singh, 2004, str. 56). Nazadnje, moralno vrednotenje spodbudi sledilce, da vpletenim stranem pripišejo odgovornost (Shaver, 1985). Če sledilci zaznavajo, da podpornik zavestno nadaljuje z moralno vprašljivim vedenjem, ga bodo imeli za graje vrednega (Gupta, 2009).

Na podlagi tega so predlagane naslednje hipoteze:

H1: Prepoznavanje moralno vprašljivega vedenja spletnega vplivneža s strani sledilcev je negativno povezano z njihovimi moralnimi sodbami o moralno vprašljivih vedenjih spletnega vplivneža.

H2a: Moralna sodba sledilcev o moralno vprašljivem vedenju spletnega vplivneža je pozitivno povezana z zaznanim zaupanjem do spletnega vplivneža.

H2b: Moralna sodba sledilcev o moralno vprašljivem vedenju spletnega vplivneža je pozitivno povezana z zaznano strokovnostjo spletnega vplivneža.

H3: Moralna sodba sledilcev o moralno vprašljivem vedenju spletnega vplivneža je pozitivno povezana z njihovo zaznavo podobe spletnega vplivneža.

H4: Moralna sodba sledilcev o moralno vprašljivem vedenju spletnega vplivneža je pozitivno povezana z njihovo zaznavo ugleda spletnega vplivneža.

H5a: Zaznano zaupanje do spletnega vplivneža je pozitivno povezano z nakupno namero njegovih sledilcev do predstavljene blagovne znamke.

H5b: Zaznana strokovnost spletnega vplivneža je pozitivno povezana z nakupno namero njegovih sledilcev do predstavljene blagovne znamke.

H6: Zaznana podoba spletnega vplivneža je pozitivno povezana z nakupno namero njegovih sledilcev do predstavljene blagovne znamke.

H7: Zaznani ugled spletnega vplivneža je pozitivno povezan z nakupno namero njegovih sledilcev do predstavljene blagovne znamke.

H8a: Moralna odgovornost pozitivno blaži razmerje med moralno sodbo in zaznanim zaupanjem do spletnega vplivneža.

H8b: Moralna odgovornost pozitivno blaži razmerje med moralno sodbo in zaznano strokovnostjo spletnega vplivneža.

H8c: Moralna odgovornost pozitivno blaži razmerje med moralno sodbo in zaznano podobo spletnega vplivneža.

H8d: Moralna odgovornost pozitivno blaži razmerje med moralno sodbo in zaznanim ugledom spletnega vplivneža.

Da bi bolje izpolnili namen disertacije, sta bila uporabljena dva ločena metodološka pristopa, kvalitativni in kvantitativni. Kvalitativna raziskava je omogočila poglobljeno raziskovanje pojava in bogato razumevanje družbenih procesov, ki se odvijajo pod površjem vplivnostnega trženja. Kvantitativna raziskava kot objektivnejši pristop je omogočila testiranje konceptualnega modela in oblikovanje zaključkov, ki povečujejo posplošljivost rezultatov in njihovo ponovitev.

Kvalitativna raziskava

Namen kvalitativne raziskave je bil pridobiti boljše razumevanje, kako spletni vplivneži dojemajo moralna vprašanja pri vplivnostnem trženju in kako se njihove moralne sodbe razvijajo od te točke naprej. Zato se kvalitativna raziskava nanaša na naslednja raziskovalna vprašanja disertacije:

RV2: Kako spletni vplivneži dojemajo svojo vlogo glede na pričakovanja različnih deležnikov?

RV3: S kakšnimi moralnimi dilemami se soočajo spletni vplivneži v zvezi s pričakovanji različnih deležnikov?

RV4: Kako spletni vplivneži rešujejo moralne dileme, ki izhajajo iz pričakovanj različnih deležnikov?

