JYU DISSERTATIONS 509

Hanna Reinikainen

Fostering Organizational Intangible Assets Through Strategic Social Media Influencer Communication

JYVÄSKYLÄ UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

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Building trust among stakeholders has become a key issue for organizations and their strategic communication management. Trust is commonly viewed as one of the most essential organizational intangible assets and, thus, an important source of value for organizations. This reality merits further examination of how intangible assets can be fostered through strategic communication. A modern instrument for such efforts is strategic social media influencer communication, i.e., the utilization of social media influencers (SMIs) in the attainment of organizational strategic goals. In practice, such efforts are commonly understood as influencer marketing, where SMIs are used mainly as endorsers and the goal is to affect the purchase intentions of consumers.

This study uses mixed methods and three sub-studies to examine how strategic SMI communication creates both opportunities and risks for organizations in fostering their intangible assets. Sub-study 1 examines the perceptions of four Finnish public sector organizations that engaged in strategic SMI communication during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The qualitative case study explores how these organizations argued for the use of SMIs, as well as their perceptions of possible risks and rewards introduced by strategic SMI communication. Sub-studies 2 (N = 302) and 3 (N = 250) focus on stakeholders and their perceptions. These quantitative studies examine possible positive and negative effects from strategic SMI communication on organizations and their intangible assets.

The results indicate that organizations can foster their intangible assets through strategic SMI communication. In this context, SMIs can be viewed as agents of intangible assets for organizations, broadening the idea of SMIs as endorsers. This opens new avenues for understanding the nature and the possibilities of strategic SMI communication. Introducing SMI communication as a way of fostering intangible assets suggests that SMI communication covers more than just endorsements, expanding the opportunities of strategic SMI communication.

The effects of strategic SMI communication are traced back to influencer capital, which can be harnessed to benefit organizations. Enhanced organizational intangible assets also reflect on the SMI and their influencer capital. However, eroding influencer capital can also hurt organizational intangible assets, and damaged organizational intangibles can affect influencer capital negatively. Therefore, it is suggested that strategic SMI communication entails a constant interplay between organizational intangibles and influencer capital, with both positive and negative effects for both. Strategic SMI communication, thus, appears to be a balancing act between the available risks and rewards, with these effects impacting not only organizations, but also SMIs and stakeholders.

Keywords: social media influencer; strategic communication; intangible assets

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

Reinikainen, Hanna
Organisaation aineettomien pääomien vaaliminen sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien avulla
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Sidosryhmien luottamuksen vaalimisesta on tullut keskeinen osa organisaatioiden strategista viestintää. Luottamus on yksi organisaatioiden tärkeimmistä aineettomista pääomista ja siten tärkeää myös organisaatioiden arvonluonnin kannalta. Tämän vuoksi onkin olennaista tarkastella, kuinka aineettomia pääomia voidaan vaalia strategisen viestinnän avulla. Yksi keino on "strateginen somevaikuttajaviestintä" eli sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien hyödyntäminen strategisessa viestinnässä. Käytännössä organisaatiot hyödyntävät vaikuttajia usein suosittelijoina ja markkinoinnin tukena.

Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan, kuinka strateginen somevaikuttajaviestintä luo sekä mahdollisuuksia että riskejä organisaatioille ja niiden aineettomille pääomille. Tutkimus noudattelee monimenetelmäistä tutkimusmetodologiaa, ja siihen kuuluu kolme osatutkimusta. Ensimmäinen osatutkimus on kvalitatiivinen tapaustutkimus, jossa tarkastellaan neljää suomalaista, julkisen sektorin organisaatiota, jotka ovat hyödyntäneet strategista somevaikuttajaviestintää vuoden 2020 aikana toteuttamissaan koronaviestintäkampanjoissa. Toisessa (N = 302) ja kolmannessa (N = 250) osatutkimuksessa tutkitaan sidosryhmien käsityksiä vaikuttajista ja heidän toiminnastaan. Nämä kvantitatiiviset osatutkimukset tuottavat tietoa strategisen somevaikuttajaviestinnän myönteisistä ja kielteisistä vaikutuksista organisaatioille ja niiden aineettomille pääomille.

Tulokset osoittavat, että organisaatioiden on mahdollista vaalia aineettomia pääomiaan strategisen somevaikuttajaviestinnän avulla. Täten vaikuttajat voitaisiinkin käsitteellistää myös organisaation aineettomien pääomien kautta, mikä avaa uusia näkökulmia paitsi vaikuttajien myös strategisen somevaikuttajaviestinnän ymmärtämiseen ja hyödyntämiseen. Sen sijaan, että vaikuttajat nähtäisiin vain suosittelijoina, heidät voidaan käsittää myös organisaatioiden edustajina, agentteina, jotka auttavat organisaatioita monipuolisesti vaalimaan niiden aineettomia pääomia. Näin ajateltuna somevaikuttajaviestintä kattaa enemmän kuin vain vaikuttajien tekemät suositukset ja avaa strategisen somevaikuttajaviestinnän mahdollisuuksia muun muassa organisaatioiden luottamuksen, legitimiteetin ja markkinatietouden vaalimiseen.

Strategisen somevaikuttajaviestinnän tuottamat vaikutukset jäljitetään vaikuttajien pääomaan, joka voidaan valjastaa hyödyttämään organisaatioita. Organisaatioiden kohentunut aineeton pääoma voi myös heijastua positiivisesti takaisin vaikuttajapääomaan. Myös negatiiviset vaikutukset ovat kuitenkin mahdollisia: Rapautuva vaikuttajapääoma voi vaikuttaa negatiivisesti organisaation aineettomiin pääomiin ja päinvastoin. Tutkimuksen johtopäätöksissä ehdotetaankin, että strateginen somevaikuttajaviestintä on organisaation aineettomien pääomien ja vaikuttajapääoman välillä tapahtuvaa jatkuvaa vuorovaikutusta ja tasapainoilua tarjolla olevien hyötyjen ja riskien välillä.

Asiasanat: sosiaalisen median vaikuttaja, strateginen viestintä, aineeton pääoma

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FOREWORD

The idea for this doctoral dissertation saw the light of day about seven years ago. I was working as a communication consultant at the time, helping my clients to collaborate with bloggers and vloggers (back then, nobody talked about social media influencers). I thought there was something incredibly interesting in the dynamics of how bloggers persuaded their followers to mimic their lifestyles and consumption habits. That's when I started to think about whether this could be a research topic for a doctoral thesis. So, I invited an old friend of mine for a coffee to ask for her opinion. That friend was Professor Vilma Luoma-aho. She was immediately ignited by the idea and offered to become my supervisor. "You'll finish the work quickly, in three or four years," she assured me. Well, it took a bit longer than that, but here we are. And so, it is time for the Thank Yous.

First, thank you, Vilma. Without you there would be no thesis at all. You helped me refine my rough research ideas, encouraged me all the way, introduced me to several international opportunities, and helped me get funding for my work. I am grateful for all the time that you have invested in me. Dr. Laura Asunta, my secondary supervisor, came along for the ride a bit later. Thank you so much, Laura, for your difficult questions and support at the very final stretch of this journey. You helped me cross the finish line.

A big thank you goes to my two reviewers, Professor Sabine Einwiller and Professor Augustine Pang. Your comments and remarks helped me refine the manuscript and challenged me to push my thinking further. Thank you, Professor Pang, for also taking the time to act as my Opponent in the public examination of this thesis.

I owe a lot to all my co-authors. Thank you, Dr. Juha Munnukka, Dr. Devdeep Maity, Professor Jari Salo, Dr. Teck Ming Tan, Dr. Salla-Maaria Laaksonen and Dr. Essi Pöyry. I have learnt so much about research and writing from all of you. The same goes for all the other incredibly talented researchers with whom I've had the pleasure to work, write, and publish. A special thanks goes to Salla-Maaria for giving me such great feedback on the manuscript.

I would also like to thank Professor Heikki Luostarinen for providing such insightful comments on the manuscript, but also for the hilarious e-mail exchanges over the years. A big thank you goes to Vertti Luostarinen who created the cover image for this thesis through AI.

I am grateful for being blessed with having all the lovely co-workers and colleagues at JSBE in my life. Kaisa Pekkala, Salla Syvänen, Taina Erkkilä, Hannele Haapio and Matias Livevonen, just to name a few. Thank you also for all the lovely doctoral student colleagues around the world that I've met over the years. A further thank you goes to Professor Terhi-Anna Wilska for putting together the research consortium #Agents – Young People's Agency in Social Media. Working with this team has been a rich educational experience.

As a researcher on social media influencers, I am very lucky to have met and know some social media influencers in person. Thank you, Satu and Tommi Koivisto and Elsa Heiko; you have enabled me to see what goes on behind the

scenes. I would also like to thank Inna-Pirjetta Lahti from PING Helsinki. Our joint projects have taught me a lot about the practice of influencer marketing.

I am deeply grateful that for the past six years I have been able to do research full-time, thanks to the funding that I have received. I got my first research grant from the Media Industry Research Foundation of Finland and I am humbled that they believed in me and my work from so early on. Thank you also Business Finland, Foundation for Economic Education, Helsingin Sanomat Foundation, and Academy of Finland.

The past few years have been difficult for various reasons: COVID-19, the loss of family members, the war in Ukraine. Crisis after crisis. Thank you, friends and family; I take comfort in your existence and support. Finally, thank you, Esa, for your patience, love and understanding. You have been invaluable for the completion of this thesis.

I dedicate this thesis to my father, who passed away in spring 2021. Part of this thesis was written in his hospital room, where I sat next to him as he was sleeping during his final days. I am so deeply sad that he did not have the opportunity to see me finish my work. I know he was looking forward to it and would have been very proud of me. I really miss you, Dad, and want to thank you for all your support.

Helsinki, April 2022

Hanna Reinikainen

FIGURES

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the research

Building and maintaining trust among stakeholders has become a key issue in organizations' strategic communication management (Zerfass et al., 2021). Trust is essential for organizations, e.g., it advances meaningful interactions with stakeholders, thereby diminishing the risks of possible conflicts and disengagement (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2020). Stakeholder trust is commonly viewed as an essential *organizational intangible asset*, i.e., an immaterial source of value to an organization (Dodd, 2016; Lev, 2000). This suggests that the ways of how organizations could foster their intangible assets, should be further examined.

Organizational intangible assets, such as trust or organizational legitimacy, are based on relationships between organizations and their various stakeholders (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Lev, 2000). The digital environment allows for many new possibilities to build relationships, and such opportunities that are becoming more and more popular are partnerships with *social media influencers* (SMIs) (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019) – individuals with a significant number of followers on social media, who also possess the power to shape the attitudes and behaviors of their followers (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Freberg et al., 2011). SMIs, also known as "new digital celebrities" (Morris & Anderson, 2015; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014), often are perceived by their followers as intimate friends, or even as family members (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Raun, 2018). They are viewed as more relatable as personalities than traditional celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), and their social media content often is perceived as more credible than the content that organizations produce (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019).

Due to their popularity and persuasive power, SMIs offer an intriguing way for organizations to reach out to stakeholders. This often happens through paid endorsements, known as influencer marketing (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Enke & Borchers, 2019). In practice, this means that SMIs endorse either organizations or their various products or services while getting financially compensated for these efforts. Such endorsements have become a prominent business strategy, and it is estimated that the value of the global SMI marketing industry will reach 16.4 billion USD in 2022 – up from 1.7 billion USD in 2016 and from 13.8 billion USD in 2021 (Santora, 2022).

In the academic literature, these efforts have been conceptualized as strategic SMI communication – a strategic communication tool that acknowledges SMIs as important stakeholders in organizational goal attainment (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Studies have found that SMIs' endorsements can elicit many positive outcomes for organizations, including enhanced consumer perceptions (Munnukka et al., 2019), increased purchase behaviors (Lee & Watkins, 2016), and added engagement (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Simultaneously, it seems fair to assume that endorsement partnerships with SMIs also could affect organizations negatively, although this phenomenon has gained far less attention in academic research. It has been found that influencer endorsements can be a reputational risk for brands (Sng et al., 2019) and that followers can perceive these endorsements as transgressive (Cocker et al., 2021). However, few extant studies have examined the dynamics behind these negative effects.

The present study suggests that strategic SMI communication offers opportunities for organizations to foster their intangible assets, such as trust in the organization, thereby helping link influencer endorsements to value creation. Simultaneously, it has been observed that engaging in influencer endorsements also can elicit negative consequences for organizations and that intangible assets can be risked in the process. This study aims to examine how organizations perceive SMI communication's possible risks and rewards, as well as the dynamics of these processes, including the potential for both positive and negative outcomes for organizational intangible assets.

1.2 Theoretical context of the research

Theoretically, this study can be placed within the field of strategic communication, understood as the study of communication that is goal-oriented, i.e., "purposefully used" and "substantial for the survival and sustained success" of an organization (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493). Organizations' engagements with SMIs are examined from the perspective of *strategic SMI communication*, i.e., the purposeful use of SMIs to reach critical organizational goals (Enke & Borchers, 2019). In practice, strategic SMI communication often is implemented either through influencer marketing or influencer public relations (Enke & Borchers, 2019).

Of course, whether all actions that organizations engage in with SMIs are particularly "strategic" in nature can be debated, as not all purposeful communication is strategic (Zerfass et al., 2018). The distinction between strategic and non-strategic communication lies in how significant such engagement is for the organization and its existence (Zerfass et al., 2018). Thus, *strategic* SMI communication indicates practices that are important to an organization's survival. It also should be considered that taking the strategic SMI communication perspective may be viewed as reflecting *the strategic turn in communication science,* which aims to view most organizations' communication practices as strategic (Torp, 2015).

A further central concept in this study is stakeholders. According to Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) *stakeholders*, i.e., those affected directly by the organization or who can affect the organization, may come in many forms and can be either consumers, activists, communities, voters, constituents, other businesses, or media, depending on the organization's perspective, goals, and communication strategy. Even SMIs can be perceived as organizational stakeholders (Enke & Borchers, 2019). In this study, stakeholders are viewed as people whom organizations want to address and whose perceptions and behaviors organizations wish to influence through their communication and marketing activities. In terms of SMI communication, this means that interactions and relationships with these stakeholders are pursued through, and in partnerships with, SMIs.

This study also considers strategic SMI communication in terms of *organizational intangible assets*, defined as immaterial sources of value (Dodd, 2016; Lev, 2000). It has been suggested that organizational intangible assets, e.g., trust, are one key outcome of strategic communication and that they offer a way to connect strategic communication management to the organization's value-creation process (Dodd, 2016; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Unlike tangible assets, such as machines or buildings, intangible assets are not really "owned" by an organization, but instead often are lodged in stakeholders' minds and in the relationships between them (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). Therefore, understanding the dynamics of how intangible assets are built (or destroyed) requires studying stakeholders' perceptions.

1.3 Research objective and research question

This study seeks to shed further light on the phenomenon of SMIs and their engagements with organizations through the theoretical lens of strategic SMI communication and in terms of organizational intangible assets. The study is based on two assumptions. The first is that intangible assets, such as stakeholder trust, bring value to organizations, who wish to foster these assets in various ways, including through strategic SMI communication.

The second assumption is based on the idea that stakeholders hold certain perceptions about both organizations and SMIs. Such perceptions are formed through communication and in the context of relationships (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Lev, 2000), and they tend to spill over and blend with each other when organizations and SMIs engage in partnerships with each other. For example, the more credible and friend-like followers perceive an SMI to be, the more positive their attitudes toward a brand that the influencer has endorsed (Munnukka et al., 2019). This suggests that SMIs hold a kind of *influencer capital* (Freberg et al., 2011), which can work in favor of organizations and their goals in terms of the mindset of their followers.

However, this working dynamic raises the question of whether negative perceptions might spill over in the same way positive perceptions do. For example, in 2018, Logan Paul, a U.S.-based YouTuber, published a video showing an apparent suicide victim's body, eliciting furious criticism of both Paul and YouTube, leading to YouTube taking down the video and removing Paul as an advertising partner (BBC, 2018). This suggests that a damaged relationship with an SMI could lead to a negative spill-over effect on the organization that the influencer has endorsed.

Based on these ideas, it is assumed that through strategic SMI communication, it is possible to enhance stakeholders' perceptions of organizations. Simultaneously, it seems reasonable that SMI communication also could end up negatively affecting organizations. Following this line of thinking, this study's research question is as follows:

How does strategic SMI communication create opportunities and risks for organizational intangible assets?

To answer this question, the study compiles results from three sub-studies. Sub-study 1 considers organizations' perceptions and explores how the organizations argued for the use of SMIs and what the organizations perceive to be the possible risks and rewards introduced by strategic SMI communication. Sub-study 1 looks at public sector organizations and the central intangible asset in sub-study 1 is legitimacy. Sub-studies 2 and 3 focus on stakeholders' perceptions and consider the dynamics of SMI endorsements by examining how SMI communication affects organizational intangible assets either positively or negatively. Trust is the central variable representing organizational intangible assets in both Sub-studies 2 and 3. Together, these three sub-studies increase knowledge about both organizational and stakeholder perceptions. Figure 1 encapsulates the three sub-studies' content, including their differing views.

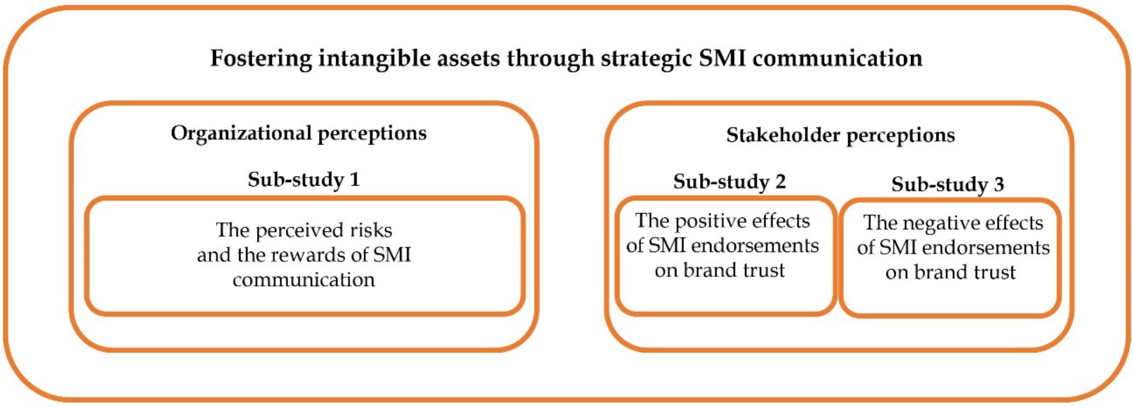

Figure 1. The composition of the study.

Methodologically, this study represents pragmatism and uses mixed methods, thereby combining both qualitative (Sub-study 1) and quantitative (Sub-studies 2 and 3) research methods. In the spirit of pragmatism, the study aims to provide practical perspectives on strategic SMI communication. Simultaneously, the study also could help the general public understand the SMI phenomenon and SMI communication a little bit better. After all, SMIs have the power to affect the attitudes, opinions, and behavior of millions of people.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis has two parts. The first introduces the entire study's central concepts, methodology, results, and contributions. The second includes the three original articles reporting the three sub-studies. This structure is laid out in more detail below.

The literature review in Chapter 2 first introduces the concepts of SMIs and strategic SMI communication. Previous studies related to SMI communication are also introduced and categorized. The second part of the literature review examines intangible assets and how they relate to marketing, communication, and strategic SMI communication. Chapter 3, the methodology section, introduces the research paradigm, pragmatism, as well as explains the methodological choices in the three sub-studies and discusses the sub-studies' reliability and validity. Chapter 4 summarizes the sub-studies' theoretical cornerstones, results, and theoretical and managerial contributions. Chapter 5 outlines the sub-studies' results and explains the theoretical and managerial contributions of the research as a whole. The first part of the thesis ends with a discussion of the sub-studies' limitations and ideas for future studies.

The second part of the thesis comprises the original articles that report the three sub-studies on which this research is based. Sub-study 1 is reported in Article 1, Sub-study 2 in Article 2, and Sub-study 3 in Article 3. Articles 2 and 3 have been published as original articles in peer-reviewed journals, and Article 1 will be published as a chapter in a forthcoming peer-reviewed book. Table 1 lists the articles and explains author contributions for each one.

Table 1. The articles included in the dissertation and author contributions

Article	Research problem and literature	Research design and data	Analysis, results, and writing
1) Reinikainen, H., Laaksonen, S-M., Pöyry, E., & Luoma-aho, V. (forthcoming). Conquering the liminal space: Strategic social media influencer communication in the Finnish public sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. In O. Niininen (ed.), *Social Media for Progressive Public Relations.* Routledge.	Mainly responsible for the research problem and literature review.	Mainly responsible for study design and data gathering.	Mainly responsible for analyzing data, writing results, and making theoretical contributions.
2) Reinikainen, H., Munnukka, J., Maity, D., & Luoma-aho, V. (2020). "You really are a great big sister" – Parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management, 36*(3–4), 279–298.	Mainly responsible for the research problem and literature review.	Shared responsibility in survey design and data gathering.	Shared responsibility in interpreting the results. Mainly responsible for writing the theoretical and managerial contributions.
3) Reinikainen, H., Tan, T., Luoma-aho, V., & Salo, J. (2021). Making and breaking relationships on social media: The impacts of influencer and brand betrayals. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change, 171*, 120990.	Mainly responsible for the research problem and literature review.	Shared responsibility in survey design and data gathering.	Shared responsibility in interpreting the results. Mainly responsible for writing the theoretical and managerial contributions.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 SMIs and strategic communication

This chapter first introduces SMIs, then defines and discusses strategic SMI communication. In addition, previous research on SMI communication is introduced and categorized.

2.1.1 Who are SMIs?

Academic literature in strategic communication, public relations, and marketing has addressed SMIs with this particular concept for about a decade. Freberg et al. (2011, p. 90) were among the first to define SMIs as:

> ...a new type of independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.

While earlier studies had examined, e.g., bloggers (Smith, 2010; Porter et al., 2009) from the perspective of public relations, the definition by Freberg et al. (2011) was the first attempt at combining individual actors in various social media platforms under one umbrella term, taking into account that SMIs often engage in endorsement deals with organizations. Since then, several efforts have been made to expand the definition further. For example, Abidin (2016, p. 3) offered the following definition, concentrating more on SMIs' actions, defining them as:

> … 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 followings by integrating "advertorials" into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events.

Dhanesh and Duthler (2019, p. 3), in their definition, further highlighted SMIs' personal brand-building efforts, persuasive power, as well as the relationship perspective, thereby ascribing more intangible dimensions to SMIs' essence:

> … a person who, through personal branding, builds and maintains relationships with multiple followers on social media, and has the ability to inform, entertain, and potentially influence followers' thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors.