Namen intervjujev z desetimi hrvaškimi spletnimi vplivneži je bil raziskati kompleksnost njihove vloge. Ti spletni vplivneži niso bili zvezdniki, preden so postali vplivni na družbenih medijih, zdaj pa vplivnostni posli že vsaj tri leta predstavljajo pomemben del njihovih prihodkov. Intervjuji so bili opravljeni prek aplikacije Google Meet aprila 2021, vsak pa je trajal približno eno uro. Spletni vplivneži, ki pogosto veljajo za vzornike, bi utegnili oklevati z odkritim razpravljanjem o etičnih kompleksnostih svojega poslovanja. Zato je bila intervjuvancem zagotovljena anonimnost, vprašanja v intervjuju pa so bila strukturirana tako, da so se postopoma poglobljala v občutljive teme in hkrati ohranjala sproščeno vzdušje. Intervjuji so bili fleksibilni, tako da so omogočali preiskovanje in nadaljnja vprašanja, da bi pridobili podroben vpogled v moralne dileme, s katerimi se srečujejo spletni vplivneži. Analiza je vključevala prepis in kodiranje intervjujev s programsko opremo MAXQDA Analytics Pro. Na začetku je bil uporabljen induktivni pristop h kategorizaciji, ki je omogočil, da so se iz podatkov porajale teme. Izvedenih je bilo več krogov analize, pri čemer je bil poudarek najprej na pričakovanjih deležnikov, nato pa na nasprotujočih si pričakovanjih in moralnih dilemah. Vprašanja, ki so bila opredeljena kot moralne dileme, so bila še nadalje analizirana, vključno s strategijami reševanja konfliktov, ki so jih uporabljali spletni vplivneži. Za vsakega anketiranca smo izdelali miselne zemljevide, s katerimi smo organizirali ugotovitve in omogočili primerjavo med njihovimi zgodbami. Medsebojna povezanost kod je razkrila vpogled v vzroke, utemeljitve in zaznane značilnosti razmerij, povezanih z moralnimi dilemami, ki so jih doživljali spletni vplivneži.

Rezultati kažejo, da se spletni vplivneži pogosto znajdejo v svojih vlogah brez jasne hierarhije ali zavedanja o njihovem pomenu. Do tega samostojno vodenega procesa pride spontano in jih usmeri v subtilno prilagajanje in ohranjanje vpliva. Strategije za (de)konstrukcijo vloge izhajajo iz konfliktov v pričakovanjih, pri čemer spletni vplivneži lovijo ravnotežje med pričakovanji sledilcev, blagovnih znamk in družbe. Ta različna pričakovanja ustvarjajo različne vloge, ki jih morajo spletni vplivneži utelešati, da ohranijo svoj vpliv. Pričakovanja prihajajo od treh skupin deležnikov: sledilcev, blagovnih znamk in družbe, ki je bila v prejšnjih raziskavah v veliki meri spregledana. Ta pričakovanja lahko združimo v tri glavna, krovna pričakovanja: sledilci pričakujejo pristnost, blagovne znamke pričakujejo zavezanost, družba pa odgovornost. Da bi izpolnili pričakovanja, si spletni vplivneži ustvarijo različne vloge: predani poslovni partner, mojster za vse, tesen prijatelj, zabavljač, zanesljiv recenzent, vzornik in zagovornik. Intervjuji so razkrili tudi, da so krovna pričakovanja različnih deležnikov pogosto v navzkrižju, kar spletnim vplivnežem povzroča moralne dileme, tj. spletni vplivneži se soočajo s situacijami, v katerih izpolnitev pričakovanj ene skupine deležnikov neizogibno krši pričakovanja druge. Moralne dileme, ugotovljene v tej študiji, so: nerazkrivanje, prikrivanje negativnih izkušenj, pomanjkanje empatije,

promocija izdelkov brez pristnih izkušenj, izmenjava mnenj o družbeno pomembnih temah in promocija škodljivih izdelkov. Iz intervjujev so se izluščile tudi strategije, ki jih spletni vplivneži uporabljajo, ko se soočijo z dilemo, da bi lahko nadaljevali s svojim ravnanjem: zmanjševanje pomena vloge, izpostavljanje vloge, prilagajanje vloge in zatekanje k vlogi.