Finally, Enke and Borchers (2019, p. 267) examined SMIs specifically from a strategic communication perspective, highlighting their role in the strategic communication efforts of organizations and defining SMIs as:

> … third-party actors that have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web.

Based on the previous definitions, Suuronen et al. (2021) summarized SMIs as modern-day opinion leaders who: 1) use various social media platforms intensively; 2) collaborate regularly with brands and organizations; 3) engage in two-way interactions and relationship-building activities with their followers; and 4) practice self-branding, thereby curating their public personas.

A concept often used as a synonym for SMI is *microcelebrity*. According to Marwick (2015), microcelebrity entails "something one does, rather than something one is," thereby referring to a way of, e.g., presenting oneself in a certain way on social media, thus suggesting that microcelebrity is a practice. This is explained further by Khamis et al. (2016), who define microcelebrity as a strategic way of both talking to an audience through social media and seeking to grow this audience, with a view toward attaining celebrity status. Thus, from this perspective, the practice of microcelebrity can be viewed as a way to imitate a celebrity lifestyle, which can be seen, of course, among many SMIs these days.

SMIs' popularity often has been traced back to parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSRs) (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Lueck, 2015). These concepts refer to illusionary two-way interaction and relationship building that followers might experience with SMIs – a phenomenon identified already in the 1950s in mass communication media such as TV and radio (Horton & Wohl, 1956). From mass media studies, it is known that parasocial experiences keep bringing people back to media content and have them spend more time with such content (Quintero Johnson & Patnoe-Woodley, 2016). Parasocial experiences also have been demonstrated to be important factors that contribute to influencer endorsements' effectiveness (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Munnukka et al., 2019).

Through parasocial experiences, followers may come to perceive SMIs as intimate friends whom they know very well, even without ever having met them in real life (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Raun, 2016). This points out an important feature in SMIs: Followers often view them as peers. This particular feature distinguishes SMIs from the so-called traditional celebrities, such as pop stars, movie actors, athletes, etc., who often are perceived as less attainable than SMIs (Enke & Borchers, 2019). Studies have found that SMIs often are perceived as more authentic (Pöyry et al., 2019), credible (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), and identifiable (Schouten et al., 2020) than traditional celebrities. This further suggests that the academic literature on celebrity endorsements – available since the 1970s (Halder et al., 2021) – is not necessarily applicable as such to the SMI context, thereby calling for research specifically on SMIs when it comes to strategic communication.

A further aspect of SMIs is that they can be categorized by the size of their audience as either micro-, meso-, or mega-influencers. Micro-influencers typically cater to a small number of followers, reaching fewer than 10,000 people, while meso-influencers usually reach tens or hundreds of thousands of followers, and mega-influencers millions of followers (Boerman, 2020; Jin & Muqaddam, 2021). The figures vary from market to market, and in Finland, e.g., an influencer with around 500,000 followers can be considered a mega-influencer with an extensive reach. As far as endorsement effectiveness is concerned, it has been suggested that micro-influencers could be more effective as endorsers, as they can be perceived more identifiable than mega-influencers, who are often also internationally renowned (Cervantes-Guzmán, 2020). This suggests that different kinds of SMIs offer organizations and their strategic communication different kinds of possibilities.

2.1.2 What is strategic SMI communication?

Partnering with SMIs has become popular among organizations because it can offer effective opportunities to address various stakeholders – particularly so when trying to target stakeholders who might be difficult to reach and influence directly, such as teenagers or young adults (Enke & Borchers, 2019). In fact, SMIs have become an important part of the strategic communication toolbox for many organizations, along with other forms of public relations and marketing communication activities (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). Strategic SMI communication is viewed as an instrument of strategic communication efforts and, thus, includes using SMIs for strategic goal attainment (Enke & Borchers, 2019). This also can be viewed as an "interactive, ongoing process" between organizations, SMIs, and stakeholders (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019, p. 291).

Enke and Borchers (2019) contend that strategic SMI communication can be classified either as managed or unmanaged. Managed SMI communication refers to activities in which an organization knowingly has partnered with one or several SMIs, with a particular goal in mind. For example, there may be a situation in which an organization pays an influencer to endorse a recently launched product to boost sales. Unmanaged SMI communication, on the other hand, represents a situation in which an SMI independently raises an issue concerning an organization, e.g., by praising a product that they have purchased, or a campaign that they have come across on their own. These kinds of spontaneous, surprising acts can be positive for organizations, but they can't really be relied on when it comes to strategic goal attainment and critical issues.

This study concentrates on managed strategic influencer communication, i.e., efforts that stem from organizations' own need to reach certain strategically significant goals. Such efforts can entail either monetary compensation for influencers or be voluntarily based, such as sending out press releases to SMIs in hopes of getting them to distribute offered information. It should be noted that according to Enke and Borchers (2019, pp. 272–273), strategic SMI communication in practice can include both influencer marketing (e.g., paid media and direct sales objectives) and influencer public relations (e.g., unpaid, earned media and long-term relationships) activities. Thus, when influencer marketing is discussed later in this study, it is understood here as a practical implementation of strategic SMI communication.

When regarding the nature of SMI communication, it has also been suggested that it is relationship management (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), with organizations aiming to build meaningful and trusting relationships with both SMIs and their followers. However, Borchers and Enke (2021) question organizations' ability to do this, as they suggest it is possible that through strategic SMI communication, organizations actually *withdraw* from relationship-building activities with stakeholders and *delegate* these activities to SMIs. Therefore, it may be that perceiving SMI communication as relationship building is an idealistic view and that in practice, influencer endorsements still often are truncated into acts of seeking visibility and various short-term effects online. Davies and Hobbs (2020) point out that it is possible for organizations to both use and misuse SMI communication; it can offer organizations possibilities to genuinely interact with stakeholders, but on the other hand, influencers can also be used as "vehicles for covert message dissemination".

Another established way to understand SMI communication is to interpret it through the lens of media relations and, thus, as a way for organizations to maximize their online media coverage (Pang et al., 2016). Creating awareness and reach (Borchers & Enke, 2021) and producing buzz or electronic-word-of-mouth (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014) are common goals for SMI communication, cited by communication and marketing professionals. Academically, this has meant that research on SMI communication has often focused on studying the effectiveness of endorsements made by social media influencers (see, e.g., Hughes et al., 2019; Jin & Muqaddam, 2019; Munnukka et al., 2019). However, this raises the question of whether such a view is restrictive and whether SMIs and SMI communication could add value to organizations in other ways than just through endorsements.

In practice, managed SMI communication activities include giving SMIs agency in the process: Organizations authorize SMIs, e.g., to endorse either products, services, or ideas for their followers on the organization's behalf (Enke & Borchers, 2019). This process refers to agency theory or the principal-agency approach, in which one party (the principal) delegates work to another (the agent), who then performs that work (Eisenhardt, 1989). From this perspective, an organization is the principal and the SMI the agent. This setting means that the possibility for conflict always exists – the agent might act against the principal's best interests (Bergen et al., 1992). Therefore, while SMIs seem to be able to offer many beneficial possibilities for organizations, it has been acknowledged that influencer communications can elicit negative consequences for organizations and even be a potential source of reputational crisis (Sng et al., 2019). Considering that SMIs have such high autonomy, organizations often are understandably worried about possible reputational risks that influencer endorsements could cause. However, few extant studies have examined this topic.

It is also worth noting that the traditional understanding of agency theory refers to situations in which the agent is "acting for the principal" and focuses on the related problems (Brummans, 2017, p. 3). However, there are other ways to understand agency as well. The structuration theory, e.g., highlights the possibility for an agent to "act otherwise," meaning that the agent has more influence over the situation and the ability to make their own choices in a way that "makes a difference" (Iverson et al., 2017, p. 44). Another aspect is the relational view of agency (Cooren, 2017, p. 142), which emphasizes that the agent not only "acts for principals" but also "with and through" principals – and also other actors. This shows that agency is a complex issue. It can refer to situations where an agent's influence is limited, but also to situations where the agent has capacity and power over independent intentions and a true ability to make a difference (Cheney & Ritz, 2017, p. 194). In the case of SMI communication, this means looking at what kind of agency is given to SMIs: Whether they are considered as "subordinates" who carry out activities in accordance with the instructions given by organizations, or whether they have the power to make their own decisions, engage their followers as co-agents, and thus modify the results and thereby even the principal organizations?

2.1.3 What differentiates strategic SMI communication from other types of persuasion efforts?

It has been suggested that the concepts of opinion leadership and the two-step flow of communication introduced by Katz and Lazarsfeld in the 1950s might offer helpful starting points for understanding how SMIs and their endorsements work (Suuronen et al., 2021). According to these classic theories, “ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less-active sections of the population” (Katz, 1957, p. 61). This suggests that knowledgeable and powerful individuals can persuade others and act as intermediaries between mass media and their own networks of people. This process resembles how influencer endorsements work, with influencers acting as intermediaries between organizations and their followers. However, the expertise that SMIs possess often is acquired through their personal experiences and related to their own lifestyle and topics such as fashion, beauty, fitness, travelling, or gaming – hence the definition of SMIs as “modern-day opinion leaders” (Suuronen et al., 2021).

Celebrity endorsement is a form of persuasion that organizations have used for centuries to advance their own objectives (Halder et al., 2021). As it often includes a well-known personality endorsing various products or services, it can be viewed as a practice that is related closely to SMI endorsements. However, as already mentioned in Chapter 2.1.1, the dynamics of celebrity endorsements are not necessarily directly applicable to SMI communication due to differences in how celebrities and SMIs are perceived (see, e.g., Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Pöyry et al., 2019). Therefore, separate research on SMIs and influencer endorsements is needed.

Another persuasion strategy that SMI communication resembles is native advertising – "a type of online advertising that matches the form and function of the platform on which it appears" (Aribarg & Schwartz, 2020, p. 20). The idea of native advertising is that it smoothly blends in with surrounding content and tries not to disturb the overall content experience. Native advertising has become a typical revenue source in the field of journalism, resulting in many journalistic media outlets struggling with the separation of journalistic content from advertising content (Carlson, 2015). However, SMIs, while often professional content creators, are not directly comparable to journalists, nor are they bound by journalistic codes of conduct. SMIs make content decisions on their own – whether sponsored or not. However, the legislation, guidelines, and ethics of advertising are also compatible with SMIs, who are required to mention in their posts if they have received any payment for the said content (see Abidin et al., 2020; Asquith & Fraser, 2020).

An important difference between various forms of advertising and SMI communication is related to control. SMIs' endorsements mostly take place on the influencers' own social media accounts, which the influencers administer and manage themselves. Thus, they have final say over their content. This strategy differs from putting out paid ads featuring well-known celebrities and publishing them either on mass media or on the organizations' own channels. This suggests that while advertising often gives organizations a fair amount of control over their messaging, the same kinds of practices are not transferable as such to SMI communication, which requires freedom from outside pressure to succeed (Enke & Borchers, 2018; Borchers & Enke, 2021). Furthermore, a brand's perceived control over an influencer's endorsement diminishes the endorsement's credibility and, thus, the content's effectiveness (Martínez-López et al., 2020). This points towards the alternative ways of understanding agency (Brummans, 2017; Iverson et al., 2017) and implies that securing the best results from SMI communication requires offering SMIs the possibility to "act otherwise," and that the most effective approach to SMI communication would be to act "with" SMIs and their followers, instead of having SMIs only act "for" organizations.

Therefore, treating SMIs as another platform for advertising or another outlet for messaging is not necessarily a very sustainable approach. Successful SMI communication requires an understanding of the dynamics between organizations, SMIs, and their followers, and a fair amount of agency mandated for SMIs. Furthermore, viewing SMIs merely as people who just create and distribute content on their platforms is rather limited. Instead, SMIs can take on various roles, including acting as event hosts, strategic counsellors, or SEO providers for organizations (Borchers, 2019; Borchers & Enke, 2021). Therefore, SMI communication offers a wide variety of possibilities for organizations, but also less control, which may entail risks.

2.1.4 What have previous studies discovered?

The abundance of studies on SMIs, influencer marketing, and influencer communication has been emblematic for the past couple of years. These studies have been published in journals in the fields of strategic communication, marketing, management, business studies, psychology, and information studies. Three recent literature reviews (Hudders et al., 2021; Martínez-López et al., 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021) aimed to categorize the literature, and building on this categorization, the following themes emerge from the influencer marketing and communication literature:

1) Management. This strand of literature concerns how influencer marketing and communication are practiced and implemented, as well as possible struggles that organizations experience in these efforts. Examples of studies in this category include papers by Enke and Borchers (2019), which conceptualizes strategic SMI communication, and by Davies and Hobbs (2020) and Borchers and Enke (2021), which offer a communication agency perspective to understand influencer marketing and communication. Archer and Harrigan (2016) examined marketing and public relations professionals' expectations for influencer marketing, while Navarro et al. (2020) examined how public relations professionals perceive SMIs. This category also includes studies on influencer marketing management by examining influencer selection and suitability (e.g., Bishop, 2021; De Veirman et al., 2017).

2) Ethics. This category includes papers interested in influencer marketing and communication ethics. Most of these studies concern sponsorship disclosure and its effects on SMIs, organizations, and followers (Boerman, 2020; Evans et al., 2017; Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Stubb et al., 2019). The authenticity of influencer endorsements has also been discussed from an ethics perspective (Wellman et al., 2020). The current status of legislation and guidelines related to influencer marketing in the Nordics (Abidin et al., 2020) – as well as in the U.S., Canada, and U.K. (Asquith & Fraser, 2020) – also has been examined within this literature category, but comprehensive reviews on ethics in the SMI industry remain lacking.

3) Endorsement effectiveness. This is by far the largest category and includes studies that examine how the characteristics of SMIs, the audience, and content explain various influencer marketing and communication outcomes. Papers on SMIs' characteristics, or "source characteristics," include studies, e.g., on perceived authenticity (Luoma-aho et al., 2019; Pöyry et al., 2019), expertise (Trivedi & Sama, 2020), and credibility (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014; Lou & Yuan, 2019) of SMIs, as well as perceived congruence or fit between the influencer and the endorsed brand (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Martínez-López et al., 2020). Studies on audiences and their psychology-related factors include those of identification (Schouten et al., 2019), PSI and PSRs (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), and emotional attachment (Ladhari et al., 2020) with influencers, as well as engagement with influencer content (Munnukka et al., 2019). Studies on content characteristics have examined, e.g., visual appeal (Ki & Kim, 2019), "product-only" posts (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019), and sponsored posts' hedonic value (Hughes et al., 2019). Most of these studies also have measured the positive outcomes of endorsements for organizations, such as heightened brand attitude, brand trust, engagement, and purchase intention.

While several studies have examined influencer marketing and communication, they mostly concentrate on the positive effects that strategic SMI communication can bring to organizations. Studies on possible negative effects largely remain lacking, which is interesting considering that a wide range of literature has examined negative effects from celebrity endorsements (see, e.g., Carrillat et al., 2014; Kelly et al., 2016; Louie et al., 2001). This suggests that organizations often are very interested in the possible perils of engaging in endorsement partnerships; therefore, the issue should be raised in the context of SMIs as well.

It also should be noted that most extant research on influencer marketing has examined stakeholders' perceptions. Studies on endorsement effectiveness and sponsorship disclosure mostly concern how to affect consumers' opinions, attitudes, and behaviors, most of which were conducted either by surveying or interviewing consumers and followers of SMIs. However, the management category includes some studies that have examined management and organizations' perceptions, but so far, these studies have been in the minority.

The sub-studies examined within this research can be categorized as follows: Sub-study 1 belongs under the category of management, as it examines organizations' perceptions, as well as management of strategic SMI communication. Sub-studies 2 and 3 belong under the category of endorsement effectiveness and examine how certain perceived characteristics of SMIs and audience-related factors affect strategic SMI communication outcomes. However, Sub-study 3 deviates from most of the literature in this category, as it concentrates on possible negative effects from endorsements. The influencer characteristics studied in these two sub-studies are influencer credibility (Study 2) and influencer coolness (Study 3), and the audience-related factors are PSRs (Studies 2 and 3) and audience participation (Study 2). These intangible features can be understood as comprising *influencer capital,* which is discussed further in Chapter 2.2.3. A central outcome in Studies 2 and 3 is stakeholder trust, understood here as an important organizational intangible asset.

2.2 Intangible assets and strategic communication

This sub-section first introduces and defines *organizational intangible assets*. Intangibles are a concept that has been studied mostly in the field of business studies, largely from financial reporting and accounting perspectives. However, this chapter aims to explain how intangible assets are understood from the perspective of communication and marketing research, and how intangible assets and strategic SMI communication come together.

2.2.1 What are intangible assets?

Intangible assets are defined as a broad range of immaterial sources of value (Dodd, 2016; Lev, 2000) that, unlike many tangible assets, are both renewable and tend to grow when they are used (Diefenbach, 2006). Knowledge is a good example of an intangible asset, as it is immaterial, renewable, and tends to grow when we use it. We cannot actually see knowledge, as it is lodged in our heads, but we can understand and even sense when it is being utilized. Knowledge is also very valuable to us, with its value apparent when knowledge is being applied. Other types of intangible assets include reputation, trust, innovation, brands, information, and relationships (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Diefenbach, 2006; Lev, 2000; Luoma-aho et al., 2012; Olkkonen & Luoma-aho, 2019). Organizational intangible assets may be derived from various sources, such as employees' skills or patents' value, as well as from marketing and communication activities (Doyle, 2000). Intangible assets can be viewed as important capital for organizations, and like other forms of capital, it is possible to invest in intangible assets and anticipate returns from these investments (Dodd, 2016). For example, organizations can invest in SMI communication and expect a return later in the form of heightened brand attitude and rising sales.

Organizations and organizational research have taken a big interest in intangible assets, as the role of intangibles in increasing organizational value and growth was acknowledged in the 1990s (Lev & Daum, 2004). Since then, the understanding about the competitive advantages that knowledge and creativity can bring to an organization steadily has been rising (Pasban & Nojedeh, 2016). Simultaneously, there has been much discussion on how to best measure intangibles and their worth for organizations (Joia, 2000). Measuring intangibles is a challenge, as they represent the future, i.e., upcoming capabilities and possibilities for growth (Lev, 2000). How to, for example, determine the future value of one "like" on a company's Instagram account?

The key to understanding intangibles' significance comes from examining both intangibles and tangibles holistically and as embedded (Lev, 2000; Lev & Daum, 2004). For example, computers need both hardware (tangible) and software (intangible) to elicit value. Or, training alone doesn't bring any value to an organization if people cannot use their newly acquired skills. These examples demonstrate that intangible and tangible assets are linked, and studies further indicate this in both good and bad. It has been discovered that a good reputation (intangible) and positive financial performance (tangible) correlate positively with each other (Rautiainen & Luoma-aho, 2021), while intangible, reputational risks also can cause tangible, financial risks (Gatzert, 2015). For example, Tiger Woods' sponsors lost more than 2 percent of their market value during the 10–15 trading days after his infidelity scandal broke in 2009 (Knittel & Stango, 2014).

Therefore, fostering intangible assets is crucial work, as both successes and failures also often are visible in the bottom line. This view is highlighted by Canel and Luoma-aho (2019), who contend that fostering intangible assets can make organizations "antifragile," i.e., resilient and durable amid an ever-changing operational environment. Fostering intangible assets ultimately can even save lives: Evidence indicates that it is difficult to affect, e.g., vaccine acceptance among people with little trust in public authorities (Petersen et al., 2021). Therefore, cherishing stakeholder trust, along with other intangible assets, is important not only for organizations themselves, but also for society at large.

2.2.2 What are marketing- and communication-based intangibles?

In addition to management, accounting, and organizational studies, intangible assets have raised interest among strategic communication and marketing scholars. Both marketing and communication have been deemed as playing a critical role in securing and managing certain organizational intangible assets, e.g., trust, reputation, or brand equity (e.g., Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Dodd, 2016; Doyle, 2000; Wang et al., 2009; Zerfass & Volk, 2018).

Examining outcomes from strategic communication, such as intangible assets, allows organizations to link their communication efforts to the entire organization's value-creation process (Doyle, 2000; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Dodd (2016) even suggested that fostering organizational intangible assets can be perceived as one of the most important areas of strategic communication. However, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) recommend caution in emphasizing intangible assets' role when examining the value that communication brings to an organization, as intangible assets are influenced by many factors that cannot be controlled through strategic communication alone. Along these lines, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) recommend understanding management of intangible assets as one of the key functions of strategic communication, while acknowledging that strategic communication's value lies in other areas as well, such as enabling operations, ensuring flexibility, and adjusting overall strategy.

As mentioned earlier, many types of organizational intangible assets exist, such as innovation or software, and this study focuses on the kind of assets that can be affected specifically by strategic SMI communication, e.g., through influencer marketing or influencer public relations. For this reason, it makes sense to examine what the literature says about marketing- and communication-based intangible assets.

Doyle (2000) divides intangible assets that can be derived from marketing activities into four types: 1) marketing knowledge, i.e., information received through, for example, marketing research; 2) brands, i.e., positive images and consumers' perceptions and their value to the organization; 3) customer loyalty, developed through customer satisfaction that keeps them coming back; and 4) strategic relationships, i.e., successful partnerships such as those that allow for a streamlined flow of products and services. However, Srivastava et al. (1998) examined only two types of intangible assets based on marketing: 1) relational, referring to relationships between an organization and its key external stakeholders, and 2) intellectual, referring to marketing knowledge. Bick (2009) highlights two marketing-based intangibles in driving value growth: 1) brand equity and 2) customer equity.

From a communication perspective, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) classified the management of intangible assets as one of the four major value-creation dimensions of strategic communication and highlighted three key intangibles: reputation; brands; and communication culture. However, Dodd (2016) identified several other intangible resources, such as confidence, commitment, credibility, goodwill, identification, legitimacy, power, relationship, reputation, satisfaction, and trust. Canel and Luoma-aho (2019) examined intangible assets from the perspective of public organizations and introduced eight intangible assets that require communication: organizational culture, intellectual capital, legitimacy, reputation, trust, satisfaction, engagement, and social capital.

Table 2 combines some of the most common marketing- and communication-based intangible assets that have been recited above.

Table 2. Marketing- and communication-based intangible assets.