Kvantitativna raziskava

Med sledilci je bila izvedena anketa, da bi preverili odziv sledilcev, kadar spletni vplivneži ne izpolnijo njihovih pričakovanj in predstavljajo izdelek, s katerim imajo negativno izkušnjo. Literatura s področja trženjske etike obravnava moralno sodbo kot povezano z vprašanjem ali situacijo, pri čemer je posameznikovo dojemanje etičnega problema bistveno (npr. Rest, 1986; Hunt in Vitell, 1986). Modeli etičnega odločanja so kompleksni, saj določajo številne konstrukte in medsebojne povezave, zato Hunt in Vitell (1990) predlagata, da se njegovi deli preizkušajo naenkrat. V tej raziskavi se osredotočamo na prepoznavanje nemoralnega dejanja in moralno sodbo o njem. Realno izkušnjo smo opisali skrbno izbranemu vzorcu anketirancev, ki spremljajo spletne vplivneže na Instagramu. Čeprav se pojma, kot sta ugled in podoba, opirata na dojemanje vseh deležnikov, je najbolj pragmatičen način, da ju izmerimo, ta, da se osredotočimo na neposredne stranke (Wartick, 2002; Cretu in Brodie, 2007), v tem primeru sledilce.

Anketo je na podlagi kvalitativnih ugotovitev, pilotne študije ter uveljavljene literature s področja poslovne etike in vplivnostnega trženja izvedla agencija za tržne raziskave med 415 anketiranci, ki so spremljali vsaj enega spletnega vplivneža. Vse postavke so bile prevzete iz predhodne literature in predelane, da bi ustrezale kontekstu vplivnostnega trženja. Vse lestvice vprašalnika so bile predstavljene v hrvaščini, saj je bila raziskava izvedena na Hrvaškem.

Anketa se je začela z vprašanji o pogostosti uporabe Instagrama, ki jim je sledila opredelitev spletnega vplivneža na podlagi prejšnjih raziskav (Jun in Yi, 2020; Ki idr., 2020). Tako smo poskrbeli, da anketiranci spletnih vplivnežev ne bi zamenjali s tradicionalnimi zvezdniki s številnimi sledilci na družbenih medijih, kar je pomembno, saj med njimi obstajajo bistvene razlike, ko gre za odnose s sledilci (Jun in Yi, 2020). Sledilo je vprašanje glede sledenja vsaj enemu vplivnežu na Instagramu. Anketirance smo vprašali tudi o nagnjenosti k upoštevanju nasvetov spletnih vplivnežev v splošnem (lestvica, ki so jo uporabili Belanche idr., 2021a), da bi zagotovili, da je vzorec v tem smislu homogen. Nato je bila anketirancem predstavljena opredelitev spletnega vplivneža. Zatem so morali anketiranci prebrati naslednje besedilo: Včasih imajo vplivneži negativno izkušnjo z izdelkom, ki ga morajo predstavljati. Vendar tega v svojih objavah ne omenjajo, temveč se osredotočajo le na pozitivne vidike izdelka, ki ga predstavljajo.

Glede na opisano situacijo smo anketirance prosili, da odgovorijo na štiri vprašanja o svoji nameri za nakup takega izdelka. Lestvica nakupne namere je bila prilagojena na

podlagi nedavne študije o spletnih vplivnežih, ki jo je opravil Hsieh (2023). Verodostojnost spletnih vplivnežev smo merili z lestvico, ki jo je predlagala R. Ohanian (1990). Izvirna lestvica ima tri razsežnosti: zaupanje, strokovnost in privlačnost. Vendar je bila razsežnost privlačnosti v tej raziskavi izpuščena, saj se osredotoča na dojetanje vplivnostnega trženja kot panoge. Natančneje, namen je, da bi anketiranci obravnavali spletne vplivneže kot kolektivni del širšega pojma spletnih vplivnežev. Zato bi bilo preučevanje razsežnosti privlačnosti, ki se običajno nanaša na fizični videz, neprimerno, saj je fizično privlačnost težko pripisati sami panogi. Zato sta bili v vprašalnik vključeni le razsežnosti zaupanja in strokovnosti. Za merjenje moralne podobe spletnih vplivnežev je bila uporabljena lestvica s šestimi postavkami, ki jo je razvila Katja H. Brunk (2012). Ugled spletnih vplivnežev je bil merjen po metodologiji, ki sta jo razvila Zhou in Whitla (2013). Moralne sodbe smo merili z enorazsežnostno lestvico semantičnega diferenciala moralne sodbe s šestimi postavkami (Tansey idr., 1994). Prepoznavanje moralnega vprašanja, ki ga najdemo v večini modelov etičnega odločanja (npr. Jones, 1991), je bilo merjeno z eno postavko, kot je bilo navedeno v prejšnjih raziskavah (npr. Valentine in Barnett, 2007; Rousselet idr., 2020). Tudi moralna odgovornost je bila merjena z eno postavko (Steinbauer idr., 2014). Na koncu smo anketirance prosili, naj odgovorijo na demografska vprašanja.