Intangible	Content	References
Marketing knowledge; intellectual capital	Information about the markets that is gained, e.g., through market research	Doyle, 2000; Srivastava et al., 1998; Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019
Brands; brand equity	The overall perceptions and value of brands owned by the organization	Bick, 2009; Doyle, 2000; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017
Customer loyalty and equity; stakeholder satisfaction	The value of satisfied stakeholders and customers	Bick, 2009; Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Dodd, 2016; Doyle, 2000
Relationships and social capital	Networks and relationships with key stakeholders and strategic partners	Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Dodd, 2016; Doyle, 2000; Srivastava et al., 1998
Reputation	The general beliefs that stakeholders have about the organization	Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Dodd, 2016; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017
Trust	The stakeholders' willingness to rely on the organization	Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Dodd, 2016
Legitimacy	The level of the acceptability of the organization's actions, granted by stakeholders	Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Dodd, 2016
Organizational and communication culture	The overall collection of values and practices that drive actions and communication within the organization	Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017

This study concentrates on two specific intangible assets: legitimacy (Sub-study 1) and trust (Sub-studies 2 and 3). Legitimacy in the public sector commonly is understood as a license to operate, granted by citizens (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). It is often a question of life and death for public sector organizations, as a lack of legitimacy can impact them severely, possibly even leading to their elimination (Wæraas, 2020). According to Bitektine (2011, p. 159), organizational legitimacy covers "the perceptions of an organization," and these perceptions can be "rendered" by media, as well as other actors. This suggests that SMIs also could be such "renderers of legitimacy" when it comes to public sector organizations. However, strategic SMI communication in the public sector is an understudied area. Sub-study 1 of this research is among the first studies to examine public sector organizations' legitimacy in connection with strategic SMI communication.

Trust is another essential intangible asset that elicits many benefits for organizations, entailing vulnerability (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019), as it reflects willingness to rely on the other party (Moorman et al., 1992). Trust often is viewed as a lubricant for social relations (Yamagishi, 2005), and in the context of organizations, it advances relationship building with stakeholders and diminishes risks, such as a reluctance to engage in meaningful interactions (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2020). Trust is also an important factor when people make decisions about what kind of information to use (Moorman et al., 1992). Therefore, trust influences behaviors, from purchase decisions (Soni & Verghese, 2018) to vaccine hesitancy (Schernhammer et al., 2021). Lately the annual European Communication Monitor study has found very high interest among communication professionals on how to build and maintain trust among stakeholders (Zerfass et al., 2021). Therefore, trust can be viewed as one of the most important issues in strategic communication at the moment.

2.2.3 How do intangible assets and SMIs connect?

The studies reviewed in Chapter 2.1.4 found that much research in the field of influencer endorsements has taken an interest in so-called "source characteristics," such as the influencer's popularity, perceived credibility, and authenticity, as well as "audience characteristics," such as PSRs with the influencer. As these characteristics seem to determine influencer endorsements' effectiveness, they can be viewed as very tempting in the eyes of organizations and, therefore, valuable features for SMIs. Thus, these features resemble organizational intangible assets. This study refers to these features as *influencer capital*, i.e., immaterial sources of value to SMIs that comprise the power of their endorsements.

Previous literature has defined *influencer capital* in various ways. Freberg et al. (2011) refer to "SMI capital" as comprising both the number of followers that SMIs have, as well as how SMIs' followers perceive them. Reinikainen (2019) introduces the concept of "parasocial capital," referring to SMIs' relational capital, comprising mainly of PSRs that their followers experience and which contribute, e.g., to endorsement effectiveness. Wolf and Archer (2018), on the hand, use Bourdieu's (1986) notion of fields to explain relational capital that SMIs bring to the table. For example, fashion bloggers have relationships and relevant networks (social capital) in the field of fashion. This capital is alluring to organizations, who wish to grow their own social capital in this field as well. Through SMIs, organizations can access the field to build their own relationships and networks. Thus, an SMI utilizes their social capital to enable organizations to grow their organizational social capital in this particular field (Wolf & Archer, 2018).

While SMIs can turn their influencer capital into financial capital (e.g., brands paying SMIs for endorsements), the use of this capital often worries SMIs. Endorsement partnerships with organizations may leave SMIs struggling over whether such practices compromise their relationships with their followers (Lövheim, 2011) and hurt their perceived authenticity (Liljander et al., 2015), thereby jeopardizing their influencer capital. Therefore, many influencers have been careful in choosing partners and seek to enter endorsement deals that are not viewed as threats to their personal brands and perceived trustworthiness (Ember, 2015; Watson, 2020). This suggests that as organizations seek to foster their intangible assets (e.g., trust, legitimacy, reputation, etc.) through SMI communication, ensuring that neither organizational intangible assets nor influencer capital are jeopardized in the process seems important.

3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter first introduces this study’s research paradigm, pragmatism, then the research design. Data collection and analysis of the sub-studies also are explained.

3.1 Research paradigm: pragmatism

The idea of research paradigms was originally introduced in 1962 by Thomas Kuhn (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2013). Research paradigms are understood as “shared belief systems that influence the kinds of knowledge researchers seek and how they interpret the evidence they collect” (Morgan, 2007, p. 50) and as “worldviews providing categories and concepts through and by which science and social science construct and understand the world” (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 8). Therefore, paradigms help place researchers in the field of science.

However, how encompassing paradigms are viewed varies greatly, and the question about research paradigms’ generality ranges from viewing them as worldviews to treating them as model examples (Morgan, 2007). For example, Creswell and Creswell (2018) define paradigms as “philosophical worldviews,” Bryman (2008) as “a cluster of beliefs,” and Greene and Hall (2010) as “mental models.” However, whether they are worldviews, models, or guiding beliefs, the central questions that all researchers ask themselves at some point are: How do I view reality, and how do I think knowledge is generated from that reality?

The question of paradigms often traditionally has been dichotomous and a struggle between positivistic and constructivist paradigms (Morgan, 2007). The positivistic tradition is interested in determination, explanation, causes, and outcomes, comprising and testing hypotheses, with objectivity as the ideal (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 6–7; Lincoln et al., 2018, 110). The reasoning within this paradigm model is deductive, allowing for predictions and advances from theory to data (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013; Singleton & Straits, 2018). These features typically involve quantitative research. However, the constructivist (or interpretivist) tradition is interested in hermeneutics and understanding how meanings are constructed, acknowledging social and historical perspectives in meaning-making (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 7–8; Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 110). Reasoning typically is inductive and proceeds from data to theory, thereby avoiding generalizations (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013; Singleton & Straits, 2018). These features typically involve qualitative research. A central difference between positivism and constructivism can be condensed to the issue of whether social reality exists externally to actors and is present for researchers to observe as it is, or whether participants – including the researchers themselves – construct and reconstruct it constantly (Bryman, 2008).

These two worldviews have been deemed incompatible in the past, leading to raging "paradigm wars" and struggles over "paradigm superiority" and "purity" in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Bryman, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The battles were settled as a third paradigm emerged – pragmatism became a way of connecting these two opposite ends of the paradigmatic continuum and making qualitative and quantitative studies compatible (Denscombe, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Morgan, 2007). Originating from the works of Charles Pierce and John Dewey (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgan, 2007), the pragmatist tradition does not view the world as "an absolute unity" and typically is not tied to only one certain kind of method, approach, or technique, but draws from a variety of options that best suit the researcher's needs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 10–11). Pragmatists view knowledge as something that is both constructed and based on the reality we experience daily (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The form of reasoning in pragmatism typically is abductive, suggesting not only one direction for reasoning, but a constant movement back and forth between theory and data (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). Morgan (2007) calls this movement "an intersubjective approach," offering an alternative to the subjective and objective approaches familiar within qualitative and quantitative approaches, respectively.

Typical of pragmatism is that instead of particular methods, it is more concerned with research problems and questions, thereby encouraging finding, using, and mixing various research approaches in a way that best allows researchers to find answers to their research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Mills (1959, p. 224), e.g., urging researcher individuality and letting everyone be "their own methodologist." Pragmatism generally is understood as a good partner for mixed methods studies, in which both quantitative and qualitative methods are combined into one single study (Biesta, 2010; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgan, 2007). However, critics often are suspicious of whether researchers who choose pragmatism merely just aim to avoid philosophical disputes (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) and whether qualitative and quantitative methods can be combined in the first place due to their fundamental differences (Denzin, 2012). Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p. 315) also found it difficult for researchers to base their arguments for using mixed methods on classic pragmatism, which they view as a theory of meaning, not a methodology per se.

However, Howe (1988) addresses the relationship between paradigms and methods interestingly and contradicts the idea that abstract paradigms would determine the choice of individual research methods only one way. Howe (1988) disputes the incompatibility thesis, which states that if paradigms are incompatible, so are the ensuing methods. Howe's (1988) view is that a two-way relationship exists between paradigms and methods, i.e., that paradigms inform methods, but that *paradigms also are informed by methods*. This is what Howe (1988) calls the pragmatic view.

This study is built on the idea that knowledge can be both constructed and observed. The central, rather practical, phenomenon in the study is the partnering of organizations and SMIs, and the possible risks and rewards that this entails. As indicated in the literature review (2.1.4), the phenomenon comprises two sides: the organizational management view and the stakeholder view. For the management view, this study offers an interpretive approach, and for the stakeholder view, an experimental approach. Sub-study 1 seeks to understand and make sense of how and why four public-sector organizations engaged in strategic SMI communication and how they perceived the entailing risks and rewards. Sub-studies 2 and 3 sought to explain the dynamics behind influencer endorsements by building connections between psychological constructs, experimenting with them, and demonstrating how endorsements function and elicit both positive and negative outcomes for organizations. It is believed that combining these two views into one study, instead of perceiving them as "incompatible," can cater to this study's aims. Therefore, pragmatism is perceived as the paradigm that best describes the present study's approach, as it reflects an effort to bridge two very different approaches; the interpretive Sub-study 1 and experimental Sub-studies 2 and 3.

Within organizational studies, there has been a call for research on practical value, with pragmatism viewed as a way to serve "human purposes" (Wicks & Freeman, 1998, p. 123). This study aims to produce practical value, with the three sub-studies linked to SMI communication in practice. Sub-study 1 concentrates on how and why the studied organizations actually practiced strategic SMI communication. The experiments in Sub-studies 2 and 3 also are practical in nature. Sub-study 2's experimental setting concentrated on showing/not showing participants audience comments and examining whether this connects to the effectiveness of the influencer's endorsement. This kind of practice currently is ongoing, as YouTube restricts commenting on videos featuring content related to underage children (Binder, 2019). Thus, the study helps understand endorsement content's effect with or without audience engagement. However, Sub-study 3 introduces an influencer-betrayal scenario in which an SMI is revealed to have perpetrated a transgression by purchasing followers. While this is a fictional scenario, there has been a lot of talk about such incidents in the influencer marketing industry, and practitioners have expressed concerns over influencers having fake followers (Deng, 2018;

Huddleston, 2021). Thus, there is a real-life possibility that strategic SMI communication can affect outcomes, such as trust, in both experimental studies as well.

3.2 Research design: mixed methods

This study uses mixed methods, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches, because it was perceived that this can provide a good understanding of the research question at hand (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), as well as a more holistic picture of the studied phenomenon (Denscombe, 2008).

A multiple-case study (N = 4) was conducted from an organizational management perspective, and two experiments (N = 302 and N = 250) from a stakeholder perspective (see Figure 2).

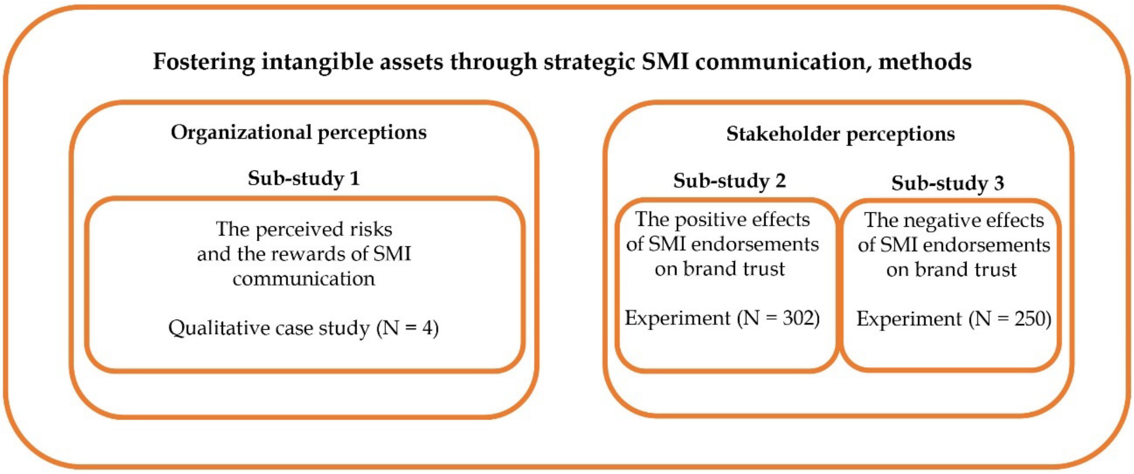

Figure 2. The methods used in the study.

The case study introduces the organizational perspective and asks how four public sector organizations engaged in SMI communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, how they argued for the use of SMIs, and what kind of risks and rewards they perceived from these campaigns. The two stakeholder studies explain why SMIs' endorsements can lead to either heightened or decreased trust in the endorsed organizations. Together, the three sub-studies examined how SMI communication possibly could help foster organizational intangible assets – or put them at risk. Data gathering and analysis are introduced in more detail in the following sub-chapters.

3.2.1 Multiple case study

A multiple case study investigates a particular phenomenon at several different sites and is typically either exploratory, explanatory, or evaluative in nature (Stewart, 2012). Multiple case studies also aim to enhance understanding about a phenomenon in a way that allows for theorizing about an even larger collection of cases (Stake, 2008, p. 123). Simultaneously, the core of multiple case studies is particularization, instead of generalization and making cases understandable (Stake, 1995, pp. 8, 85). Typical of exploratory multi-case studies is that they start from a position in literature, are often practically oriented, and examine and describe processes, and underlying relationships (Stewart, 2012).

Sub-study 1, reported in Article 1 (Reinikainen et al., forthcoming), followed an exploratory multiple case study's logic (Stake, 1995, 2006, 2008), examining how four Finnish public sector organizations campaigned with the help of SMIs during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The study was based on several data sources that highlighted the studied organizations' perceptions and views. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted through Zoom with people responsible for implementing SMI communication within the case organizations. As one of the interviews included two participants, the number of interviewees was five. Other data types included three campaign websites, five reference stories from the agencies that helped the case organizations execute the campaigns, six press releases that the case organizations published, three webinar presentations by the case organizations, and eight online articles from both Finnish and international media outlets that introduced the campaigns and included comments and quotes from the case organizations.

The approach adopted in Sub-study 1 was interpretive sensemaking, with the intention to look for meanings and describe and understand the cases (Welch et al., 2011; Stake, 1995). The analysis started during data collection, and notes were taken while putting the materials (interview transcripts, online sources, articles, press releases, presentations) together. A timeline of the major events was compiled at first to create a clearer understanding of the sequence of events and to be able to describe them. A 15-page case report (see Stake, 2006) was written, including passages related to the rationale behind the campaigns, their deemed purposes, and possible risks. Patterns and themes drawn from the research task then were sought through thematic analysis (Mabry, 2008) between the selected cases.

3.2.2 Experiments

Experiments as a method draw from the positivistic tradition (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and typically are used to investigate causal effects (Bloom, 2008; Singleton & Straits, 2018). The key features in true experimental research design are manipulations between the independent variables and random assignment of participants to the experimental groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Singleton & Straits, 2018). Randomization eliminates bias (Bloom, 2008), and a manipulation check – i.e., a test to determine the effectiveness of manipulations

– commonly is used to ensure that the intended experiment truly works (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, experiments were used in Sub-studies 2 and 3, and their methods are introduced below in more detail.

Sub-study 2, reported in Article 2 (Reinikainen et al., 2020), examined an influencer endorsement's effects on brand trust and purchase intention, as well as the moderating role of audience comments. A theoretical framework was created with five hypotheses. The independent variables in the framework were PSR with an influencer and audience comments. Influencer credibility was treated as a mediator, and brand trust and purchase intention as the outcome variables. Audience comments also were tested as a moderator in the relationship between PSR and influencer credibility.

An online survey was created, with respondents randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. In the first condition, respondents were shown a video of a female YouTuber endorsing a health service for young women, along with positive comments praising the YouTuber and the content. In the second condition, the respondents viewed the same video, but were not shown any comments. The survey link was shared on a Snapchat channel of a media house that featured the YouTuber, with an invitation to attend a study measuring consumer attitudes. The survey guidelines were the same for respondents in both experimental conditions, and no misleading or deceptive guidelines were provided. Altogether, the final data sample included 302 responses with adequately filled-out questionnaires.

After watching the video and either seeing (Condition 1) or not seeing (Condition 2) audience comments, the respondents assessed their PSR with the influencer (Lee & Watkins, 2016), the perceived credibility of the influencer (Munnukka et al., 2016), trust toward the brand endorsed in the video (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and the intention to purchase the service endorsed in the video (Lee & Watkins, 2016). The respondents in the condition with the comments also were given an "I read the comments" survey to check for manipulation. All the items were measured using seven-point Likert scales (1 = fully disagree, 7 = fully agree).

A confirmatory factor analysis found that the measured variables received loading values between 0.62 and 0.94, thereby loading well to their assigned factors and confirming validity and the used scales' unidimensionality. The composite reliabilities were over 0.9, thereby demonstrating good internal reliability. As the average variance extracted (AVE) values also were above the cut-off value (0.5), and the square root of the AVEs exceeded the between-factor correlations, all constructs were assessed to demonstrate adequate convergent and discriminant validity (see Ping, 2004). All five hypotheses were confirmed.

Sub-study 3, reported in Article 3 (Reinikainen et al., 2021), examined the influencer and brand betrayals' direct and indirect effects on brand trust, purchase intention, influencer coolness, and PSR. Two theoretical frameworks were created, with 12 hypotheses altogether. The independent variable in the first framework was influencer betrayal. PSR and influencer coolness were treated as mediators, with brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase intention as the outcome variables. In the second framework, brand betrayal was the independent variable. Brand trust and brand attitude were treated as mediators, and influencer coolness and PSR as the outcome variables.

To gather the data, an online survey was created, and 250 adults were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in a survey measuring consumer attitudes. No misleading or deceptive guidelines were given at any point. The respondents first were asked to think about an SMI and a brand that they favored and followed on social media. Next, the respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two betrayal scenarios. In the influencer betrayal scenario, the respondents were asked to imagine a situation in which the influencer whom they favored and followed had intentionally misled them by purchasing followers, thereby pretending to be a more popular, attractive, and authentic influencer than in reality. The respondents also were informed that the influencer in question had endorsed a brand that the respondent favored. In the brand betrayal scenario, the respondents were asked to imagine that their favored brand had positioned itself as an ethical brand, but instead was revealed to have been neglecting codes of conduct and participating in unethical and incompetent practices. The respondents also were informed that an SMI whom they liked had endorsed the brand in question. Next, the respondents in both conditions were asked to answer items about their level of perceived betrayal concerning the influencer or the brand (Tan et al., 2021), their PSR with the influencer (Munnukka et al., 2019), the perceived level of influencer coolness (Warren et al., 2019), and their perceived brand attitude (Priester & Petty, 2003), brand trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and purchase intention (Söderlund & Öhman, 2003). All items were measured on seven-point Likert scales (1 = fully disagree, 7 = fully agree). Notably, at the end of the survey, all respondents were reminded that the scenarios were fictional to avoid any negative feelings toward SMIs or brands.

A manipulation check found that the respondents in the influencer betrayal condition reported lower PSR levels with the influencer and perceived influencer coolness, while respondents in the brand betrayal scenario reported lower levels of brand attitude, brand trust, and purchase intention. Therefore, the manipulation was deemed successful. All the measurement models indicated sufficient reliability and validity, as all the Cronbach's alphas and composite reliabilities exceeded the value of 0.85. A discriminant validity analysis found that the square root of AVEs exceeded the correlations between all pairs of constructs. Both the influencer betrayal and brand betrayal models fit all the data well. The structural models then were used to test the 12 hypotheses and confirm both direct and indirect effects.

3.3 Research evaluation: reliability and validity

Assessing reliability and validity are common ways to evaluate research quality. *Reliability* refers to a study's consistency, whereas *validity* entails a study's accuracy (Singleton & Straits, 2018, p. 131). However, how reliability and validity are ensured in practice varies between qualitative and quantitative studies. According to Hammersley (2008, p. 42), "the general standards in terms of which both the processes and products of research should be judged are the same whichever approach is employed."

In qualitative research, reliability might be difficult to establish, particularly in sole-author studies. Typical ways to ensure qualitative reliability include, e.g., ensuring that the interview transcripts do not include mistakes, writing memos during the analysis, and cross-checking codes (Gibbs, 2007). In this research, qualitative reliability concerns Sub-study 1. Considering that the study has multiple authors, assessing reliability was somewhat easier than in a sole-author study. Also, no outside transcribing service was used to ensure that the interviews were transcribed and understood correctly. The research process also included taking notes along the way and writing a case report to integrate various data sources. The first author was responsible for the initial data analysis. The preliminary findings then were discussed together with all authors, then adjusted accordingly.

In quantitative research, one of the main concerns about reliability is related to the measures: Are they measuring the operationalized concepts consistently? While several measurements are seldom possible, ways to improve reliability include pre-testing measures with a small target group and ensuring that the instructions to respondents are clear (Singleton & Straits, 2018, pp. 137–138). In this case, both Sub-studies 2 and 3 included a small pre-test with student respondents to ensure that the survey instructions and questions were understood correctly and that the experimental conditions worked. The test respondents also were asked to provide feedback about the studies. In Sub-study 2, the responses on the pre-test were pre-analyzed to determine whether the measures seemed to be working. Finally, appropriate adjustments were made to the survey questionnaires based on the feedback.

Qualitative validity means seeking to avoid obvious mistakes in the research process and generate a rich data set (Gibbs, 2007). A systematic approach and transparency in the research process help demonstrate a study's rigor (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 18). Triangulation, respondent validation, constant comparisons (Gibbs, 2007), and self-reflection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) are other ways to enhance validity in qualitative research. In Sub-study 1, several data sources were used, as is typical for case studies. The results were discussed in cooperation with all authors, and respondent validation also was used, as the final report was given to the interviewees for examination to ensure that the interpretations were in line with their perspectives on the events. Small adjustments to some expressions were made based on respondents' feedback.

In assessing quantitative studies' validity, such as Sub-studies 2 and 3, in which relationships between concepts are measured, it is relevant to examine the concepts' nature and meanings, and whether the concepts' operationalization properly represents these meanings (Singleton & Straits, 2018, p. 138). In practice, this means assessing whether the study truly measures what it intends to measure. One way of tackling this issue in Sub-studies 2 and 3 was to use existing scales that had been used and, thus, tested in previous studies. In experimental research, validity also might be threatened either through internal or external factors that compromise the conclusion that the manipulated variable affected the measured outcome (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 169). In Sub-studies 2 and 3, these possible threats were tackled, e.g., through random assignment and manipulation checks. The use of online surveys also helped with the possible threat of "cross-contamination" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 170), as the respondents in different experimental groups had no knowledge of each other, which might happen, e.g., in a physical laboratory setting.