Rezultati so pokazali, da sledilci prikrivanje negativnih izkušenj s predstavljenim izdelkom prepoznavajo kot moralno vprašanje in da to prepoznavanje spodbudi negativne moralne sodbe. Poleg tega moralna sodba vpliva na verodostojnost (ki jo sestavljata zaupanje v spletnega vplivneža in njegova strokovnost), podobo in ugled spletnih vplivnežev. Ta razmerja (razen ugleda) se okrepijo, če sledilci spletne vplivneže dojemajo kot moralno odgovorne za njihovo ravnanje. Nazadnje, zaupanje v spletnega vplivneža in njegova podoba vplivata na nakupno namero do predstavljene blagovne znamke, medtem ko njegova strokovnost in ugled na to nimata pomembnega vpliva.

Znanstveni prispevek in posledice na področju upravljanja

Prvič, utemeljitev te disertacije na teoriji vlog (Biddle, 2013) v kontekstu spletnih vplivnežev zagotavlja teoretični okvir, ki se razlikuje od običajnih teorij, povezanih s sporočilom ali sporočevalcem, in ponuja nov pogled na odnose, ki so se pojavili s pojavom vplivnežev. Uporaba teorije vlog kaže, da so spletni vplivneži zares vzpostavili stabilen status v družbi. Kljub temu razvoju pa številni vidiki njihove vloge ostajajo nejasni, kar podpihuje konflikte znotraj nje.

Drugič, ta disertacija presega ugotovitve o moralnih vprašanjih, ki obstajajo na področju vplivnostnega trženja, in kaže, katera moralna vprašanja predstavljajo dileme za tiste, katerih vidik je najpomembnejši – same vplivneže. Pri tem pojasnjuje, katera moralna vprašanja na področju vplivnostnega trženja postanejo moralne dileme in kako. Poleg tega ta spoznanja širijo razumevanje, kako se spletni vplivneži soočajo z moralnimi dilemami. To znanje je ključnega pomena, saj je poslovanje spletnih vplivnežev polno

moralnih dilem, razumevanje strategij, ki jih uporabljajo za njihovo obvladovanje, pa zagotavlja dragocen vpogled v operativno dinamiko njihovega poslovanja.

Tretjič, konceptualni model disertacije povezuje predhodnike iz modelov moralnega odločanja (Jones, 1991), tj. moralno prepoznavanje in sodbe, z uveljavljenimi lastnostmi vplivnežev (npr. Kim in Kim, 2021b; Bu idr., 2022; Chidiac in Bowden, 2023). Ugotovitve kažejo, da so sledilci bolj nagnjeni k temu, da moralno obsodijo predstavljanje izdelka kot neetično, če spletni vplivneži izdelek predstavljajo kljub negativni izkušnji z njim. Ta rezultat poudarja bistveno povezavo med specifičnimi etičnimi dilemami in moralnimi ocenami, kot je bilo poudarjeno v predhodnih raziskavah (npr. Barnett in Valentine, 2004; Hollingworth in Valentine, 2015). Zato je prispevek k literaturi v razkritju, da takšne moralne sodbe pomembno vplivajo na zaznane lastnosti spletnih vplivnežev.

Četrtič, pri preizkušanju predlaganih odnosov v zvezi s prikrivanjem negativnih izkušenj so ugotovitve delno podprle ugotovljene povezave med lastnostmi spletnih vplivnežev in nakupno namero njihovih sledilcev do predstavljene blagovne znamke. Pozitiven vpliv na nakupno namero se je pokazal le pri lastnosti zaupanja, medtem ko strokovnost tega vpliva ni imela. Medtem ko prejšnje študije običajno preučujejo strokovnost spletnih vplivnežev v določenih panogah ali pri posameznih spletnih vplivnežih, smo se v tej disertacijski študiji osredotočili na splošno strokovnost spletnih vplivnežev, kar je morda predstavljalo izziv za ocenjevanje s strani anketirancev.