As a final note on whether this study presented results on what was meant to be presented, one concern can be raised regarding Sub-studies 2 and 3. These two studies tried to explain the connection between influencer endorsements and possible attitude changes and behaviors but were unable to say anything about possible organizational goal attainment related to the endorsements. Therefore, in Sub-study 2, in which an actual video featuring an influencer endorsement on YouTube was used as the stimulus, there was no way of knowing whether building brand trust was the collaborating organization's actual goal. The results indicate that the video was likely to add feelings of trust toward the organization presented in the video, but whether that was the endorsement partnership's intention is not known. The connection of Sub-studies 2 and 3 to organizational goal attainment and strategic communication is here made by the author.

4 PUBLICATION SUMMARIES

This chapter lays out the results of the three sub-studies and discusses them in relation to this study's research question: How does strategic SMI communication create opportunities and risks for organizational intangible assets?

4.1 Study 1: The perceived risks and rewards of strategic SMI communication

This study examined how and why four Finnish public sector organizations – the Finnish Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of the Interior, National Institute for Health and Welfare THL, and the City of Helsinki – engaged in strategic SMI communication during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Through a multiple case study approach, the paper analyzed the reasons why the organizations campaigned with the help of SMIs, the ways how the campaigns were executed, and the perceived opportunities and risks presented from the campaigns.

The study was built on three cornerstones. The first is that public sector organizations rely heavily on legitimacy, understood here as a license to operate provided by citizens (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019) – one that is vital to public organizations' existence (Wæraas, 2020). The second is that public communication campaigns are a common way for public organizations to reach out to citizens (Werder, 2020) and to build and support their legitimacy. The third is that public sector organizations typically are attuned to anticipating various kinds of risks (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016). Failing to recognize, manage, and communicate risks effectively, whether a natural disaster or an administrative scandal, might damage the organization's legitimacy (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). Thus, risk management is crucial for public sector organizations.

The four studied case organizations engaged altogether in six campaigns, which included SMIs. Two organizations (Prime Minister's Office, THL) resorted to influencer public relations tactics, in that they mainly offered SMIs information about the pandemic, including disease prevention, without requiring the influencers to publish the messages on their own channels. The influencers also were not offered any monetary compensation. However, the Ministry of the Interior and City of Helsinki utilized influencer marketing tactics, as both organizations hired carefully chosen SMIs to publish certain kinds of content on their own channels, including content that, e.g., encouraged followers to stay at home during the May Day celebrations and promoted mask wearing when using public transportation.

The results indicated that a key driver for the four organizations to campaign with the help of SMIs was the pressure to provide all citizens with accurate COVID-19-related communication quickly and to influence citizens' behavior to prevent viral spread. As this implies "significance" (see, e.g., Zerfass et al., 2018), these campaigns can be interpreted as strategic SMI communication. The perceived pressure also suggests that from the studied organizations' perspective, there were citizens (mainly young people) who were perceived as unattainable through traditional public sector communication methods, such as media communication and organizations' own social media channels. SMIs, on the other hand, were viewed as occupying "a liminal space" (see Chadwick, 2017, p. 199) located somewhere between traditional and social media. Thus, the study suggests that strategic SMI communication offered the studied public organizations a chance to conquer these spaces and foster their legitimacy with the help of SMIs.

The results also elicited another possibility for public sector organizations: approaching citizens in emotion-centric ways. While public sector communication traditionally has been rather information-centric (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020; Werder, 2020), the new online environment is attuned for emotions (Papacharissi, 2015). The results demonstrated that with SMIs' help, the studied organizations aimed to build a sense of community and appeal to citizens on an emotional level. This suggests that SMIs can bring public organizations new possibilities to maintain their legitimacy through, e.g., community building, and extend their methods of influence from information-centric to emotion-centric.

The third key observation from the study was that the organizations used several risk management measures. First, the campaigns can be viewed as risk management as such: The organizations claimed that without including SMIs in their communication efforts, accurate and current COVID-19-related communication potentially would not have reached all citizens, thereby possibly endangering many lives. This suggests that leaving SMIs out of the strategic communication toolbox possibly could have been risky – and maybe even resulted in decreased legitimacy. Risk management measures within the campaigns included preparing Q&A sheets to explain campaigns' purpose and execution, and to ensure that the influencers involved in the campaigns did not post content that the organizations would not have been able to endorse. The occurrence of such events also could have diminished the organizations' legitimacy. An analysis of these risk measures found that risk management was implemented on several levels and contemplated in terms of citizens, organizations, campaigns, and SMIs involved in the campaigns. Thus, there was an attempt to secure legitimacy both through and within the campaigns.

The study also raised the issue of public sector organizations using influencer marketing tactics to change citizens' behaviors and foster legitimacy. The results indicated that public sector organizations are well on their way to adopting the same kinds of marketing and public relations approaches commonly used in the corporate sector. The question of whether tax-funded organizations should engage in strategic communication and practices that resemble corporate public relations often has been controversial (Arolainen, 2014; Hiltunen, 2021). Furthermore, the study also questioned the mandate given to SMIs: How much control over their messaging can public sector organizations truly give to SMIs, particularly during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic?

4.2 Study 2: Building trust through SMI communication

This study examined how a paid endorsement by an SMI (a YouTuber in this case) relates to trust toward the brand that the influencer has endorsed, along with an intention to purchase a service that the influencer has endorsed. Thus, the article aims to explain how endorsement effectiveness works. Central influencer-related constructs in the article are PSR and influencer credibility, with trust as the endorsement's outcome.

In studies on influencer marketing, PSR refer to the imaginary, one-sided relationships that followers create with SMIs (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Lee & Watkins, 2016). It is common for followers to develop intimate feelings toward influencers, as if they "know" the influencers, even though they have never met them in real life (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Lueck, 2015). Influencer credibility is a source characteristic construct that encompasses perceived trustworthiness, similarity, and expertise of the influencer (Munnukka et al., 2019; Sakib et al., 2020). This study's outcome variable, trust, is understood as stakeholders' willingness "to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function" (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82). This implies confidence in an organization's reliability, along with a certain sense of vulnerability (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2020).

This study found that in the context of a paid endorsement on YouTube, PSR with the influencer and the perceived credibility of the influencer are related positively with each other, suggesting that those who have a strong PSR with an SMI also are likely to find this influencer highly credible. This relationship is strengthened further by positive audience comments. The influencer's credibility is, in turn, connected to trust in the brand that the influencer has endorsed. Thus, the more credible the influencer is perceived to be, the more likely stakeholders are to trust the organization that the influencer has endorsed. This ultimately also leads to stronger behavioral intentions, such as purchase intention, thereby benefitting the organization financially.

This article's key theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating the moderating role of audience comments in the relationship between PSR and influencer credibility. The study demonstrates that if followers see positive comments about the influencer and the content, this makes the relationship between PSR and influencer credibility even stronger. Thus, influencer credibility can be advanced through interactions between the influencer and their followers. This dynamic also describes a path from the influencer endorsement to brand trust and, subsequently, to purchase intention. The findings suggest that influencer credibility is an important component of influencer capital and that an actively participating audience plays a key role in building this capital. In terms of intangible assets, the study found that trusting relationships between SMIs and their followers can contribute to trust in organizations as well.

Managerially, the study highlights the importance of audience comments in building influencer credibility, brand trust, and purchase intention. The study indicates that the best partners for organizations are SMIs who can build intimate relationships with their followers and entice them into interaction, and the best kind of paid endorsement is the kind that induces positive comments from audience members. The latter suggests that SMIs should be given as much agency as possible to create content because paid endorsements that feel inauthentic and superimposed are not likely to attract audience comments, thereby possibly diminishing the endorsement's effectiveness.

4.3 Study 3: Risking trust through SMI communication

This article examines influencer and brand betrayals' effects on brand trust and PSR, respectively, and introduces two theoretical frameworks that capture these effects. This study's central constructs are influencer and brand betrayals, PSR, influencer coolness, and brand trust. Influencer betrayal is derived from the concept of brand betrayal (Reimann et al., 2018; Tan et al., 2021) and is understood here as a moral violation that can damage the relationships between influencers and their followers. The concept of influencer coolness is derived from the concept of brand coolness (Warren et al., 2019) and defined as a desirable success factor for SMIs comprising dimensions of originality, appeal, extraordinariness, high status, iconicity, popularity, and high energy.

The paper introduced two betrayal scenarios. In the first, an SMI was revealed to have perpetrated a betrayal (purchasing followers and, thus, pretending to be a more popular influencer than in reality), and in the second, a brand was revealed to have perpetrated a betrayal (engaging in unethical activities while pretending to be a responsible brand). The first scenario's results demonstrate what happens to followers who experience betrayal by an influencer, indicating that influencer betrayal negatively affects PSR with the influencer and perceived influencer coolness. These also were reflected in trust and purchase intention toward a brand that the influencer endorsed. The second scenario's results indicated that brand betrayal negatively affects brand trust and purchase intention, and that these negative effects also can reflect on the influencer who endorsed the brand. Thus, brand betrayals might end up hurting both influencer coolness and, ultimately, the PSR that followers have established with the influencer.

This article's theoretical contributions lie in introducing the concepts of influencer betrayal and influencer coolness, then testing them empirically. The results demonstrate that after a transgressive event, followers can feel betrayed by an SMI, which can have repercussions both for the influencer and the brand. The results also suggest that influencer coolness is an essential concept in paid endorsements and that coolness can be affected negatively by both influencer and brand betrayals. Based on this, it can be claimed that coolness is a component of influencer capital, as it can contribute to organizations' intangible assets, such as trust.

Managerially, this study found that endorsements can go wrong: Influencers caught in questionable behaviors can end up hurting the brands that they have endorsed, and unethical brands can hurt the influencers with whom they have partnered with. Thus, the damage to intangible assets and influencer capital can spill over from influencers to brands and vice versa. This suggests that organizations keen on managing their intangible assets should remember that they are responsible not only for their own assets, but also partly for influencer capital, comprising the perceptions that followers have about influencers and the relationships that influencers have with their followers. This so-called "collaboration responsibility" also should extend to stakeholders and organizations are wise to consider whether stakeholders are better off after being exposed to the endorsement.

5 DISCUSSION

This study aimed to combine theory on strategic SMI communication and organizational intangible assets and build further understanding about partnerships between organizations and SMIs and their effects. The study's research question was: **How does strategic SMI communication create opportunities and risks for organizational intangible assets?**

The results from Sub-study 1 and Sub-study 2 indicate that through strategic SMI communication, it is possible for organizations to foster their intangible assets by harnessing the power of influencer capital that comprises the influencer's relationships with their followers and the perceptions, such as credibility and coolness, that the followers have of the influencer. However, Sub-study 3 suggested that strategic SMI communication can also backfire. If the influencer's relationships and perceptions about the influencer somehow are damaged, trust in the organization that the influencer has endorsed is in danger of eroding. This highlights the fact that organizations planning to engage in SMI communication should pay a lot of attention to the choice of SMIs and try to address the impact of potential negative events in advance.

Furthermore, there also might be risks involved if organizations rule out SMIs altogether from their strategic communication efforts, as was suggested in Sub-study 1. The exclusion of SMIs possibly can lead to missing certain key stakeholder groups and failing to approach others in authentic ways. This also might be harmful to the maintenance of organizational intangibles. The main findings of the three sub-studies are encapsulated in Figure 3.

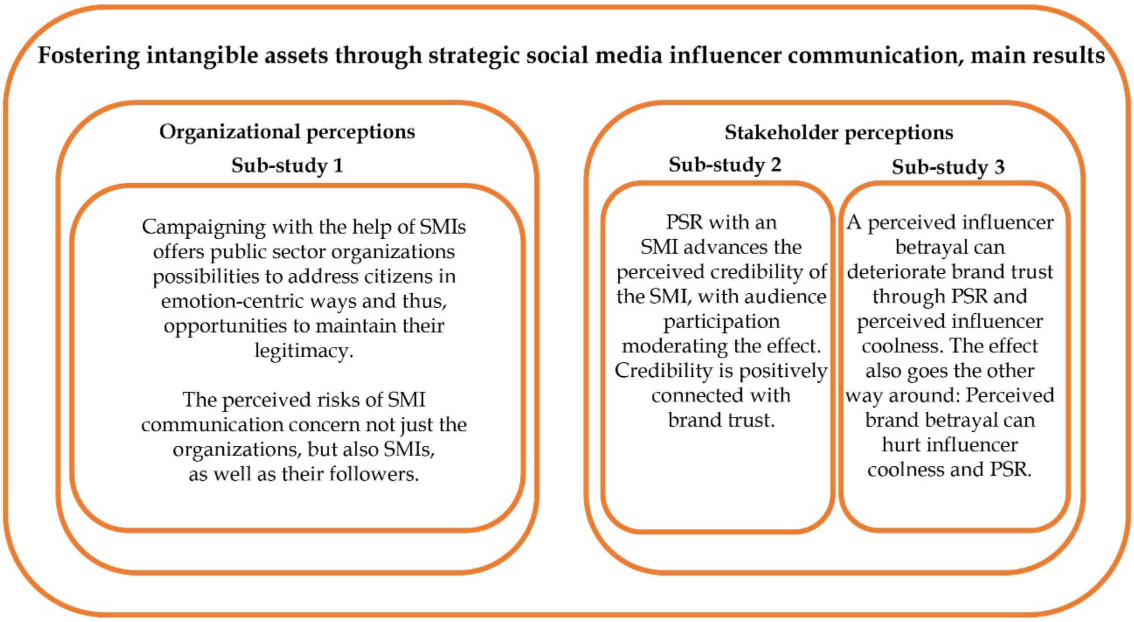

Figure 3. The main results of the three sub-studies

Based on these results, it can be asserted that fostering intangible assets through strategic SMI communication is a balancing act between possible risks and rewards (see Figure 4). The rewards for organizations include the possibility of strengthening intangible assets, e.g., through increased stakeholder trust or legitimacy. The possible risks include that intangibles can be endangered, as partnerships with SMIs also can lead to decreased stakeholder trust. It's also important to notice that strategic SMI communication can elicit both positive and negative effects on SMIs and their followers, and these risks and rewards also should be considered when entering partnerships with SMIs.

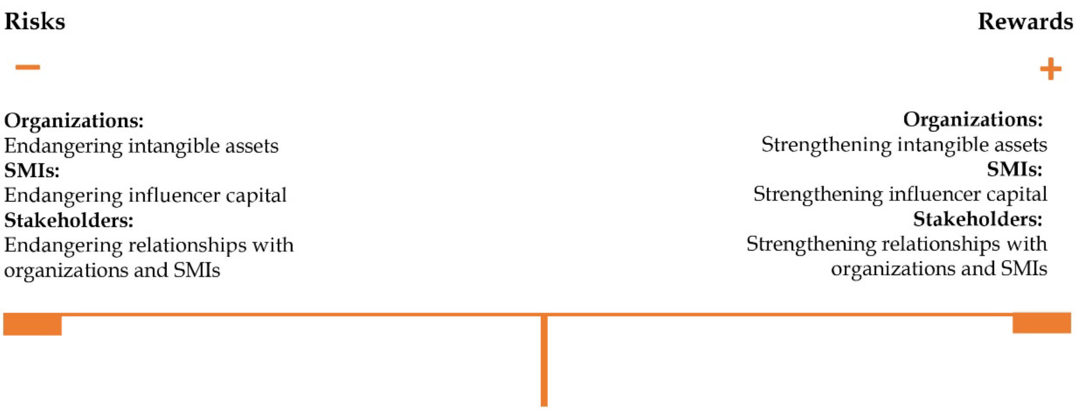

Figure 4. Balancing the risks and rewards of strategic SMI communication

In the best-case scenario, strategic SMI communication means that followers can get to know their favorite influencers in even more intimate ways than before and strengthen bonds between influencers and their followers. However, if something goes wrong, e.g., through transgressive behaviors, SMI communication might deteriorate these trusting relationships, eat away influencer capital, and leave followers feeling betrayed. This connects with Davies and Hobbs' (2020) thoughts on the possible uses and misuses of SMIs, i.e., when executed carefully, SMI communication can be a source of fruitful interaction and trusting relationships, but unethical practices can lead to poor outcomes. The results also suggest that responsible organizations analyze SMI communication not only from their own perspective and in terms of their own intangible assets, but also in terms of possible consequences for SMIs and stakeholders.

5.1 Theoretical implications

While previous studies have reported many outcomes from strategic SMI communication – most of them positive – this study is one of the first to introduce these outcomes from the perspective of intangible assets, along with considering the possible risks and negative effects that SMI communication may introduce to organizations and their intangible assets. As managing intangibles has been defined as a key aspect of strategic communication (Dodd, 2016; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017), this perspective offers new avenues for strategic SMI communication and a way to connect SMI communication to organizations' value creation. The results also indicate that SMIs offer possibilities for organizations to foster their intangible assets, suggesting that SMIs could be viewed as *agents of intangible assets.* This idea can be seen as broadening the ways of how both SMIs and SMI communication have previously been understood and defined.

Defining and understanding SMIs as "endorsers" (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90) or as people who "integrate advertorials" into their content (Abidin, 2016, p. 3) can be reductive when considering the opportunities that SMIs could offer organizations. Enke and Borchers (2019, p. 267) have already expanded these definitions by outlining SMIs as "third-party actors," which better demonstrates the diversity of SMIs and highlights the fact that SMIs are able to offer organizations more than just endorsement deals. This way of thinking is highlighted by the fact that Enke and Borchers (2019) present a number of roles that influencers can take on in SMI communication. Content creator and distributor are among the most obvious roles, but in addition, SMIs can also act as moderators between organizations and their stakeholders, and as campaign consultants or even SEO-providers for organizations (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Borchers & Enke, 2021). This study also highlights a new role that influencers can take on in SMI communication: A community builder. The results of Sub-study 1 showed that SMI communication provided an opportunity for the studied public sector organizations to build a sense of community among citizens. It is often difficult for public sector organizations to deal with the emotions of citizens, but this is made possible through SMI communication.

This broadened view of SMIs as agents of intangible assets and as more than mere endorsers suggests that organizations might want to reconsider, how they engage with SMIs and what kind of strategic goal attainment they use SMIs for. Organizations could, e.g., learn new things from influencers regarding social media and interaction with various stakeholders, thereby developing the organization's intellectual and knowledge capital. Or, have SMIs facilitate conversations between the organization's experts and audiences, thus growing the social capital of the organization. Strategic SMI communication has traditionally focused on various brand-related outcomes and perceptions, such as brand attitude or engagement (see Chapter 2.1.4). However, the perspective of intangible assets raises the question of whether strategic SMI communication outcomes could be thought of more broadly, covering not only outcomes related, e.g., to purchase intention (see, e.g., Lee & Watkins, 2016; Munnukka et al., 2019) among young people, but also to internal goals, such as marketing knowledge or creativity and the innovativeness of employees. These ideas are introduced in Table 3.

Table 3. SMIs as endorsers and as agents of intangible assets

SMI role	SMI communication activities	Outcomes
SMIs as endorsers	SMIs test, present, and endorse products and services on their own social media accounts SMIs appear in advertisements run by organizations, both online and offline SMIs participate in events organized by organizations SMIs appear as brand advocates for organizations	Brand attitude, brand trust, purchase intention
SMIs as agents of intangible assets	SMIs create communities around them, allowing emotional encounters between organizations and stakeholders SMIs facilitate conversations between organizations and stakeholders SMIs provide market knowledge for organizations, and participate in co-designing products and services SMIs consult organizations in their social media efforts and interaction with their stakeholders	Stakeholder trust, legitimacy, social capital, market knowledge, expertise in social media

Combining strategic SMI communication and intangible assets can expand the understanding of SMI communication. Previous studies have applied the relationship management perspective (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019) to SMI communication and outlined SMI communication as a way to build positive media coverage (Pang et al., 2016). It can be considered that this somewhat limits the scope of SMI communication and narrows SMI communication down to a new form of media relations. However, the introduction of SMI communication as a means of fostering intangible assets suggests that SMI communication covers more than just endorsements, influencer marketing, influencer PR, and online coverage, further expanding the possibilities of strategic SMI communication and thus benefiting both organizations and influencers.

This kind of thinking also opens up new possibilities for SMIs, who have expressed concern over whether endorsement deals with organizations might compromise their integrity and authenticity in the eyes of their followers (Liljander et al., 2015; Lövheim, 2012). After all, using their own platforms and personas to endorse brands and organizations publicly may erode their influencer capital in the long run. However, assuming more often the role of, e.g., a social media consultant and introducing themselves to organizations more often as *specialists in online interaction and engagement,* as well as *experts in social media capitalization,* might help them protect their influencer capital, while still preserving a source of revenue.

Influencer capital is presented in this study as kind of *an equivalent* to organizational intangible assets. In the same way that organizational intangibles are connected to organizational tangible assets, value creation, and the bottom line (Gatzert, 2015; Rautiainen & Luoma-aho, 2021), influencer capital also can bring SMIs concrete value and resources through partnerships with organizations. As suggested above, SMIs worry about their influencer capital and likely want to foster it in the same way organizations want to foster their intangibles. While strategic SMI communication offers a way for organizations to achieve such efforts, this effect goes both ways: It seems that endorsement deals can help influencers build their influencer capital further (see Reinikainen et al., 2020). Positive effects, therefore, move back and forth between the two.

However, as Sub-study 3 indicates, it is not only positive perceptions that spill over, but also negative feelings, which are transferred between organizations and influencers as well. Therefore, it is suggested that in addition to strategic SMI communication being "an interactive, ongoing process" (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019, p. 291), it also entails a constant interplay between influencer capital and organizational intangibles, with positive and negative influences moving back and forth (see Figure 5). This interaction is also the place where value creation takes place – while also allowing for the potential dilution of value. It can therefore be said that SMI communication is an essential issue for the strategic management of organizations.

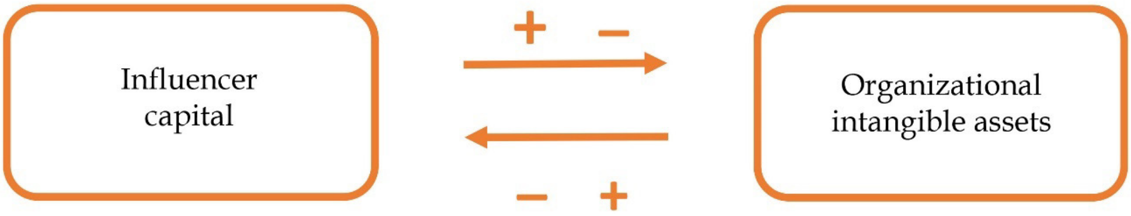

Figure 5. The interplay between influencer capital and organizational intangible assets

Canel and Luoma-aho (2019) stated that fostering intangible assets can make organizations “antifragile.” While this may be the ultimate goal of strategic SMI communication, the results of this study indicate that SMI communication also can be a source of fragility for organizations and, therefore, a risk for intangible assets. Theoretical support for this notion also can be found from Taleb (2014), who originally coined the term *antifragile organizations*. He listed several possible sources of fragility, naming the “agency problem” as one of the major sources (Taleb, 2014, p. 430).

This notion takes us back to agency theory (see Chapter 2.1.2). An agency problem presents itself when one party in the agent-principal relationship is not motivated to act in the other party’s best interests or acts in a way that is not consistent with the other party’s goals (Bergen et al., 1992). As already demonstrated, this also can happen with partnerships between SMIs and organizations, i.e., their goals might clash and end up competing with each other. If agency theory is applied to strategic SMI communication from this perspective, it could be alleged that organizations and SMIs often are interested mainly in maintaining and building their own assets and capital, respectively. This seems to suggest that in addition to an equivalent to intangible assets, influencer capital also can be viewed as *an opponent* of them. This further raises the question of whether the view of strategic SMI communication as relationship building (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019) or as a mutually beneficial collaboration between organizations and influencers (see, e.g., Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021) is rather idealistic in the end. In actuality, the competitive nature of the relationship between organizations and SMIs seems rather prominent from the agency theory perspective.

However, as already stated in the Literature review (2.1.2), agency is, in fact, a more complex issue. Instead of the more traditional way of understanding agency (“acting for the principal”, see Brummans, 2017, p. 3) and concentrating on conflicting goals, the intangible view suggests considering the agency of SMIs more broadly. The true value of strategic SMI communication is likely created when SMIs have the opportunity to "act otherwise", "make a difference" (Iverson et al., 2017, p. 44) and even shape situations, instead of merely stepping into them (Cheney & Ritz, 2017, p. 194). In addition, “acting for,” is substituted with “act through” and “act with” (Cooren, 2017, p. 142), which entails not only the relationship between the organization and the SMI, but also embraces the followers of the SMI and includes them as co-agents in the relationship.

5.2 Managerial implications

In addition to theoretical contributions, this study also aimed to contribute to SMI communication management – an issue of interest to many communication and marketing practitioners at the moment. One managerial aspect is the question of how to partner with SMIs who can best help foster organizational intangible assets. The most popular influencers receive plenty of business proposals, have become very selective in choosing their collaborators, and are keen on preserving their "coolness" in their followers' eyes (Ember, 2015). This suggests that organizations need to understand where SMIs are coming from and identify the features and capabilities on which they capitalize on. Organizations that understand influencer capital and can identify how a partnership with an SMI might support or even grow this capital are likely to be in a better position when competing for the best influencers. Offering SMIs roles that go beyond the traditional endorsement role and allowing them a wide range of agency might be ways to do this.

Simultaneously, possible negative repercussions from SMI communication also should be considered. Partnerships can go wrong if influencers engage in questionable behaviors. This highlights the importance of choosing influencers carefully, as well as raising the issue of reciprocal responsibility with the influencer, i.e., openly communicating about how both the organization and influencer carry a responsibility over the other's reputation. Furthermore, influencer endorsements also can become harmful due to outside factors, e.g., campaigns can be highjacked through a hashtag takeover (Reinikainen et al., forthcoming). Therefore, it is advisable that organizations put together a risk management plan that anticipates various risks related to the partnership with the influencer.

A further consideration regarding risk management is the misinformation that SMIs may share with their followers. Recent global events (COVID-19, war in Ukraine) have shown that influencers are eager to engage in debates on current, social and political events (Dang & Culliford, 2022; Stokel-Walker, 2022). At the same time, many influential individuals are also prone to the dissemination of misinformation (Abidin et al., 2021). Naturally, this also has implications for organizations. For example, partnering with SMIs who share conspiracy theories or health-related misinformation might lead to conflicts with stakeholders. Vigilance is therefore needed when considering whether SMI is an appropriate candidate for strategic SMI communication.

Despite the risks, it is noteworthy that it is potentially also risky for organizations to rule out the utilization of SMIs altogether. For example, B2B companies that generally rely on personal connections in their communication and marketing activities are often skeptical about SMI communication. However, studies have shown that because social media has changed the interaction between buyers and sellers, leveraging SMIs can also lead to positive results in

B2B marketing (Melzer & Zech, 2018). On the other hand, stubbornly restricting the utilization of SMI communication could mean a waste of good opportunities.

As SMI communication, and influencer marketing in particular, has become more and more common, there also have been signs that people are getting irritated having to constantly deal with sponsored content on SMIs' platforms (Troot, 2019). Added skepticism toward SMIs is likely to decrease strategic SMI communication's effectiveness, which is why it has been suggested that marketing and communication practitioners should take advantage of combining influencer marketing and word-of-mouth practices on social media (Jamil & Qayyum, 2021). This could be done, e.g., through micro-influencers, i.e., influencers with a small number of committed and faithful followers who typically cater to a tailored, niche market (Cervantes-Guzmán, 2020). This possibly could help avoid situations in which audiences become tired of continuously encountering influencer endorsements that they view as irrelevant to them.

Finally, an important consideration for marketing and communication professionals is how SMIs could be used meaningfully to help fight one of the most crucial challenges of our time: climate change. Influencers have been accused and even shamed for accelerating climate change by promoting fast fashion and unnecessary air travel (Ledel, 2019; Siegle, 2019). Simultaneously, many influencers have been active in speaking out against climate change and using their platforms to share information about the climate crisis (Suuronen et al., 2021). Therefore, communication and marketing professionals could consider how to encourage sustainable consumption and lifestyles with the help of SMIs.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations, but the results also offer several ideas for future studies. First, the case study was conducted under very special circumstances, namely the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation somewhat forced the studied organizations to turn to SMIs and implement campaigns on a very tight schedule. Therefore, how the studied organizations entered the campaigns is rather exceptional. While case studies do not really aim for generalizations, it is important to keep the context in mind when considering this study's results.

Experiments, on the other hand, always raise questions as to whether the results are replicable and whether the designs also would be valid in real-life situations. In Sub-study 2, only one video from one YouTuber was studied, and in Sub-study 3, the scenarios were made up. Thus, the results might have been different with different kinds of influencers, as well as different kinds of scenarios. Therefore, testing the theoretical frameworks in different contexts would help validate the results. Considering that the experiments are also hypothetical in nature, in that they measure intentions and ask respondents to assess their own morals and possible behaviors, this raises questions as to whether the results are truly applicable to real-life situations. For example, would the respondents actually place their trust on the endorsed brand in Sub-study 2, or truly turn their back on the organization, as they claimed in Sub-study 3? It is also important to consider that respondents often have a tendency to respond in ways they think they are expected to respond. This effect might have distorted Sub-study 3's results, in which unethical behavior was catered to respondents.

This study addressed intangible assets in strategic SMI communication, but only one intangible asset, stakeholder trust, was truly tested and measured. Future studies could apply the idea of intangible assets in SMI communication by adopting a wider variety of intangibles, such as innovativeness, creativity, or even organizational culture. In practice, this suggests considering what organizations could learn from SMIs. Many SMIs are not only professional content producers, but also experts on engagement, interaction, and relationship building on social media – all intriguing skills from the perspective of strategic communication.

This study also suggests that the relationships between organizations and SMIs could be perceived through agency theory and the principal-agent problem. It would be interesting to examine this further empirically. A possible perspective would be to examine the question of control that often becomes central in influencer endorsements. Organizations are tempted to practice control, but simultaneously, influencer endorsements demand freedom to remain authentic and, thus, effective (Enke & Borchers, 2018). Applying concepts such as self-interest and other-orientation likely would lead to interesting results on how organizations balance between risks and rewards from SMI communication.

This study perceives strategic SMI communication as including three key parties: organizations; SMIs; and stakeholders. In reality, more parties often are involved, with influencer and communication agencies acting as intermediaries between organizations and SMIs, and bringing these actors together. Agencies' role has been examined in previous literature (see, e.g., Borchers & Enke, 2021; Davies & Hobbs, 2020); therefore, it is worth asking whether this perspective should have been included in this study as well. However, the study mainly concerned intangible assets and influencer capital based on stakeholders' perceptions and their relationships with organizations and SMIs, respectively. Agencies' role, while important in business deals between organizations and SMIs, often is invisible to stakeholders. When engaging with influencer content online, followers engage with the influencer and with the organizations endorsed and linked to the content. Followers view the influencer either using services provided by the organization or endorsing the organization and its products. They are often not aware of the processes that have been going on in the background that have led to the content being published. However, while it seems justified to leave agencies out of the examination, future research would be welcome to examine agencies' role in generating relationships between organizations and stakeholders in the context of SMI communication.

Finally, this study revolved around SMI communication's risks and rewards for organizations, but it also would be worth considering possible effects on society at large. While trust seems to spill over in SMI communication in both positive and negative ways, it is reasonable to ask whether trust, and particularly distrust, in organizations and SMIs also could spill over into other walks of life. For example, could feelings of betrayal from influencer transgressions help decay trust in other actors and institutions as well? Trust is a force that keeps societies together (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2020); thus, it is important to foster trust at all levels – with other people, organizations, and various networks. Therefore, future studies also could examine whether wider negative effects are incurred from stakeholders losing their trust in organizations and SMIs.

SUMMARY IN FINNISH

Tämä väitöskirja käsittelee sosiaalisen median vaikuttajien hyödyntämistä organisaatioiden strategisessa viestinnässä. Tutkimus ehdottaa, että strategisen somevaikuttajaviestinnän avulla on mahdollista vaalia organisaatioiden aineettomia pääomia, kuten sidosryhmien luottamusta organisaatiota kohtaan. Samalla tutkimus toteaa, että strateginen somevaikuttajaviestintä voi merkitä myös riskejä organisaatioille ja niiden aineettomille pääomille.

Sosiaalisen median vaikuttajat ovat määritelmällisesti toimijoita, joilla on sosiaalisessa mediassa merkittävä määrä seuraajia, jotka ovat seuraajiensa kanssa säännöllisessä vuorovaikutuksessa ja joilla on kykyä vaikuttaa seuraajiensa asenteisiin ja käyttäytymiseen. Organisaatioiden näkökulmasta sosiaalisen median vaikuttajat on perinteisesti ymmärretty suosittelijoina, jotka tarjoavat organisaatioille mahdollisuuden puhutella erilaisia sidosryhmiä ja edistää organisaatioiden tuotteiden ja/tai palveluiden menekkiä. Tutkimuskirjallisuudessa organisaatioiden keinot hyödyntää vaikuttajia osana tavoitteellista viestintäänsä on käsitteellistetty strategiseksi somevaikuttajaviestinnäksi. Käytännössä strateginen somevaikuttajaviestintä sisältää muun muassa vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin eli toimenpiteet, joihin kuuluu vaikuttajien hyödyntäminen suosittelumarkkinoinnissa. Aiempi, somevaikuttajaviestintää koskeva tutkimus on keskittynyt pääasiassa tarkastelemaan, kuinka ja miksi suosittelumarkkinointi tuottaa positiivisia tuloksia. Vähemmän on tutkittu strategisen somevaikuttajaviestinnän johtamista sekä etiikkaa. Tämä väitöskirja tuottaa viestinnän tutkimuksen kentälle uutta tietoa somevaikuttajaviestinnän negatiivisista vaikutuksista organisaatioille sekä nostaa esiin aiemmassa tutkimuksessa usein ohitetun näkökulman: Julkisyhteisöjen somevaikuttajaviestinnän.

Organisaatioiden aineettomilla pääomilla tarkoitetaan organisaatioiden ei-fyysisiä, uusiutuvia resursseja, kuten tietopääomaa, mainetta ja luottamusta. Aineettomat pääomat syntyvät ihmisten välisessä kanssakäymisessä ja tuottavat organisaatioille lisäarvoa. Organisaatiot voivat vaalia ja kehittää aineettomia pääomiaan viestinnän ja markkinoinnin keinoin. Myös sosiaalisen median vaikuttajilla voidaan ajatella olevan aineetonta pääomaa, joka koostuu vaikuttajan suhteista seuraajiensa kanssa sekä niistä käsityksistä, joita seuraajilla on hänestä. Tämä pääoma tarjoaa vaikuttajille mahdollisuuden kaupankäyntiin organisaatioiden kanssa sekä organisaatioille tilaisuuden vaalia omia aineettomia pääomiaan, kuten sidosryhmien luottamusta.

Tutkimuksen empiirinen osa koostuu kolmesta osatutkimuksesta. Ensimmäinen osatutkimus on tapaustutkimus, joka lähestyy strategista somevaikuttajaviestintää julkisyhteisöjen näkökulmasta. Keskeinen aineeton pääoma tutkimuksessa on organisaatioiden legitimiteetti, ja tutkimuksen keskiössä ovat mahdollisuudet vaalia legitimiteettiä strategisen vaikuttajaviestinnän avulla. Toisessa ja kolmannessa osatutkimuksessa tarkastellaan sidosryhmien näkemyksiä ja selvitetään somevaikuttajaviestinnän positiivisia ja negatiivisia vaikutuksia organisaatioille ja sidosryhmien niitä kohtaan tuntemalle luottamukselle. Tutkimus hyödyntää monimenetelmäisen tutkimuksen metodologiaa (mixed methods): Ensimmäinen osatutkimus on laadullinen ja toinen ja kolmas osatutkimus ovat määrällisiä. Pragmatismi tutkimuksen paradigmana auttaa sovittamaan näiden eri menetelmien näkökulmia yhteen.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että somevaikuttajaviestintä voi tarjota organisaatioille keinon vaalia niiden aineettomia pääomia, mutta samalla somevaikuttajaviestintä voi myös merkitä aineettomien pääomien vaarantumista. Näin ollen strateginen somevaikuttajaviestintä onkin käytännössä usein tasapainottelua uhkien ja mahdollisuuksien välillä. Samalla somevaikuttajaviestintä nähdään organisaation aineettoman pääoman ja vaikuttajapääoman välisenä jatkuvana vuorovaikutuksena.

Esittämällä ajatuksen strategisesta somevaikuttajaviestinnästä keinona vaalia organisaatioiden aineettomia pääomia tutkimus laajentaa ymmärrystä vaikuttajista. Aiempi tutkimus on käsitellyt sosiaalisen median vaikuttajia pääasiassa vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin näkökulmasta, jolloin vaikuttajat typistyvät helposti pelkiksi suosittelijoiksi. Aineettomien pääomien näkökulma sen sijaan tarjoaa somevaikuttajaviestintään ymmärtämiseen laajempia mahdollisuuksia, kuten vaikuttajien hyödyntämisen organisaation sosiaalisen median viestintää kehittävänä konsulttina tai yhteisön rakentajana, joka tuo yhteen organisaation ja sen sidosryhmät.

Tällä tutkimuksella on useita rajoituksia, mutta samalla se avaa väyliä myös jatkotutkimuksille. Eräs rajoituksista liittyy siihen, että ensimmäinen osatutkimus on toteutettu erityisissä olosuhteissa, koronapandemian aikana. Tilanne on väistämättä vaikuttanut tutkittujen organisaatioiden tekemiin valintoihin, jotka ovat tutkimuksen kohteena. Määrällisissä tutkimuksissa on puolestaan hyödynnetty kokeellisia tutkimusasetelmia, mikä herättää aina kysymyksiä siitä, ovatko tulokset toistettavissa tai sellaisenaan sovellettavissa tosielämän tilanteisiin. Näin ollen jatkotutkimuksissa olisikin hyvä tarkastella somevaikuttajaviestinnän vaikutuksia organisaatioihin muissa konteksteissa. Myös vaikuttajien toimijuus osana organisaatioiden strategista viestintää tarjoaa kiinnostavia uusia tutkimuskohteita.

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ORIGINAL PAPERS

I

CONQUERING THE LIMINAL SPACE: STRATEGIC SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER COMMUNICATION IN THE FINNISH PUBLIC SECTOR DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

Hanna Reinikainen, Salla-Maaria Laaksonen, Essi Pöyry, and
Vilma Luoma-aho, (forthcoming)

Social Media for Progressive Public Relations, Routledge

Accepted manuscript

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II

‘YOU REALLY ARE A GREAT BIG SISTER’. – PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, CREDIBILITY, AND THE MODERATING ROLE OF AUDIENCE COMMENTS IN INFLUENCER MARKETING

by

Hanna Reinikainen, Juha Munnukka, Devdeep Maity,
and Vilma Luoma-aho, 2020

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‘You really are a great big sister’ – parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing

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‘You really are a great big sister’ – parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing

This study examines the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing. A YouTube vlog entry by a social media influencer featuring the endorsement of a brand was studied, and an experimental design featuring two conditions related to audience comments was created. The results indicate that a parasocial relationship with the influencer builds the perceived credibility of the influencer, while comments by other audience members moderate the effect. Influencer credibility positively affects brand trust and purchase intention. The findings enhance the understanding of the role of an active audience in influencer marketing.

Keywords: influencer marketing, social media influencers, parasocial relationship, audience comments, credibility, brand trust, purchase intention

Summary statement of contribution

This study illuminates the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing on YouTube by showing comments have an effect on the endorsement an influencer provides through the constructs of parasocial relationship and influencer credibility. Blocking comments on YouTube may therefore affect influencer marketing because seeing other people's comments offers a way for audience members to verify their feelings about influencers and their endorsements.

Introduction

Interaction and relationship building between people is the heart and soul of social media. However, the dark side of online behaviour has led Facebook and Google to restrain interaction on some of their channels. In February 2019, it was announced that YouTube would be disabling comments on videos featuring minors due to predatory behaviour (Binder, 2019). Meanwhile, Instagram tested the hiding of the number of likes and views on people's posts to 'advance people's focus on the posted content' (Fitzgerald, 2019). It has also been claimed that Facebook is considering hiding the number of likes on its News Feed (Constine, 2019). These actions have received mixed responses: while some people feel these actions can create a healthier environment on social media (Graham, 2019), others, including social media influencers, feel disabling comments and interaction might damage their connection with their followers (Alexander, 2019). These actions also raises questions about possible impacts on influencer marketing.

To gain the attention and trust of consumers, brands have increasingly been turning to social media influencers – such as bloggers, YouTubers, and Instagrammers, some of whose social media accounts are followed by millions of people. Many brands have chosen to work with social media influencers because of the challenges they have encountered while engaging consumers directly on social media (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). According to industry reports, the budgets for influencer marketing are growing fast. It has been claimed that, in 2018, marketers spent more than $5 billion on influencer marketing on Instagram alone (InfluencerDB, 2019) and the global ad spend on influencer marketing could be up to $10 billion by 2020 (Mediakix, 2018).

The effectiveness of influencer marketing has intrigued both academics and professionals in recent years. To understand how influencer marketing works, many studies have examined the attributes of the influencers. Factors that have been found to have an effect on the popularity and credibility of influencers, as well as the effectiveness of their endorsements, include social and physical attractiveness, attitude homophily (Lee & Watkins, 2016; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019), trustworthiness, similarity, expertise (Munnukka, Maity, Reinikainen, & Luoma-aho, 2019), the ability to build parasocial relationships (PSRs) with followers (Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme, & LaGroue, 2018), and the perceived authenticity of the influencer and the influencer's content (Pöyry, Pelkonen, Naumanen, & Laaksonen, 2019). Only a few studies have been conducted on the role of the audience members in the effectiveness of influencers' endorsements. Munnukka et al. (2019) included audience participation in their model of endorsement effectiveness and examined how audience members' own participation (liking, sharing, and commenting) created a kind of ownership over the influencer's content and thus supported the effectiveness of the influencer's endorsement. This study builds on the ideas of audience participation and examines the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing. What is the effect of seeing other audience members' comments?

This study specifically examined the endorsement of a brand on YouTube by a young female social media influencer and studied the moderating role of audience comments in the interaction between the PSR with the influencer and influencer's credibility (IC). The variables used to measure the endorsement effectiveness included brand trust (BT) and purchase intention (PI). Although Instagram is currently the social media application where influencers are mostly followed (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), a YouTube vlog entry was chosen for this study to understand the possible effect of disabling comments on endorsement effectiveness.

Literature review

Social media influencers

Over the last decade, social media have offered a megaphone for individual content creators (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013) – making it possible for bloggers, vloggers, and other social media influencers to talk about their lives and express their emotions and opinions to large audiences in an authentic way (Morris & Anderson, 2015). Zoella, PewDiePie, and Casey Neistat are individuals who have made their way to global fame through YouTube videos and gained millions of followers on other social media channels, like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. This has been said to be a sign of a 'demotic turn' – referring to the visibility of ordinary people and their experiences on online and offline media, including user-generated content on social media (Turner, 2010).

Several definitions of social media influencers have emerged in recent years. One of the first definitions came from Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg (2011, p. 90); they defined social media influencers as a 'new type of independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media applications. In addition to the ability to influence, personal branding (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016), a large number of followers (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019), and the ability to monetise their following (Abidin, 2016) have been proposed as defining characteristics of social media influencers. In addition, Enke and Borchers (2019) highlighted the influencers' relationship-building capabilities and interaction with followers.

Social media influencers, such as YouTubers, build connections with their followers by addressing them directly and using a conversational style (Tolson, 2010). Self-disclosure adds to the influencers' perceived authenticity (Ferchaud et al., 2018) and encourages the audience's trust and feelings of intimacy (Huang, 2015). This, in turn, invites interaction, and audience members often seek to engage with influencers by, for example, commenting on, liking, or sharing the influencer's social media posts. This kind of participation by audience members has been found to be positively associated with the formation of PSRs between audience members and social media influencers (Chung & Cho, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019).

Social media influencers are not only able to attract large audiences but also act as efficient marketers (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). Endorsing brands has proven very beneficial, both for social media influencers themselves and the brands. Brands can profit from the co-operation with influencers through, for example, heightened brand attitude (Munnukka et al., 2019), brand perception, purchase intention (Lee & Watkins, 2016), and a positive effect on the brand's ranking on search engines (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). For the influencers, co-operation with brands offers a way to monetise their fame (Liljander, Gummerus, & Söderlund, 2015) and possibly even further expand their influence. However, the monetary incentive is just one of the motivations driving influencers. Community building, acting as an advocate, and helping followers with their lives have also been found to motivate influencers (Archer & Harrigan, 2016).