Petič, disertacija poudarja pomen moralne odgovornosti, ki se pripisuje spletnim vplivnežem za njihovo neetično ravnanje. Spletni vplivneži se pogosto opirajo na osebne izkušnje in morda ne razumejo svoje moralne odgovornosti. Vendar je sprejemanje moralne odgovornosti bistveno za doseganje harmoničnega ravnesja med učinkovitostjo in etičnim ravnanjem na tem področju. Poleg omenjenih teoretičnih prispevkov disertacija ponuja tudi več spoznanj s področja upravljanja.

Ugotovitve razkrivajo, da se spletni vplivneži spopadajo s svojo vlogo v dinamičnem okolju družbenih medijev in pogosto krmarijo med nasprotujočimi si pričakovanji, ki naprezajo njihovo območje udobja. Moralne dileme, ki izhajajo iz konfliktov med vlogami, bi morali spletni vplivneži reševati s prednostnim obravnavanjem pričakovanj deležnikov, najsi bodo povezana z blagovno znamko, sledilci ali družbo. S tako jasnostjo se zmanjšajo moralne zadrege in potreba po pogostem menjavanju vlog, spletni vplivneži pa ohranijo verodostojnost in ugled. Poleg tega lahko prednostna obravnava ene skupine deležnikov pomaga spletnim vplivnežem pri njihovem umeščanju v panogo ter spodbuja zaupanje in transparentnost sodelovanja.

Spletni vplivneži se morajo tudi zavedati, da jih sledilci obravnavajo kot moralno odgovorne, zlasti kadar predstavljajo izdelke z negativnimi izkušnjami. Pristnost in transparentnost pri predstavljanju izdelkov sta bistvenega pomena, saj lahko neizpolnjevanje pričakovanj sledilcev bistveno poslabša vplivneževo verodostojnost, podobo in ugled. Za sodelovanje so lahko koristna jasno opredeljena pričakovanja in

meje, kar zmanjšuje možnost neetičnega ravnanja ter krepi zaupanje in verodostojnost v odnosu do vplivnostnega trženja.

Oblikovalci politik imajo ključno vlogo pri urejanju praks vplivnostnega trženja, zlasti glede promocije škodljivih izdelkov in izražanja družbeno pomembnih mnenj s strani spletnih vplivnežev. Vzpostavitev jasnih smernic lahko moderira moralne dileme ter spodbudi transparentnejše in bolj zaupanja vredno oglaševalsko okolje za vse vpletene deležnike.

Metodološke omejitve in poročila za nadaljnje raziskave

Raziskovalni pristop te raziskave je omejen v več pogledih. Prvič, sistematični pregled literature o etiki na področju vplivnostnega trženja je bil osredotočen le na članke v angleškem jeziku iz znanstvenih revij, pri čemer so bila zato morda spregledana spoznanja iz drugih virov. Drugič, z opiranjem izključno na podatkovno zbirko SCOPUS, čeprav je ta pomembna, morda niso bili vključeni ustrezni članki. Tretjič, zaradi nedosledne terminologije v raziskavah o vplivnostnem trženju so bile morda kakšne študije spregledane.

Pri kvalitativnem delu so omejitve naslednje: možna pristranskost zaradi družbene zaželenosti v odgovorih v intervjujih zaradi občutljive narave moralne tematike, omejena kulturna raznolikost intervjuvancev in analiza podatkov, ki jo je opravil en sam raziskovalec. Omejitve kvantitativne študije vključujejo pristranskost pri izbiri vzorca, osredotočenost na eno samo moralno dilemo in ukrepe, ki niso optimizirani za modeliranje strukturnih enačb.

Pri pregledu literature so se pokazali pristranskost do nekaterih teorij, omejene raziskave iz neanglosaksonskih držav in zanemarjanje pogledov ključnih akterjev, kot so spletni vplivneži ter vodje odnosov z javnostmi. V prihodnjih raziskavah bi bilo treba raziskati vloge spletnih vplivnežev in posebne moralne dileme ter upoštevati značilnosti sledilcev in medkulturne razlike. Z uveljavljenimi koncepti s področja znamčenja in upravljanja v kontekstu spletnih vplivnežev bi lahko obogatili raziskavo, prav tako pa bi lahko uporabili raziskovalne pristope na več ravneh. Vnovično vrednotenje merjenja uveljavljenih konstruktov v poslovni etiki je bistvenega pomena, zlasti v kontekstu kompleksnih statističnih analiz, ki se običajno uporabljajo v raziskavah vplivnostnega trženja.