It seems using social media influencers as endorsers might be even more effective than using traditional celebrities, especially when it comes to the younger generations (Southgate, 2017). Previous studies have shown that social media influencers may have a greater impact on purchase decisions than traditional celebrities, because social media influencers are perceived as more credible and relatable (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Fashion bloggers have even been referred to as 'fashionable friends' (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011), highlighting the intimacy of the relationship between influencers and their audiences. As the feelings of intimacy grow, the influencer may become an 'imaginary friend', one who is not perceived to be talking about brands to conduct advertising but give advice on how to create a certain lifestyle through the use of brands (Lueck, 2015).

Parasocial relationships

PSR is a concept originally coined to explain the experience of a face-to-face relationship television, film, or radio audiences may have with media performers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSRs are imaginary relationships with media performers that begin with spending time with the performer through media consumption and that are characterised by perceived relational development with the performer and knowing the performer well (Brown, 2015, p. 275). As the experience evolves, media consumption becomes ritual-like and an important part of the audience member's life (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). For example, soap opera characters are often seen as familiar friends who regularly appear in people's living rooms (Sood & Rogers, 2000).

The origins of PSRs lie in the experience of parasocial interaction (PSI) – referring to an illusion of interaction, 'a simulacrum of conversational give and take' (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215), with a media performer. An illusion of eye contact through the camera and straight verbal and bodily address may trigger the experience of an actual interaction with the performer, luring the audience member into adjusting his or her own behaviour accordingly (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Other methods of creating the experience of PSI include developing the feeling of a personal, private, and informal conversation (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956), as well as openness and interactivity (Labrecque, 2014). Much like the televisual context, talking directly to the camera, greeting the audience (Frobenius, 2011), making eye contact with the audience and using eye-level angles (Zhang, 2018) are ways in which vloggers on YouTube, for example, can also build PSI and PSRs with their followers. YouTube has even been referred to as a ‘technology of intimacy’ (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 309), highlighting the illusion of closeness the videos create.

The spectrum of PSRs is wide, and like social relationships, they range from parasocial friendships – liking and trusting the media performer, feeling solidarity with the media performer, and desiring self-disclosure from and communication with the media performer – to parasocial love, which entails strong emotional responses and even romantic desires involving the media performer (Tukachinsky, 2010). Nevertheless, PSRs are not always positive in nature, and the audience can experience such relationships with performers they do not like as well (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Therefore, negative relational behaviours, such as criticism, should also be taken into account when examining PSRs (Sanderson, 2009).

Both PSI and PSRs can be very powerful and can affect an audience member’s identity, lifestyle, attitude, and behaviour (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Parasocial experiences can, for example, add to the enjoyment generated by the media content (Jin, 2011; Xiang, Zheng, Lee, & Zhao, 2016), and the audience members’ level of concentration (Yoo, Kwon, & Lee, 2016), affect message acceptance (Kim, Zhang, & Zhang, 2016), draw audience members back to the content, and make them spend longer periods of time with the content (Quintero Johnson & Patnoe-Woodley, 2016). A PSR with an influencer also moderates the role of persuasion knowledge (Hwang & Zhang, 2018), implying that audiences may be less bothered by brand endorsements made by influencers perceived as ‘friends’.

Parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships on social media

According to Horton and Wohl (1956, p. 215), the defining characteristic of PSI is the lack of reciprocity. In the traditional media environment, where real-time feedback was impossible, this definition was non-problematic. However, because social media channels are reciprocal in nature, the question arises as to whether it is possible to apply a concept that originated in the 1950s to the context of social media. Can social media have parasocial features?

Giles (2002) introduced a continuum of social–parasocial encounters – stretching from simple dyadic, face-to-face encounters to thoroughly parasocial encounters with, for example, cartoon figures. According to Giles (2002), a dyadic conversation between two people in an online context would be classified as social, but the more people are added to the audience, the more illusionary and parasocial the interaction becomes. It has also been pointed out that not all social media users actively take part in discussions or share information. There are also 'lurkers', who mostly observe others but do not share much about themselves (Ballantine & Martin, 2005, p. 197).

While some researchers, such as Lueck (2015) and Tsiotsou (2015), retain the definition of parasocial as one-sided and non-reciprocal interaction, other studies have linked the creation of PSR to responsiveness. For instance, interactivity and referring to audience members by their usernames have been found to enhance the experience of PSR on social media (Labrecque, 2014). The responses do not even have to be directed at the person having the parasocial experience. Frederick, Choong, Clavio, and Walsh (2012) studied PSI between followers and athletes on social media and noticed that when the studied athlete responded to specific followers, it also heightened the parasocial experience for those followers, who were merely witnessing the interaction. It, therefore, seems that witnessing interactions between other people on social media can have an effect on people's own PSR.

Perceived influencer credibility

One of the factors determining the effectiveness of influencer endorsements is the perceived credibility of the influencer (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Munnukka et al., 2019). Credibility, also referred to as source credibility, adds to message acceptance (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016) and positive endorsement attitudes (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000; Pornpitakpan, 2004). Credibility consists of several dimensions – such as the attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness of the endorser (Ohanian, 1990; Chu & Kamal, 2008, Goldsmith et al., 2000). Other dimensions include perceived similarity with the endorser (Munnukka et al., 2019; Munnukka et al., 2016), the quality of the message, and a good endorser–product fit (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016).

Previous studies have found several drivers for credibility. These include a PSR with the endorser (Munnukka et al., 2019), previous experience with endorsers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), disclosure of sponsored content (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Hwang & Jeong, 2016), and the way in which the influencer uses self-disclosure (Huang, 2015). Interaction also contributes meaningfully to credibility, since comments made by other users seem to provide an important source of information for making of judgements about other people and their endorsements. People often use different kinds of cue or ‘warrant’ in online encounters to validate the self-presentation and truthfulness of others (Walther & Parks, 2002). Comments made by other people on social media can act as such cues and may even override mere self-descriptions (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009). It has been claimed that allowing comments on blogs supports the perceived expertise of the blogger, although no direct effect on credibility has been found (Hayes & Carr, 2015). This implies, however, that comments made by other audience members may enable confirmation of the self-descriptions and endorsements of a social media influencer, but other constructs must also be involved because the effect of comments on credibility is not direct.

Trust towards brands

Brand trust (BT) refers to 'the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function' (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82), reducing the uncertainty consumers may feel towards a brand. It is based on consumer beliefs and increased knowledge of the brand (Yannopoulou, Koronis, & Elliott, 2011) and aids people in making decisions about brands (Lee, Kim, & Chan-Olmsted, 2011).

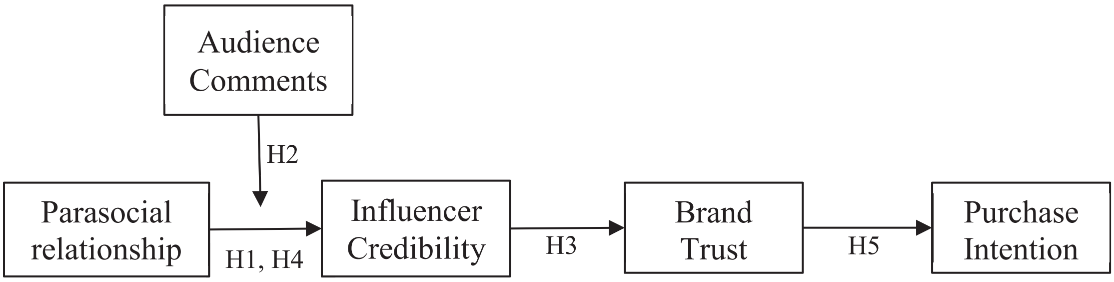
Trust is formed through interaction in the context of relationships (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Dervitsiotis, 2003) and is shaped by an individual's past experiences within similar contexts (Quandt, 2012). Trust in a brand can be built through engagement and relationships with the brand and different elements of the brand on social media (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014), but trust can also be transferred. Trust transfer takes place when initial trust in a target (a person, a group, or an organisation) turns into trust in another target (Stewart, 2003). For example, a consumer's trust in another consumer or a marketer in a social media brand community can turn into trust in an associated brand (Liu, Lee, Liu, & Chen, 2018). It has also been claimed that in an online brand community, both trust and distrust can spill over to affect the brand without direct involvement (Lay-Hwa Bowden, Conduit, Hollebeek, Luoma-aho, & Solem, 2017).

BT contributes to brand and purchase loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and has also been found to moderate the role of sales promotion in purchase decisions (Soni & Verghese, 2018). This suggests that BT can be a building block for purchase intention (PI), that is, the consumer's willingness to purchase an endorsed product or service (Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991).

Conceptual model and hypotheses

Based on the reviewed literature, the following conceptual model is suggested:

Figure 1. Conceptual model: Parasocial relationship, influencer credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in building brand trust and purchase intention.



Audience members often form strong emotional bonds with social media influencers and engage in PSR with them (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Since the experience of knowing an influencer well (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019) has been found to drive credibility, a PSR with an influencer is expected to act as an antecedent to the influencer's perceived credibility (IC). The first hypothesis is thus as follows:

H1: PSR with a social media influencer positively affects IC.

Despite the relationships that audience members have with influencers, uncertainty can still prevail when it comes to brand endorsements made by influencers. Warrants or cues are, therefore, needed (Walther & Parks, 2002), which can be instantiated through comments made by other people (Walther et al., 2009). Since witnessing other people's interactions seems to enhance PSR (Frederick et al., 2012), although no direct effect between comments and credibility has been found (Hayes & Carr, 2015), the second hypothesis is suggested as follows:

H2: Reading comments made by other audience members moderates the relationship between PSR and IC; thus, reading comments strengthens the relationship between the two constructs.

It has been claimed that trusting relationships can foster further trusting relationships (Luoma-aho, 2018), and that trust can transfer from one target to another (Stewart, 2003). This implies that trust in a social media influencer can also transfer to a brand that the influencer uses or recommends, that is, a brand that he or she trusts. Accordingly, the third and fourth hypotheses are as follows:

H3: IC positively affects BT in the brand that the influencer endorses.

H4: IC mediates the PSR-BT relationship.

BT helps people to deal with the uncertainty they may have when making decisions about brands (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Lee et al., 2011). Since researchers have identified the moderating role of BT in purchase decisions in online shopping (Soni & Verghese, 2018), it seems likely that trust in a brand that an influencer endorses could also influence PI. The final hypothesis is therefore suggested as follows:

H5: Trust in the brand recommended by the influencer positively affects audience members' intention to buy the endorsed brand.

Methodology

Research design

To be able to study an actual endorsement and capture the experiences of real followers, the research was carried out in co-operation with a Finnish online community for young girls. The community features several vloggers on its website. With the assistance of a community manager and a producer, a vlog entry by a female lifestyle vlogger was chosen for the study. The inclusion criteria were a vlogger who had a sizeable audience, regularly co-operated with brands, and recently uploaded an endorsement video for a brand. The chosen vlogger was a young woman in her 20s, with around 70,000 followers on her YouTube channel. Her videos include different kinds of lifestyle content, but she also gives tips and advice of interest to teenage girls such as what to consider when starting at high school or how to use an epilator. She has a special video concept for giving advice, named ‘Big Sis’, alluding to her role as a kind of big sister to her followers. The video chosen for the study included an endorsement for a private health-care services provider, which offers, among other things, sexual health services for young women. The service provider is a fairly well-known brand, with over 400 service units around the country. In the video, the vlogger visits a gynaecologist at one of the health clinic’s units and openly talks about her experience with the brand. The fact that the video is made in co-operation with the health-care services provider is mentioned in the information box and at the beginning of the video. At the beginning of the video, the vlogger also says, ‘This video was done in co-operation with…’ and then mentions the name of the endorsed brand.

The study followed an experimental two-way between-subjects design. Two experimental conditions were constructed (audience comments presented/audience comments not presented). The studied video was uploaded, along with a survey questionnaire, on SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire was anonymous. The participants were first asked about their age, and only participants aged 16 or above were allowed to continue filling the questionnaire. The remaining participants were then asked to share their general thoughts about vloggers co-operating with brands. The participants then watched the embedded video. To study the causal effect of exposure to audience comments in the constructed model, two experimental conditions were designed. The participants were directly requested to read the audience comments in the ‘audience comments presented' condition. Thirteen screen shots of actual comments from the influencer's YouTube channel were presented to the respondents in this condition. Since the audience responded well to the video, all shown comments were positive in nature and included praise of the vlogger, such as 'This will really help a lot of people. Great video!' and 'Really nice video!' The comments also included heart emojis and smileys. In the 'audience comments not presented' condition, no such request was made, and no audience comments were presented. Finally, the participants answered a few control and background questions, as well as questions about the perceived credibility of the vlogger, PSR with the vlogger, their trust in the endorsed brand, and their possible intention of purchasing the endorsed service.

Participants

The survey link was shared on the Snapchat channel of the online community that features the vlogger. Three small gift cards and a magazine subscription were offered as raffle prizes for the respondents. During the 24 hours that the link was available, 1,138 respondents opened the link. In the end, the study resulted in 309 questionnaires adequately completed. Seven responses were later omitted from the group that was exposed to audience comments because they responded negatively to the statement 'I read the comments', which was used to confirm manipulation. Thus, the final data sample included 302 responses. The respondents in the final sample were sufficiently and equally distributed across the two manipulated groups (n = 146 'no audience comments'; n = 156 'audience comments'). Most of the respondents were female (99%), 0.3% were males while 0.7% gave no response. Most of the respondents were also 20 years old or younger (98%). The vlogger (mean 4.25, std. 1.75), as well as the endorsed brand (mean 4.19, std. 1.52), was considered moderately familiar to the respondents (1 = not familiar, 7 = very familiar). The video was mostly regarded as an advertisement, with the mean value of 5.64 (std. 1.26) on a seven-point scale (1 = fully disagree, 7 = fully agree). The majority of the respondents had seen the video before (71%) and had also liked it (93%).

Measures

One independent construct (PSR) and three dependent constructs (IC, BT, and PI) were measured. PSR was measured using an eight-item, seven-point Likert scale adapted from existing scales (Labrecque, 2014; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Quintero Johnson & Patnoe-Woodley, 2016; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). IC was measured using an eleven-item, seven-point Likert scale adapted from existing scales (Morimoto & La Ferle, 2008; Munnukka et al., 2016; Ohanian, 1990). BT was measured using a four-item Likert scale adapted from an existing scale (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). PI was measured using a three-item Likert scale adapted from existing scales (Dodds et al., 1991; Lee & Watkins, 2016). In addition, an independent variable of audience members' comments was measured using a single item on a dichotomous scale (0 = did not read audience comments, 1 = read audience comments) to separate the two experimental conditions in the analyses. The respondents in the latter condition were also presented with the statement 'I read the comments' on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = fully disagree, 7 = fully agree) to check for manipulation. The averages of the ratings of PSR, IC, BT, and PI were computed after confirming the scale validity by confirmatory factor analysis, using SPSS Amos software, and were used as single ratings. The single ratings were standardised, so their mean values were set as 0.

Results

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with SPSS Amos was first done to confirm the validity and unidimensionality of the measurement scales. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis with factor loadings are presented in Table 1. The variables loaded well to their assigned factors, with loading values between 0.62 and 0.94. The reliability and validity of the factor constructs were assessed through composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), between-factor correlations, and the square root of AVE values (Table 2). The composite reliabilities (CR) of the constructs were found to be over 0.9, thus demonstrating good internal reliability. Since the AVE values were also clearly above the cut-off value of 0.5, and the square root of the AVEs exceeded the between-factor correlations in the case of each construct, the constructs were assessed as demonstrating adequate convergent and discriminant validity (Ping, 2004).

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Measures and Items	*CFA Loading*
Parasocial Relationship	
I look forward to watching the influencer on her channel.	0.87
If the influencer appeared on another YouTube channel, I would watch that video.	0.74
When I am watching the influencer, I feel as if I am part of her group.	0.84
I think the influencer is like an old friend.	0.80
I would like to meet the influencer in person.	0.82
If there was a story about the influencer in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.	0.77
The influencer makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.	0.80
When the influencer shows me how she feels about the brand, it helps me make up my own mind about the brand.	0.77
Perceived Influencer Credibility	
I feel the influencer is honest.	0.87
I consider the influencer to be trustworthy.	0.86
I feel the influencer is truthful.	0.85
I consider the influencer to be sincere.	0.77
I feel the influencer knows a lot about the service.	0.78
I feel the influencer is competent to make assertions about the service.	0.80
I consider the influencer sufficiently experienced to make assertions about the service.	0.81
I consider the influencer an expert on the service.	0.81
The influencer and I have a lot in common.	0.62
The influencer and I are very alike.	0.62
I can easily identify with the influencer.	0.67
Brand Trust	
I trust this brand.	0.89
I rely on this brand.	0.90
This is an honest brand.	0.92
This brand is safe.	0.87
Purchase Intention	
I consider it likely that I would purchase this service from this brand.	0.92
I consider it possible that I would purchase this service from this brand.	0.79
I consider it probable that I would purchase this service from this brand.	0.94
Audience Members' Comments Not reading versus reading audience members' comments	n.a.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations

Measures	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
PI	0.92	0.79	**0.89**				
PSR	0.93	0.64	0.54	**0.80**			
IC	0.94	0.60	0.51	0.75	**0.77**		
BT	0.94	0.80	0.56	0.50	0.63	**0.89**	
OC[1]	n.a.	n.a.	0.01	-0.05	-0.06	-0.10	**n.a.**

Note. [1]= a single item variable on a dichotomous scale. CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; PI = purchase intention; PSR = parasocial relationship; IC = perceived influencer credibility; BT = brand trust; OC = reading other audience members' comments.

Manipulation check

To confirm the manipulation that the respondents who were presented with audience comments had carefully read the comments, a two-item measure on a seven-point Likert-scale (1 = fully disagree, 7 = fully agree) was applied ('I read the audience comments very carefully' and 'I was highly interested in those comments'). The mean value of carefully reading audience comments was 4.63 (std. 1.43) and that of being interested in the comments was 3.74 (std. 1.55). Seven respondents who responded that they had not read the presented comments were removed from the data.

Test of main effects and mediation

The results of testing the main effects and mediation are presented in Table 3. First, the independent direct effects of PSR and IC on BT were assessed. The effects were significant and positive in both cases – IC ($\beta = .66$, $t = 9.95$, $p < .001$) and PSR ($\beta = .67$, $t = 15.68$, $p < .001$). When PSR and IC were included in the same model, the direct effect of PSR on BT turned insignificant ($\beta = -.01$, $t = -0.22$, $p > .05$), thus suggesting the mediating effect of IC between PSR and BT. PSR and IC together explained 45% of the variance of BT. PSR explained 61% of the variance of IC. The indirect effect of PSR on BT was β 0.42. The significance of the indirect effect was further confirmed by the Sobel test ($Z = 9.03$, $p < .001$). Trust in the endorsed brand was found to positively affect the audience's intention to buy the endorsed brand (β = .58, t = 12.25, p < .001), explaining 33% of the variance of PI.

Table 3. The results of the main effects and mediation

Main effects	**t Value**	**Pr > |t|**	**β**	**R^2**	**Hypothesis**
IC → BT	9.95	< 0.001	0.66	0.45	
PSR → IC	21.64	< 0.001	0.78	0.61	H1
PSR → BT	15.68	< 0.001	0.67	0.45	H3
Mediation					
PSR → BT	-0.22	ns.	-0.01		
PSR → IC	21.64	< 0.001	0.63	0.61	
PSR→IC→BT[1]	9.03	< 0.001	0.42		H4
BT →PI	12.25	< 0.001	0.58	0.33	H5

Note. [1]Sobel test applied; PSR = parasocial relationship; IC = perceived influencer credibility; BT = brand trust;

Test of moderation

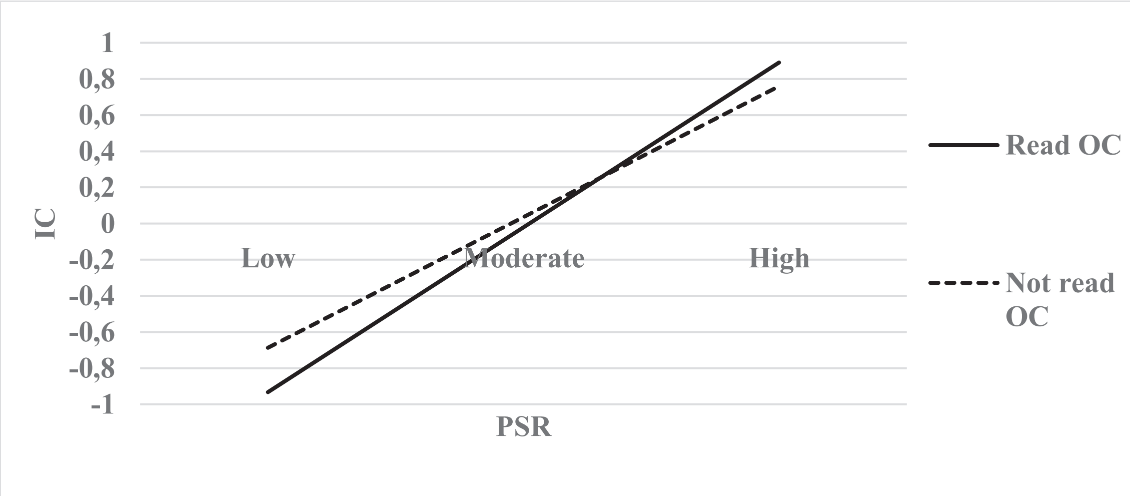
To test the moderation effect of reading other audience members' comments on the PSR–IC relationship, an interaction effect analysis was conducted using the Andrew Hayes PROCESS macro in SPSS. OC was defined as a categorical indicator in the PROCESS macro that is required when conducting interaction effect analysis with a dichotomous variable. The results in Table 4 show that although reading other audience members' comments had no direct effect on IC (β = -.06, t = -0.79, p > 0.05), it had a significant and positive interaction effect with PSR on IC (β = .15, t = 2.61, p < 0.01). The interaction effect is also shown in Figure 2. This suggests that reading other audience members' comments strengthens the PSR–IC relationship. Therefore, the effect of a PSR with the influencer on his or her perceived credibility is stronger when the audience has a chance to review other audience members' comments.

Table 4. Interaction effect analysis

DV = IC	**t Value**	**Pr > |t|**	**β**	**R^2**	**Hypothesis**
PSR	14.14	< 0.001	0.58	0.63	
OC	-0.79	> 0.05	-0.06		
PSR x OC	2.61	< 0.01	0.15		H2

Note: DV = dependent variable; PSR = parasocial relationship; IC = perceived influencer credibility;
OC = reading others audience members' comments.