Appendix 2: Interview protocol and questions

Introduction

Hi, so again my name is Nina. I am a research assistant in Rijeka and doctoral student in Ljubljana. Currently I am working on a project concerning influencer marketing and decision-making. I am the principal investigator of this subject and if you have any follow up questions or concerns you can always contact me via email nrguric@efri.hr or phone 0989 409 986.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Your participation is very much appreciated. Just before we start the interview, I would like to reassure you that as a participant in this project you have several very definite rights.

First, your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary.

You are free to refuse to answer any question at any time.

You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.

This interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to me and two other researchers working on this project.

Excerpts of this interview may be made part of the final research report, but under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics be included in this report.

I am well aware time is your most valuable resource and I am taking some of it now, so I want to give something back. My intention is to share my findings from this research in a meeting/seminar I will arrange with people from the field (influencers and professionals interested in influencer marketing).

Give an example of interview questions.

After collecting the data, I need to analyze the findings and this step is much easier if I have recordings of the conversation. However, if you are not comfortable with that the conversation will not be recorded.

Before we start there is one more thing I want to say: don't worry, there is no right or wrong answer to these questions. I am a researcher and that means I am interested in honest answers of many respondents so I can draw some conclusions from them all. If there was already a right or wrong answer, I wouldn't have to do a research on it...

Interview questions

1. I would like to know more about you as an influencer. Could you walk me through how you became an influencer?
2. Would you say it is your main preoccupation or more like a hobby? *I need a detailed and cleared explanation of their role.*
3. How would you describe your role with regard to the followers – who are you to them?
4. What do followers expect when following you?
5. How would you describe your role with regard to brands – who are you to them?
6. What do brands expect when engaging you?
7. How do you see your position in relation to followers on one side and brands on the other? *Are you in the middle, do you come before or after some of them? Is this relationship vertical, horizontal...? Say, if you were this brands' employee what would your job position be?*
8. Do you ever feel these expectations (from followers on one hand and brands on the other) are not on the same page for you or influencers in general? Can you explain, and maybe provide an example?
9. What were your main concerns in these situations? *IF THEY NEED MORE NUDGE: What exactly is your worry here – why do you think the resolution is not straightforward? (Are they worried about losing brands? Losing followers?)*
10. Are there situations when you are not sure what to do? If this isn't working out well (i.e. I don't get them to talk about situations that could be characterized as moral dilemmas) then I ask hypothetical question: *For example, and I ask this because I consider you an expert in influencer marketing, not because I think it relates to you in any specific way, what happens if an influencer is put in a situation where.../example based on focus groups and previous literature/* (examples from literature (on influencers and salespeople): non-disclosing a paid sponsorship, disclosing when you know there are not many people online and then hiding a post, "stretching the truth" - exaggerate product benefits, overpromise, suggesting products they are not sure work (or they know they don't), withholding information, lack of product knowledge/expertise (for ex in banking services, cosmetics like face creams eye drops etc.), promoting products that are illegal to promote through other channels; additional examples from focus groups: deceptive behavior (everything is perfect, you just buy expensive things and travel, eat finest food party all night long...) that gives the impression everything is perfect for them, money can be easily made without much effort, making young people insecure about how they look and what they do)
11. How much do you think influencers are pressured to make a decision when faced with a situation like this? (try to get the answer where this pressure is coming from and try leaning toward personal experience)
12. When in situation like this, what would/do you do help you make a decision? (other influencers, close people, guidelines that are not yet obligatory, just observing what others do, comparing to similar situations in other industries, 'everybody does it')

The interviews were terminated with casual talk about respondents' future plans and projects.

Appendix 3: Questionnaire

How often do you use Instagram?	1 = never 2 = a few times a month 3 = a few times a week 4 = every day 5 = multiple times every day [If 1, terminate the survey]
What year were you born?	Drop-down menu
Gender	M/F
What Croatian county or other country do you live in?	Drop-down menu with the following options: - the 21 Croatian counties - Bosnia and Herzegovina - Slovenia - Serbia - other foreign countries - I don't want to answer - I don't know
Please read the following definition of the term <i>influencer</i> carefully: Influencers are people who have built a large base of followers on social media and thus have the potential to influence their followers. Brands sometimes pay them for the promotion of products. They were not famous people before their engagement on social media.	
Please select which one applies to you: I follow at least one influencer on Instagram.	Yes/No [If No, terminate the survey]
In general, if an influencer gives advice... I will take into account his/her suggestions. I will feel safe following his/her suggestions. I will follow his/her recommendations.	5-point Likert scale
Sometimes influencers have negative experiences with a product that they need to promote. However, they do not mention this in their posts, but rather focus only on positive aspects. The following set of questions will pertain to this situation.	
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below (1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - Neither agree nor disagree; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree). If an influencer hides negative experiences and focuses only on positive experiences while promoting the product: 1. I would buy such a product. 2. I would intend to buy such a product. 3. I would be interested in buying such a product.	5-point Likert scale

4. It is likely that I would buy such a product.	
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below (1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - Neither agree nor disagree; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree). Influencers who hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences while promoting the product are: 1. reliable 2. honest 3. trustworthy 4. credible	5-point Likert scale
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below (1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - Neither agree nor disagree; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree). Influencers who hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences while promoting the product are: 1. experts 2. experienced 3. full of knowledge 4. qualified 5. skilled	5-point Likert scale
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below (1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - Neither agree nor disagree; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree). Influencers who hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences while promoting the product: 1. respect social norms. 2. always obey the law. 3. are socially responsible. 4. avoid damaging behavior at all costs. 5. are good business entities. 6. make a decision only after carefully considering the possible positive or negative consequences for everyone involved.	5-point Likert scale
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statements below (1 - Strongly disagree; 2 -	5-point Likert scale

Disagree; 3 - Neither agree nor disagree; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree). 1. Influencers who hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences while promoting the product have no integrity. 2. Influencers who hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences while promoting the product deserve little respect from me. 3. Influencers who hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences while promoting the product make me skeptical of their virtues and values.	
When influencers hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences while promoting the product that is: unfair/fair unjust/just unacceptable to my family / acceptable to my family not morally right / morally right traditionally unacceptable / traditionally acceptable culturally acceptable / culturally unacceptable	Semantic differential 1-5
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statement below: If influencers hide negative experiences and focus only on positive experiences while promoting the product that is an ethical problem.	5-point Likert scale
Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the statement below (1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - Neither agree nor disagree; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree). Influencers are responsible for promoting only products with which they have not had a negative experience.	5-point Likert scale
How often do you use Internet? Meaning using it at home, at work/school or on your phone.	1 – every day 2 – almost every day 3 – at least once a week 4 – at least once a month 5 – less than once a month I don't want to answer

Which of the following categories best describes your current work status?	Full-time employment Owner of a company – employer Craftsman Entrepreneur Self-employed professional (lawyer, doctor, architect) Freelancer (artist, freelance journalist, freelance actor) Working part-time or via contract Unemployed Retired In primary school In high school College student In vocational school Agricultural worker Housewife Worker helping in the household (workshops, cafés) Unable to work, disabled Other I don't want to answer
How often do you buy things online, i.e., through online stores – regardless of the product type?	
What is your personal average monthly disposable income?	Up to 100 EUR More than 100 EUR up to 200 EUR More than 200 EUR up to 300 EUR More than 300 EUR up to 400 EUR More than 400 EUR up to 500 EUR More than 500 EUR up to 600 EUR More than 600 EUR up to 700 EUR More than 700 EUR up to 800 EUR More than 800 EUR up to 900 EUR More than 900 EUR up to 1,000 EUR More than 1,000 EUR up to 1,100 EUR

	More than 1,100 EUR up to 1,200 EUR More than 1,200 EUR up to 1,300 EUR More than 1,300 EUR up to 1,400 EUR More than 1,400 EUR up to 1,500 EUR More than 1,500 EUR up to 1,600 EUR More than 1,600 EUR up to 1,700 EUR More than 1,700 EUR up to 1,800 EUR More than 1,800 EUR up to 1,900 EUR More than 1,900 EUR up to 2,000 EUR More than 2,000 EUR up to 2,100 EUR More than 2,100 EUR up to 2,200 EUR More than 2,200 EUR up to 2,300 EUR More than 2,300 EUR up to 2,400 EUR More than 2,400 EUR up to 2,500 EUR More than 2,500 EUR up to 2,600 EUR More than 2,600 EUR up to 2,700 EUR More than 2,700 EUR up to 2,800 EUR More than 2,800 EUR up to 2,900 EUR More than 2,900 EUR up to 3,000 EUR More than 3,000 EUR
What is your household's average monthly disposable income?	Up to 200 EUR More than 200 EUR up to 400 EUR More than 400 EUR up to 600 EUR More than 600 EUR up to 800 EUR More than 800 EUR up to 1,000 EUR More than 1,000 EUR up to 1,200 EUR More than 1,200 EUR up to 1,400 EUR More than 1,400 EUR up to 1,600 EUR More than 1,600 EUR up to 1,800 EUR More than 1,800 EUR up to 2,000 EUR More than 2,000 EUR up to 2,200 EUR More than 2,200 EUR up to 2,400 EUR More than 2,400 EUR up to 2,600 EUR

	More than 2,600 EUR up to 2,800 EUR More than 2,800 EUR up to 3,000 EUR More than 3,000 EUR up to 3,200 EUR More than 3,200 EUR up to 3,400 EUR More than 3,400 EUR up to 3,600 EUR More than 3,600 EUR up to 3,800 EUR More than 3,800 EUR up to 4,000 EUR More than 4,000 EUR
Who does most of the shopping for everyday use (food, beverage, and other household items)?	Only me Mostly me Someone else and I, about the same Mostly someone else Someone else I don't want to answer
What is your current employment status?	High-school student College student Unemployed Self-employed/Freelancer Full-time employed Part-time employed Other
Who in your household contributes the most to the household budget?	Mostly me Someone else and I, about the same Someone else I don't want to answer
What is your education level?	Did not finish primary school Primary school Vocational school High school Undergraduate degree Graduate degree Master's degree Specialization

	PhD I don't want to answer
Which of the following categories best describes your marital status?	Single (unmarried) Married Living in a partnership Divorced Married, but living separately Widowed I don't want to answer
Do you have any children?	Yes No I don't want to answer
What is your household size?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 or more I don't want to answer
What type of place you live in?	Rural Urban I don't want to answer I don't know
What kind of financial situation best describes you household's financial situation?	Our household income is barely sufficient for food. Our household's income is sufficient for food, but we could hardly afford new clothes. Our household's income is sufficient for food and new clothes, but we could hardly afford a new TV or a new fridge at the moment.

	Our household's income is sufficient for buying household appliances, but we could hardly afford to buy a new car. Our household's income is sufficient for everything besides buying a new apartment or a holiday home. If necessary, we could afford to buy a new apartment or holiday home.
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Appendix 4: Regression coefficients table

Predictor	Outcome	Std. Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower	Upper
RECOGNITION OF THE MORAL ISSUE	MORAL JUDGMENT	-0.320	0.046	-5.586	< .001	-0.350	-0.168
MORAL JUDGMENT	SMIs' CREDIBILITY - TRUSTWORTHINESS	0.615	0.058	10.409	< .001	0.493	0.722
MORAL JUDGMENT	SMIs' CREDIBILITY – EXPERTISE	0.564	0.058	10.238	< .001	0.482	0.711
MORAL JUDGMENT	SMIs' IMAGE	0.694	0.058	11.695	< .001	0.566	0.794
MORAL JUDGMENT	SMIs' REPUTATION	0.375	0.057	5.398	< .001	0.195	0.417
SMIs' CREDIBILITY - TRUSTWORTHINES S	PI	0.521	0.042	12.866	< .001	0.453	0.615
SMIs' CREDIBILITY - EXPERTISE	PI	0.018	0.050	0.338	0.735	-0.081	0.114
SMIs' IMAGE	PI	0.246	0.047	5.408	< .001	0.162	0.347
SMIs' REPUTATION	PI	0.022	0.059	0.463	0.643	-0.089	0.144
MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY	SMIs' CREDIBILITY - TRUSTWORTHINESS	0.108	0.029	2.701	0.007	0.022	0.135
MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY	SMIs' CREDIBILITY – EXPERTISE	0.141	0.039	2.802	0.005	0.033	0.187
MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY	SMIs' IMAGE	0.132	0.033	2.917	0.004	0.031	0.160
MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY	SMIs' REPUTATION	-0.114	0.035	-1.937	0.053	-0.138	8.271×10^{-4}