Figure 2. Interaction graph of the effect of PSR x OC on IC



Note: PSR = parasocial relationship; IC = perceived influencer credibility; OC = reading others audience members' comments.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature on endorsement effectiveness and influencer marketing on social media, illuminating the focal role of audience comments. Previous studies showed that audience participation, such as commenting, can contribute to the formation of PSRs between audience members and social media influencers (Munnukka et al., 2019; Rihl & Wegener, 2019). Since the construct of the PSR supports IC (Munnukka et al., 2019), audience participation can also be connected to endorsement effectiveness. This study adds to the previous findings by demonstrating that both participation by audience members and on behalf of other audience members can have an effect on the endorsement the influencer makes, through the constructs of PSR and IC.

No direct effect between comments and IC was observed, which is in line with the findings of Hayes and Carr (2015). However, a moderating effect of audience comments between the constructs of PSR and IC was found. It would appear, then, that online commenting alone does not necessarily advance the credibility of the endorser and that a relationship (even a parasocial one) with the influencer is essential. Since a parasocial experience between consumers and brand representatives has been found to add to engagement (Men & Tsai, 2013; Pressrove & Pardun, 2016), it seems likely that experiencing PSR with a social media influencer will motivate followers to comment, thereby increasing the credibility of the influencer in the eyes of other audience members. These findings highlight that, when it comes to influencer marketing, it is not just the number of followers the influencer has or the attributes of the influencer that matter, but also the active role that followers play in supporting the social media influencer through commenting. This suggests that social media influencers' ability to create active communities around themselves can also be seen as one of their defining characteristics.

The study also shows that PSR with an influencer can eventually turn into trust in a brand recommended by the influencer, reducing the uncertainty that people might have towards the brand. Since such uncertainty is further reduced by reading comments written by other audience members, there may be a 'virtuous circle' of trust at work, whereby high levels of trust between audience members and the influencer act as a breeding ground for more trust, which may even become institutionalised into the wider society (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). Fostering trust between social media influencers and their audiences can, therefore, be seen as a way of contributing to social capital, the glue that holds communities together, enabling people to collaborate and socialise with each other (Luoma-aho, 2018; Portes, 1998; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993).

However, the virtuous circle could also turn into a vicious circle if the credibility and trustworthiness of the influencer is somehow violated in the eyes of the audience members. This could happen, for example, through a lack of transparency in disclosing sponsored content (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015) or the publishing of content that is perceived as inauthentic (Luoma-aho, Pirttimäki, Maity, Munnukka, & Reinikainen, 2019), although these kinds of practices seem mainly to harm the influencer rather than the endorsed brand (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015; Luoma-aho et al., 2019). This suggests that trust and distrust may transfer differently and that although trust in an influencer can turn into trust in brands that the influencer endorses, distrust of the influencer may not necessarily have a similar effect.

A vicious circle may also arise where the claims made by the influencer are somehow incorrect or even harmful. A recent U.K. study showed that many weight-management blogs are providing health information lacking in evidence and transparency and failing to meet the national nutrition criteria (European Association for the Study of Obesity, 2019). A strong, friend-like PSR with an influencer making such false claims might still motivate the followers to comment, thus supporting the influencer and the claims being made, which could amplify the harmful message, even creating a so-called echo chamber – an environment in which consumers are mainly exposed to views that conform to their own (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). The role of audience comments also leads to questions about possible fake comments in boosting the effectiveness of influencer endorsements. Given the claim that new AI systems will soon be as good as human writers (Wakefield, 2019), producing large amounts of fabricated supporting comments could become a reality, with followers being manipulated by fake support.

Finally, the prior evidence about the role of BT in consumers' purchase decisions in the traditional and online shopping contexts (e.g. Chauduri & Holbrook, 2001; Lee et al., 2011; Soni & Verghese, 2018) were found to apply in the social media context as well. BT appears as an important construct in the context of YouTube endorsements and health-care services when explaining how the endorsement of a brand by a social media influencer leads to increased PI. Furthermore, the findings present PSRs with social media influencers as a focal construct in trust transfer from the social media influencer to the endorsed brand. Therefore, trust transfer seems possible not only between consumers and brands or marketers and brands (Liu et al., 2018) but also between social media influencers and brands, with the audience playing an integral role. Furthermore, the present study also suggests, in the health-care services context, trust transfer and BT in relation to the uncertainty consumers feel towards a brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) are particularly important in understanding the effectiveness of social media brand endorsements on consumers' purchase decisions.

Managerial implications

The results highlight the role of audience comments in building IC and endorsement effectiveness on YouTube. Social media influencers have raised concerns over YouTube's decision to block comments on certain channels and have expressed fears that this could affect their connection with their followers (Alexander, 2019). Questions have also been raised about the possible effects of this decision on influencer marketing. According to the findings of this study, blocking comments on YouTube may be consequential for influencer marketing because seeing other people's comments offers a way for the audience to verify their feelings about the influencer and his or her endorsements. Given that previous studies have shown that interactivity on behalf of the target of the parasocial experience (e.g. an athlete) may enhance PSR (Frederick et al., 2012; Labrecque, 2014), interaction should, in fact, be encouraged. Brands engaging in influencer marketing can also support this by offering influencers enough information about the endorsed brand, service, or product so that influencers can feel confident about answering questions and comments from their followers.

The results also show the significance of the PSRs that audiences develop with social media influencers. This implies a change in mindset, away from considering the mere size of the audience to considering the influencer's relationship with his or her audience. As the demand for influencer marketing rises, influencers have become selective in their choice of partners (Ember, 2015). Understanding the audience–influencer relationship could become an asset to marketers, as they compete for the best influencers.

In addition, since the interaction between audience and influencer seems to play an important part in building the credibility of the influencer, it is important to consider what motivates the audience to participate and comment. It has been shown that brands often find it difficult to persuade consumers to participate (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016), which indicates that superimposing branded content on an influencer's social media channel may not be the best way to go. Letting go of control and allowing the influencer to decide how the brand is best portrayed in the content may lead to an end result that better motivates the audience to comment.

With regard to influencers, the results imply that in order to be effective endorsers, they need to have the courage to open up their lives and build trusting relationships with their followers. This may be risky, because PSRs are not always positive in nature (Tian & Hoffner, 2010) and may expose influencers to negative relational behaviours, such as criticism (Sanderson, 2009) or even trolling. Continuous self-presentation on social media is a stressful job and interaction with followers takes a lot of time. These, however, seem to be the keys to a successful career as a social media influencer.

On the basis of audience comments, it seems the theme of the video studied was inspiring, and it is possible the benefit for the influencer was not only the compensation obtained for cooperation but also that she was able to portray herself as a ‘big sister’ to her audience. She is not an expert on health care, but someone who understands and is trusted on issues that are crucial in the lives and minds of young women. By portraying herself in this way, she may even have been able to strengthen her relationship with her followers. Although influencers often allow brands to enter their personal channels only if they are being paid (Archer & Harrigan, 2016), it seems that with the right combination of brand, theme, content, and influencer, the co-operation between influencer and brand can bring benefits other than money for the influencer and trust in the sponsoring brand. A strengthened relationship between the influencer and his or her audience also seems like a possible outcome, meaning that brands could contribute positively to the relationship building between influencers and their followers.

Research limitations and future studies

This study has several limitations but is also offers new avenues for future studies. The research design involved only one vlog and a single video. The findings may be specific to the kind of service, brand, or personality of the vlogger studied here. Future studies should, therefore, test the presented conceptual model and experimental setting on other services, brands, and social media contexts to validate these results. Instagram is increasingly used in influencer marketing, and it would be interesting to test the presented conceptual model using brand endorsement made with Instagram Stories.

The experimental setting was also rather simple, and there might have been additional factors interacting with the constructs of the present model that were not included in the present study. For example, the vlogger replied to some of the comments that were presented to the respondents of the study and this might have affected the results. To exclude the interference of influencer participation on the results, future studies should test how the impact of comments changes when an influencer participates in the discussions. The setting also included mainly positive audience comments and a positive brand endorsement. The effects might have been different in the case of clearly neutral or even very negative comments and negative or neutral brand endorsements.

As this study concentrated on manipulating only the audience comments, it cannot be confirmed that there is a causal effect between a PSR with the influencer and BT, only a correlation effect. Therefore, it is possible that the respondents would have shown a high trust towards the studied brand even if the social media influencer had not endorsed the brand. To confirm a causal effect, an experimental setting with a manipulation of the PSR could be used in future studies.

The age of the respondents may also explain some of the results, as a clear majority (98%) of the respondents were fairly young (20 years or younger). The respondents can be said to represent a new age cohort, the Generation Z, referring to people born circa 1995–2010 (Priporas, Stylos, & Fotiadis, 2017; Turner, 2015). This generation is regarded as more receptive to advertising featuring social media influencers than earlier generations are (Southgate, 2017). Younger audiences also tend to have more intense parasocial experiences (Kyewski, Szczuka, & Krämer, 2016). Future studies could include comparisons between the different tech-oriented generations – X, Y, and Z.

Finally, the context of the study was YouTube. The most popular application for social media influencers at the moment is Instagram (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019), which is also the leading social media application for influencer marketing (Brown, 2019). The conceptual model presented in this study should, therefore, be tested in the case of a brand endorsement on Instagram to conclude on its comprehensive applicability to influencer marketing.

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III

MAKING AND BREAKING RELATIONSHIPS ON SOCIAL MEDIA: THE EFFECTS OF INFLUENCER AND BRAND BETRAYALS

by

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Making and breaking relationships on social media: the impacts of brand and influencer betrayals

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ABSTRACT

This study considers how the relationships between social media influencers, brands and individuals are intertwined on social media and analyses the spill-over effects of feelings of betrayal. An experimental design with two transgression scenarios (influencer vs. brand) was created, and 250 individuals were recruited to participate in the study. The results show that a perceived betrayal by a brand can negatively affect the perceived coolness of the social media influencer that has endorsed the brand, as well as the parasocial relationships that followers have with the influencer. Accordingly, a perceived betrayal by a social media influencer can negatively affect attitudes, trust and purchase intentions toward a brand that the influencer has endorsed. The current research helps in understanding brand and influencer transgressions and highlights the fact that both influencers and brands should have a sense of collaboration responsibility. It also introduces the concept of influencer coolness, understood here as a desirable success factor for social media influencers, which partly explains their desirability and influence, and a feature that can be endangered through both influencer and brand betrayals.

1. Introduction

The benefits of social media are numerous, including the fact that social media platforms enable new possibilities to interact and maintain relationships with friends and loved ones (e.g., boyd and Ellison, 2007; Cheung et al., 2011; Dhir et al., 2018; Gennaro and Dutton, 2007). In addition, social media also allows connecting with new kinds of 'digital friends': These new types of relationship partners can include social media influencers — bloggers, YouTubers, Instagram and TikTok celebrities — who are often considered close friends or even family members by their followers (Berryman and Kavka, 2017; Reinikainen et al., 2020), and also brands (Fournier, 1998), which can evoke strong self-brand connections (Tan et al., 2019) or even feelings of love (Batra et al., 2012) in devoted individuals. This effect may be especially high in young people, who are often 'fascinated with popular brands' (Dhir et al., 2016: 427).

These intimate, online relationships have become intertwined as brands seek endorsements from 'cool' influencers (Ember, 2015) to gain the trust and attention of the influencers' followers. For instance, within the beauty industry, influencers, followers and brands have constituted active online communities (Lawson, 2021). Such collaborations contribute to many positive outcomes for brands through, for example, heightened purchase intentions (Lee and Watkins, 2016) and, for influencers, a chance to enhance connectedness with followers (Reinikainen et al., 2020). For the public at large, the contribution of influencer-brand collaborations remains controversial, but for devoted followers, the collaborations offer a mechanism via which to ensure that the influencers receive incentives in exchange for their work and, thus, followers can continue receiving their favourite influencer content (Coco and Eckert, 2020).

However, mismanaging the relationships between influencers, followers and brands can also lead to negative emotions. Feelings of intimacy and closeness can turn into feelings of betrayal when moral obligations are broken or integrity is lost (Tan et al., 2021). Moreover, research on online communities suggests that negative experiences and emotions may spill over from the original target to another target (Bowden et al., 2017) and discourage participation in these communities via online regret (Kaur et al., 2016). Many influencers have, therefore, become vigilant in terms of entering collaborations with brands and deliberately select partners that are consistent with their personal brands (Watson, 2020) to maintain their trustworthiness and coolness in the eyes of their followers (Ember, 2015). Similarly, brands show

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concern over risking their reputation in entering endorsement deals with influencers who may exhibit questionable behaviours on social media (Winchel, 2018). For instance, American YouTuber *Logan Paul* caused controversy by filming a dead body in a Japanese suicide forest (Farokhmanesh, 2018), leading to furiously negative feedback and YouTube removing Logan Paul as a preferred advertisement partner. This suggests that, although the collaborations between influencers and brands are often profitable for both parties, potential transgressions by either party that lead to feelings of betrayal may have negative effects on the other party while also causing feelings of distress and uneasiness for followers.

Most of the research on social media influencers and brands has concentrated on the positive outcomes of influencer endorsements on individual attitudes and engagement in sponsoring brands (e.g., De Veirman et al., 2017; Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019; Hughes et al., 2019). However, prior academic research has largely ignored the spill-over effects of influencer transgressions on endorsed brands, although the impact of endorser scandals are a common topic in the context of mainstream celebrities (Bartz et al., 2013; Carrillat et al., 2013; Carrillat, et al., 2014; Louie et al., 2001; Till and Shimp, 1998). In the same vein, there is limited research on the spill-over effect of brand transgressions on social media influencers; most brand transgression research focuses on the impacts on firm and individual perspectives (Khamitov et al., 2019).

In the present study, we aim to fill this research gap by asking how a perceived betrayal by a brand that is endorsed by a social media influencer is connected with the followers' relationship with that influencer — and, vice versa, how a perceived betrayal by an influencer endorsing a brand affects individuals' brand attitudes, trust and purchase intentions. We also introduce the concepts of *influencer coolness* and *influencer betrayal*. Influencer coolness is derived from the concept of *brand coolness* (Warren et al., 2019), understood here as a desirable success factor not just for company brands but also for human brands, such as social media influencers. *Influencer betrayal* is derived from the concept of *brand betrayal* (Reimann et al., 2018), understood here as a feeling of betrayal that may be reflected in the relationship between a follower and social media influencer.

Our findings have significant practical implications for the understanding of collaboration responsibility from the perspective of both brands and influencers. This responsibility implies a shift away from the typical self-care approach, in which the parties are mostly worried about their reputation, and toward an understanding that influencers and brands have responsibilities regarding one another's reputation.

In the next section, we review the literature on social media influencers, parasocial relationships, influencer coolness and betrayal to develop our conceptual framework and hypotheses. This is followed by a presentation of the results obtained from the experiment testing of our hypotheses. Finally, we discuss the theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media influencers

Social media influencers, especially their ability to address and impact their followers, have become a growing interest topic in both practice and academic research. Social media influencers have been defined as 'third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media' (Freberg et al., 2011: 90). Other essential features that define influencers include direct and active interaction with followers; professional and effective content production and distribution skills (Enke and Borchers, 2019); the ability to monetise their following through, for example, sponsored material within their content (Abidin, 2016) and personal branding (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019).

Although many of the most popular Youtubers and Instagrammers are as well-known as mainstream celebrities, such as pop singers or movie stars, it is important to distinguish between social media influencers and so-called traditional celebrities. Influencers have often found their way to fame on their own through social media and bypassed the gatekeeper role of the mass media (Hou, 2019), whereas so-called mainstream celebrities often depend heavily on the attention of traditional mass media (Enke and Borchers, 2019). Another difference between mainstream celebrities and social media influencers can be found in the different ways they relate to their fans and followers (Enke and Borchers, 2019): while mainstream celebrities often strive to keep a distance from audience members (Jerslev, 2016) and value their privacy, the appeal of influencers lies in their openness in terms of sharing their most intimate feelings and life events with their followers (Marôpo et al., 2020).

Because of these intimate and influential relationships that influencers have with their followers, co-operation with influencers has been embraced by brands, which are able to profit from the collaborations, for example, through heightened purchase intentions (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020), brand attitudes (De Veirman et al., 2017; Munnukka et al., 2019), brand trust (Reinikainen et al., 2020) and eWOM intentions (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). The effectiveness of influencer endorsements lies partially in the friend-like parasocial relationships that followers have with their favourite influencers (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Reinikainen et al., 2020), but source characteristics, such as the perceived credibility (Munnukka et al., 2019), authenticity (Pöyry et al., 2019) and attractiveness (Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020) of the influencer, have also been deemed important.

2.2. Parasocial relationships

A parasocial relationship refers to the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with a person who is encountered through media (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Originally a concept coined to describe the relationships that audience members develop with performers on television, radio and film, it has since been applied in studying influencers who are encountered through various social media channels (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011; Lueck, 2015; Lee and Watkins, 2016; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Parasocial relationships resemble social relationships in many ways; however, they are often not balanced, because, although the audience members know a great deal about the performer, the reverse is not true (Munnukka et al., 2019). The experience of parasocial relationships may entail the feeling of knowing the performer well (Brown, 2015), identification with and interest in the performer (Auter and Palmgreen, 2000), the feeling of being among friends while consuming media content and wanting to meet the performer in real life (Rubin et al., 1985).

Parasocial experiences have been shown to affect the attitudes and behaviours of audience members in many ways (Tian and Hoffner, 2010). In the context of social media influencers, parasocial relationships have been found to advance the effectiveness of influencer endorsements through, for example, mediating the relationship between audience participation and influencer credibility (Munnukka et al., 2019) and the relationship between source credibility and product interest (Yuan and Lou, 2020). Parasocial relationships also moderate the effect of persuasion knowledge (Hwang and Zhang, 2018), suggesting the effectiveness of endorsements made by 'digital friends'.

2.3. Influencer coolness

Individuals desire 'cool' things and are willing to spend money on 'cool' brands (Warren et al., 2019). Coolness has been defined as 'a subjective and dynamic, socially constructed positive trait attributed to cultural objects inferred to be appropriately autonomous' (Warren and Campbell, 2014: 544). According to Warren et al. (2019), cool brands are extraordinary, aesthetically appealing, energetic, original, authentic, rebellious, high status, subcultural, iconic and popular, and increasing any one of these characteristics tends to make a brand seem cooler.

In previous studies, coolness has been connected with brands such as Harley-Davidson and Apple (Warren and Campbell, 2014) but also with celebrities such as Jay-Z and Beyoncé (Warren et al., 2019). In the current study, we examine whether the concept of brand coolness could also be applied in the context of social media influencers, often defined as 'human brands' (Delisle and Parmentier, 2016; Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019). Coolness has been seen as a desirable feature for brands, so the present study perceives coolness as a feature that is also desirable for social media influencers in that it attracts not only followers but also brands that wish to be associated with cool influencers.

Following the notion of Warren et al. (2019), we define influencer coolness as the perceived level of the influencer demonstrating both desirability and positive autonomy by being original, energetic, appealing, extraordinary, high status, iconic and popular. In this sense, coolness covers a holistic view of socially constructed positive traits attributed to a social media influencer, moving beyond the investigation into other source characteristics, such us the perceived attractiveness (Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020), credibility (Reinikainen et al., 2020), expertise (Trivedi and Sama, 2020) and popularity (De Veirman et al., 2017) of the influencer.

The current study focuses on influencer coolness for two reasons. First, the four key features of coolness – subjectivity, positivity, autonomy and dynamicity – as defined by Warren and Campbell (2014), are also descriptive of social media influencers. Influencers are only as cool as their followers perceive them to be, and transgressions performed by influencers are difficult for their followers to come to terms with (Cocker et al., 2021). Social media influencers are also often perceived positively by their followers (Reinikainen et al., 2020), and they have autonomy, but they are also dynamic and have been discovered to follow 'an evolutionary process' or lifecycle, in which their relationship with their followers changes over time (Smith, 2010). Second, coolness is associated with behavioural outcomes, such as intentions to talk about a brand and willingness to pay for the brand (Warren et al., 2019). Similar intentions – willingness to share and engage with an influencer's post and pay for products that are endorsed by the influencer – are also desirable for social media influencers. Coolness is, therefore, understood here as a success factor for social media influencers that, in part, explains their desirability and also their effectiveness as endorsers.

2.4. *Brand and influencer transgressions*

The effects of celebrity endorser scandals on brands have been studied quite frequently within the fields of marketing and management studies. These studies show that transgressions on the part of celebrity endorsers, such as the use of illegal substances or other behaviours that lead to negative headlines, negatively impact attitudes toward the endorsed brands (Till and Shimp, 1998) and the financial performance of these brands (Bartz et al., 2013; Hock and Raithel, 2019). Moreover, Carrillat et al. (2014) showed that a celebrity endorser's wrongdoing may impact not only the attitudes toward the endorsed brand but also other competing brands. The mechanism also seems to work conversely: Kelly et al. (2016) showed that negative perceptions about a sports team can lead to negative perceptions about the sponsoring brand. Thomas and Fowler (2016) also pointed out that the transgressions made by brands can have an effect on how individuals evaluate celebrities who have endorsed these brands.

Corresponding evidence from the context of social media influencers is still scarce, although controversies involving both influencers and brands are common and recognised in the context of influencer endorsements (Cocker et al., 2021; Lawson, 2021). Because the relationships that fans and followers have with social media influencers differ somewhat from the relationships they have with mainstream celebrities, the dynamics of brand and influencer transgressions and their effects on influencers and brands, respectively, constitute a gap in the research literature. Previously, Colliander and Erlandsson (2015) discovered that exposing a hidden sponsorship between a blogger and brand negatively affects followers' attitudes toward the blog and the credibility of the blogger, with the parasocial relationship with the blogger mediating the effect. However, they were not able to detect a significant negative impact on brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Because this is somewhat contradictory to the results of studies on celebrity transgressions, further research is called for, as well as the introduction of additional constructs that may be essential to the desirability of influencers, but that Colliander and Erlandsson (2015) may not have considered in their study.

2.5. *Brand and influencer betrayal*

The concept of brand betrayal has inspired academic research over the past years because there has been an increasing tendency toward humanising brands and seeing them as relationship partners that are close to individuals (Fournier, 1998; Tan, 2018). Individuals form expectations for their favourite brands, and if these expectations fail and brands are found guilty of transgressions, individuals can experience feelings of betrayal (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017; Reimann et al., 2018), much like in other relationships.

Brand betrayal has been defined as an unpleasant emotion evoked by a moral violation on the part of a brand that the individual has a strong self-brand connection with, fracturing the relationship that the individual has with the brand (Reimann et al., 2018; Tan et al., 2021). Brand betrayal has been deemed one of the most intrinsic factors leading individuals to behave negatively toward the brand (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017). The experience of brand betrayal is composed of assessments of the feeling of being taken advantage, misled and exploited by a brand (Tan, 2018).

Due to the close ties that followers have with influencers, it seems likely that feelings of betrayal could also follow transgressions on the part of influencers. Following the work of Tan et al. (2021), in the current study, *influencer betrayal* is defined as an unpleasant feeling caused in a follower by a moral violation on the part of a social media influencer, and it could have ramifications for the relationship that followers have with the influencer. The feeling of being misled and exploited is considered essential to the experience.

3. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Based on the reviewed literature, we propose that a negative spillover effect exists 1) on the endorsed brand when individuals feel betrayed by an influencer they follow and 2) on the endorsing influencer when individuals feel betrayed by a brand they favour. The following conceptual frameworks and related hypotheses, which present the spillover effects from influencer transgression on the endorsed brand — and vice versa — are illustrated in Figure 1.

Previous studies show that parasocial relationships can influence not only the opinions, interests and attention of people on social media but also the construction of relationships (Yuksel and Labreque, 2016). Therefore, the parasocial relationship is considered a key construct in the current model. Because parasocial relationships have been found to resemble social relationships (Rubin and McHugh, 1987), we suggest that parasocial relationships can be affected by negative, relational experiences, such as influencer betrayal:

H1. Following an influencer transgression, influencer betrayal negatively affects the parasocial relationship with the influencer.

Another key construct in our model is influencer coolness, defined in this study as an important success factor for influencers, explicating their desirability and ability to convince their followers. Because brand coolness has been connected with the emotional connection of brand love (Warren et al., 2019), we suggest that influencer coolness is positively related with an emotional connection with an influencer:

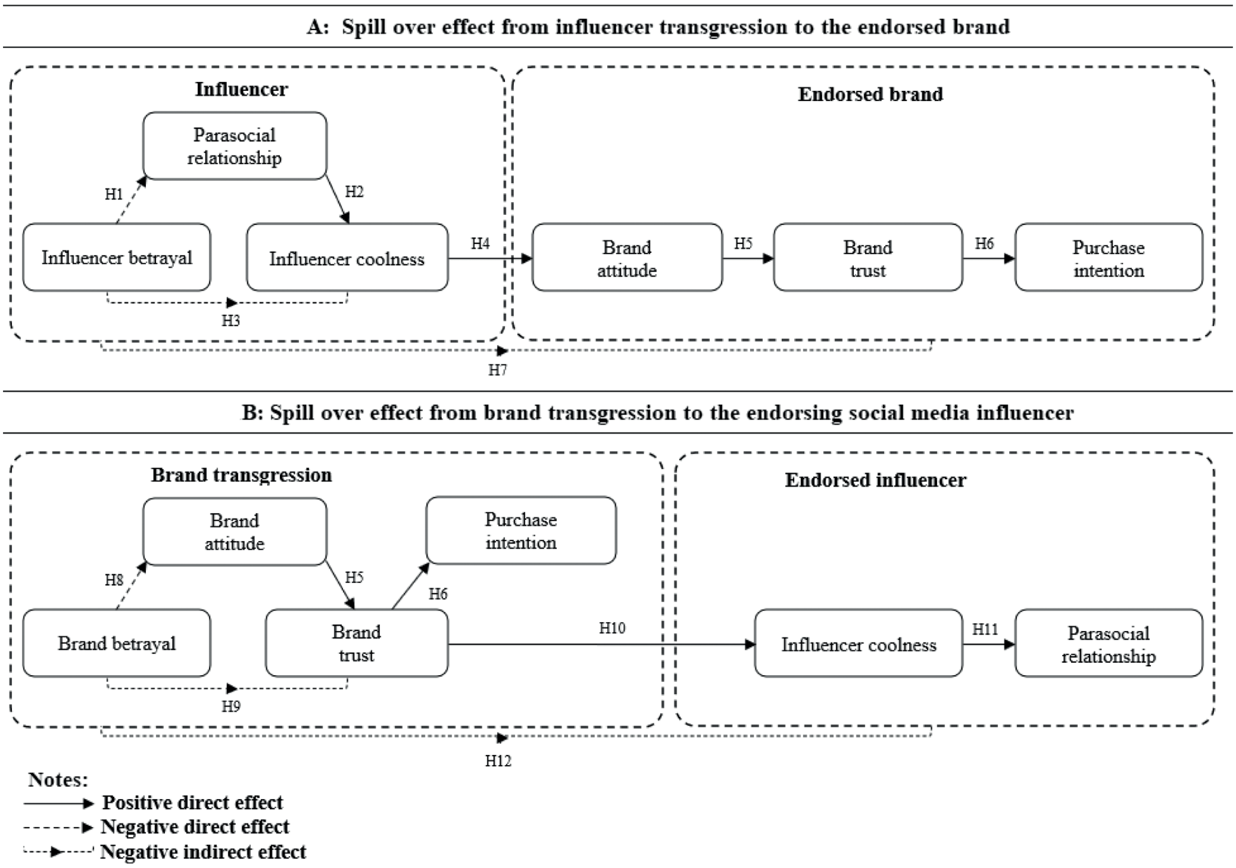

Fig. 1. Spill over effects from influencer to brand and from brand to influencer.

H2. Parasocial relationship is positively related with influencer coolness.

Here, we treat influencer coolness as a source characteristic construct. Colliander and Erlandsson (2015) found that a transgression made by a blogger had a negative effect on the perceived credibility of the blogger and that a parasocial relationship with the blogger mediated this relationship. As we view both influencer coolness and credibility as source characteristic constructs, we suggest the following hypothesis, which follows the same line of dynamics as the study of Colliander and Erlandsson (2015):

H3. Following an influencer transgression, a parasocial relationship mediates the relationship between influencer betrayal and influencer coolness, where influencer betrayal has negative and indirect effects on influencer coolness.

Source characteristics, such as perceived influencer credibility, have been shown to have a positive association with brand attitudes in the context of influencer marketing (Munnukka et al., 2019). We therefore suggest that influencer coolness is also positively associated with brand attitude:

H4. Influencer coolness is positively related to endorsed brand attitude.

Brand attitude is often considered one of the most critical assets for brands because attitudes indicate behaviour (Kumra, 2007: 172). Another essential element for brands is brand trust, which reduces the uncertainty that individuals may feel toward a brand (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001) and helps people make decisions regarding brands (Lee et al., 2011). Brand attitude has been found to be positively related to brand trust (Kim et al., 2019), and both brand attitude and brand trust have been found to be positively associated with purchase intention in influencer marketing (Munnukka et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Thus, we suggest the following two hypotheses:

H5. Brand attitude is positively related to brand trust.

H6. Brand trust is positively related to purchase intention.

When a transgression occurs that leads to feelings of betrayal, a negative brand attitude is expected to result, producing a lower level of brand trust (Folse et al., 2013). For this reason, we also suggest negative indirect effects on the part of influencer betrayal on brand attitude, brand trust and purchase intention:

H7. Following an influencer transgression, influencer betrayal has negative and indirect effects on a) brand attitude, b) brand trust and c) purchase intention toward the endorsed brand.

Because brand betrayals have been found to fracture relationships between consumers and brands (Reimann et al., 2018), even leading to negative behaviours toward brands when there is a lack of brand recovery effort (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017; Tan et al., 2021), consumers are expected to have lower levels of positive attitudes and trust toward a betraying brand. For this reason, we suggest the following two hypotheses:

H8. Following a brand transgression, brand betrayal negatively affects brand attitude.

H9. Following a brand transgression, brand attitude mediates the relationship between brand attitude and brand trust, where brand betrayal has negative and indirect effects on brand trust.

Because a trusted, positive relationship with a social media influencer is connected with a positive trusting relationship with a brand the influencer has endorsed (Reinikainen et al., 2020), we suggest that this effect may also function in the reverse direction: feelings of trust toward a brand should be connected with perceptions about the endorsing influencer and the relationship with said influencer. Therefore, the following two hypotheses are suggested:

H10. Brand trust is positively related to influencer coolness.

H11. Influencer coolness is positively related to a parasocial relationship with the influencer.

Based on the previous relationships, we also suggest our final hypothesis about the negative indirect effects of brand betrayal on purchase intention, influencer coolness and parasocial relationships. Our argument here is that, when consumers feel betrayed by a brand they have trusted, they are less likely to purchase or revisit the brand without a recovery effort (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017; Tan et al., 2021). In the same vein, these betrayed consumers should perceive a lower level of coolness with regard to a social media influencer who has endorsed the betraying brand. Consequently, they should be less likely to maintain a parasocial relationship with said influencer. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H12. Following a brand transgression, brand betrayal has negative and indirect effects on a) purchase intention, b) influencer coolness and c) the likelihood of a parasocial relationship with the influencer.

4. Method

An online survey was created using Qualtrics. Two hundred and fifty adults from across the US (106 men; age 19–74, M_{age} = 34) were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in the study in exchange for a small reward. The participants were informed that the study was interested in the psychological factors that affect individuals' attitudes. They were first asked to list a social media influencer who they preferred and frequently followed on social media. Next, the respondents were asked to list a favourable brand that they had used. The respondents were then asked about the likelihood of an influencer endorsement through the following question: 'In your opinion, how likely is it that influencer X would endorse and recommend brand X on social media?' (1 = not at all likely to 7 = very likely) (M = 4.98 vs. midpoint 4; $t(249) = 8.38$, $p < .001$). After that, the respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two following transgression scenarios:

> **Influencer transgression.** Imagine that it is revealed to you that *the listed influencer* has bought followers for himself/herself on Instagram, YouTube and other social media channels. *The listed influencer* intentionally misleads you by positioning himself/herself as an authentic and popular influencer. With the help of these paid, fake followers, *the listed influencer* has pretended to be more popular than he/she is and tried to attract interest and sponsorships from brands to maximise personal income. For your information, *the listed brand* has been endorsed by *the listed influencer* in several social media posts.
>
> **Brand transgression.** Imagine that it is revealed to you that *the listed brand* intentionally misleads you by positioning itself as more ethical than its competitors. The truth is that *the listed brand* has been avoiding its responsibility to society by neglecting its code of conduct and ethical code, specifically participating in unethical practices, such as neglecting to ensure the safety of its employees and customers. Further, the brand aims to maximise its profit without treating its employees fairly. Also, the brand failed to inform you of a data breach, choosing instead to reward the hackers who had access to the customers' information to cover up its incompetence, giving away information such as your demographics and behavioural data. For your information, *the listed brand* is endorsed by *the listed influencer* in several social media posts.

As pictured in Figures 1A and 1B, we propose that individuals travel different kinds of paths during the psychological process, starting from either the influencer transgression or brand transgression scenario. Thus, after reading the scenario, the respondents were asked to answer a manipulation check question: "Have you personally experienced an influencer/a brand that intentionally misled, took advantage of or exploited you as somehow presented in the given scenario?" (0 = No; 1 = Yes). Next, the respondents in the influencer transgression condition were asked to answer items about influencer betrayal (Tan et al., 2021), parasocial relationships (Munnukka et al., 2019), influencer coolness (Warren et al., 2019), brand attitude (Priester and Petty, 2003), brand trust (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001) and purchase intention (Söderlund and Öhman, 2003). The respondents in the brand transgression condition were asked to indicate their assessments of brand betrayal, brand attitude, brand trust, purchase intention, influencer coolness and a parasocial relationship. Apart from the one word interchanged between the items on influencer betrayal and brand betrayal, all other items were similar across the two conditions. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 to 7.

To check for manipulation, the respondents in the influencer (vs. brand) transgression condition reported a lower level of parasocial relationships ($M_{influencer}$ = 4.11 vs. M_{brand} = 4.87; $t(248)$ = -3.94, $p < .001$) and influencer coolness ($M_{influencer}$ = 4.55 vs. M_{brand} = 5.27; $t(248)$ = -3.78, $p < .001$), whereas the respondents in the brand (vs. influencer) transgression condition reported a lower level of brand attitude (M_{brand} = -0.94 vs. $M_{influencer}$ = 1.53; $t(248)$ = -11.72, $p < .001$), brand trust (M_{brand} = 3.31 vs. $M_{influencer}$ = 5.37; $t(248)$ = -10.05, $p < .001$) and purchase intention (M_{brand} = 3.69 vs. $M_{influencer}$ = 5.54; $t(248)$ = -8.47, $p < .001$). In terms of personally related experience, 116 respondents in the influencer transgression condition indicated that they had encountered similar betrayals (91 per cent; χ^2 (84.50), $p <.001$), whereas 105 respondents in the brand transgression condition indicated that they had encountered similar betrayals (85 per cent; χ^2 (63.48), $p < 0.001$). We decided to include all responses for the subsequent analysis because there were no statistically significant differences regarding participation time ($p > 0.10$) and the investigated constructs ($p > 0.05$).

5. Results

As presented in Table 1, the measurement models showed sufficient reliability and validity, as recommended by Hair et al. (2010) ($\chi^2/d.f.$ = 1.894, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .060, non-normed fit index [NNFI] = .941, comparative fit index [CFI] = .971 and standardised root mean square residual [SRMR] = .034). All the Cronbach's alphas and composite reliabilities exceeded a value of .85. The results of the discriminant validity analysis showed that the square root of average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded the correlations between all pairs of constructs (Table 2).

Table 3 demonstrates that both structural models fit the data well (influencer: $\chi^2/d.f.$ = 1.559, RMSEA = .066, NNFI = .905, CFI = .963 and SRMR = .051; brand: $\chi^2/d.f.$ = 1.611, RMSEA = .071, NNFI = .877, CFI = .949 and SRMR = .089). In the influencer transgression model, the results revealed that influencer betrayal has negative effects on parasocial relationships (H1: β = -.40; t = -4.20, $p \leq .001$) but does not significantly predict influencer coolness (H3: β = -.08; t = -1.37, $p > .05$). In line with our hypotheses, parasocial relationships significantly and positively predicted influencer coolness (H2: β = .84; t = 11.56, $p \leq .001$), influencer coolness was significantly and positively related to endorsed brand attitude (H4: β = .42; t = 4.83, $p \leq .001$), brand attitude significantly and positively predicted brand trust (H5: β = .89; t = 13.50, $p \leq .001$) and, finally, brand trust was significantly and positively associated with purchase intention for the endorsed brand (H6: β = .86; t = 15.36, $p \leq .001$). Thus, H1, H2, H4, H5 and H6 are all supported.

Table 1
Results of standardized factor loading, Cronbach's Alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted and model fit indices.

Constructs	(n) = 250 SFL	α	CR	AVE
Influencer (brand) betrayal (Tan et al., 2021)		.88	.86	.68
PIB1: To what extent does influencer (brand) X intend to take advantage of you?	.83			
PIB2: To what extent does influencer (brand) X intentionally mislead you?	.81			
PIB3: To what extent does influencer (brand) X try to exploit you?	.86			
Parasocial relationship (Munnukka et al., 2019)		.95	.93	.68
PSR1: I look forward to watching influencer X on her/his channel	.87			
PSR2: If influencer X appeared on another online channel, I would watch that post or video	.87			
PSR3: When I'm reading or watching influencer X, I feel as if I am part of her/his group	.89			
PSR4: I think influencer X is like an old friend	.84			
PSR5: Influencer X makes me feel comfortable as if I am with friends	.89			
PSR6: When influencer X shows me how she/he feels about the brand, it helps me make up my own mind about the brand	.81			
Influencer coolness (Warren et al., 2019)		.95	.93	.65
PCO1: I think influencer X is extraordinary	.90			
PCO2: I think influencer X is appealing	.89			
PCO3: I think influencer X is energetic	.83			
PCO4: I think influencer X has high status	.83			
PCO5: I think influencer X is original	.89			
PCO6: I think influencer X has her/his iconic style	.84			
PCO7: I think influencer X is popular	.81			
Brand attitude (Priester & Petty, 2003)		.98	.97	.90
After the exposure of the incident, I feel … toward brand X				
BA1: negative (-3) versus positive (+3)	.96			
BA2: bad (-3) versus good (+3)	.96			
BA3: unfavorable (-3) versus favorable (+3)	.97			
Brand trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001)		.96	.94	.84
After the exposure of the incident, …				
BT1: I trust brand X	.95			
BT2: I rely on brand X	.92			
BT3: Brand X is an honest brand	.94			

CFA model fit indices:
Study 1: $\chi^2/d.f.$ = 1.894, RMSEA = .060, NNFI = .941, CFI = .971, SRMR = .034
Notes:
SFL = Standardized factor loadings, all loadings are significant below 0.001 level and less than 0.01 difference in loading when comparing the CFA and second order CFA; α = Cronbach's Alpha; CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted; One-item purchase intention was included in the measurement model analysis as an observed variable

To test H3 and H7, which relate to spill-over effects, and examine the indirect effect of influencer betrayal on other constructs, we used SPSS AMOS 25 to conduct an indirect effect analysis with 10,000 bootstrapped samples and a 99% confidence level for the confidence intervals; the results of the indirect model show that influencer betrayal has negative indirect effects on influencer coolness (H3: β = -.34, SE = .08; CI [-.543, -.133]), brand attitude (H7a: β = -.18, SE = .05; CI [-.302, -.072]), brand trust (H7b: β = -.16, SE = .04; CI [-.284, -.060]) and purchase intention (H7c: β = -.14, SE = .04; CI [-.253, -.049]). Thus, H3 and H7 are supported.

In the brand transgression condition, the results of the structural modelling revealed that brand betrayal has negative effects on brand attitude (H8: β = -.62; t = -6.64, $p \leq .001$) but does not significantly predict brand trust (H9: β = .01; t = 0.04, $p > .05$). As expected, brand

Table 2
Results of the discriminant validity analysis.

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Influencer (brand) betrayal	**.835**					
2. Parasocial relationship	-.232**	**.863**				
3. Influencer coolness	-.221*	.847*	**.857**			
4. Brand attitude	-.302**	.088	.050	**.964**		
5. Brand trust	-.261**	.146*	.094	.901**	**.938**	
6. Purchase intention	-.238**	.159*	.099	.829**	.888**	–[a]

Notes:
** . Correlation is significant less than .001 level (2-tailed)
* . Correlation is significant less than .05 level (2-tailed)
[a] Not applicable as it is an observed variable
Square root of AVE in bold

attitude significantly and positively predicted brand trust (H5: β = .92; t = 13.35, $p \leq .001$), brand trust is positively associated with purchase intention (H6: β = .85; t = 14.39, $p \leq .001$), brand trust significantly and positively predicted influencer coolness (H10: β = .19; t = 1.92, p = .054) and, finally, influencer coolness was significantly and positively related to parasocial relationship (H11: β = .78; t = 7.93, $p \leq .001$). Thus, H8, H9, H10 and H11 are supported, whereas the results of H5 and H6 were replicated.

In terms of the spill-over effects testing, we followed a similar indirect effect analysis as in the influencer transgression model. The results of the indirect model show that brand betrayal has negative indirect effects on brand trust (H9: β = -.57, SE = .07; CI [-.701, -.468]), purchase intention (H12a: β = -.48, SE = .07; CI [-.592, -.366]), influencer coolness (H12b: β = -.11, SE = .05; CI [-.192, -.025]) and parasocial relationships (H12c: β = -.08, SE = .04; CI [-.160, -.020]). Thus, H9 and H12 are supported.

To ensure the robustness of our hypothesised models, we further conducted a respecified model by investigating the significance level of the path estimates that were included in the hypothesised models (appendices A and B). Apart from the hypothesised path estimates, there was no additional significant level of path estimates in the respecified model. Thus, our hypothesised model has fulfilled its effect stability requirements and has demonstrated a high degree of internal validity (Hair et al., 2010).

6. General Discussion

In the current study, we found that influencer betrayal after an influencer transgression scenario negatively affects the follower's parasocial relationship with the influencer, which fully mediates the relationship between the betrayal and influencer coolness. Influencer betrayal was also found to negatively affect brand attitude, brand trust and purchase intention through parasocial relationships and influencer coolness. This suggests that a betrayal by an influencer affects not only the relationship that the influencer has with their own followers but also the brand that the influencer has endorsed and the relationships that individuals have with the brand.

We also found that brand betrayal after a brand transgression scenario negatively affects brand attitude, which fully mediates the relationship between the betrayal, brand trust and purchase intention. Brand trust was also found to be positively associated with influencer coolness. Therefore, brand betrayal was found to negatively affect the coolness of the influencer who had endorsed the brand and parasocial relationships with the influencer through brand attitude and brand trust. This goes to show that endorsing brands that commit moral violations can be damaging to the relationships that influencers have with their followers.

Table 3
Key findings from structural modeling analysis.

Direct effects			Influencer transgression ($n = 128$) β	*t* value	Brand transgression ($n = 122$) β	*t* value
H1: Influencer betrayal	→	Parasocial relationship	-.40[**]	-4.20	–[a]	
H2: Parasocial relationship	→	Influencer coolness	.84[**]	11.56	–[a]	
H3: Influencer betrayal	→	Influencer coolness	-.08	-1.37	–[a]	
H4: Influencer coolness	→	Brand attitude	.42[**]	4.83	–[a]	
H5: Brand attitude	→	Brand trust	.89[**]	13.50	.92[**]	13.35
H6: Brand trust	→	Purchase intention	.86[**]	15.36	.85[**]	14.39
H8: Brand betrayal	→	Brand attitude	–[a]		-.62[**]	-6.64
H9: Brand betrayal	→	Brand trust	–[a]		.01	0.04
H10: Brand trust	→	Influencer coolness	–[a]		.19[*n]	1.92
H11: Influencer coolness	→	Parasocial relationship	–[a]		.78[**]	7.93
Influencer transgression condition: Indirect effects			β (SE) (lower and upper CI)			
H3: Influencer betrayal	→	Influencer coolness	-.34 (.08) [**] (CI = [-.543, -.133])		–[a]	
H7a: Influencer betrayal	→	Brand attitude	-.18 (.05) [**] (CI = [-.302, -.072])		–[a]	
H7b: Influencer betrayal	→	Brand trust	-.16 (.04) [**] (CI = [-.284, -.060])		–[a]	
H7c: Influencer betrayal	→	Purchase intention	-.14 (.04) [**] (CI = [-.253, -.049])		–[a]	
Brand transgression condition: Indirect effects						
H9: Brand betrayal	→	Brand trust	–[a]		-.57 (.07) [**] (CI = [-.701, -.468])	
H12a: Brand betrayal	→	Purchase intention	–[a]		-.48 (.07) [**] (CI = [-.592, -.366])	
H12b: Brand betrayal	→	Influencer coolness	–[a]		-.11 (.05) [*] (CI = [-.192, -.025])	
H12c: Brand betrayal	→	Parasocial relationship	–[a]		-.08 (.04) [*] (CI = [-.160, -.020])	
$\chi^2/d.f.$			1.559		1.611	
RMSEA			.066		.071	
NNFI			.905		.877	
CFI			.963		.949	
SRMR			.051		.089	

Notes:
[**] $p \leq .001$;
[*] $p \leq .05$;
[*n] $p = .054$
CI = confidence intervals;
[a] Not included in the analysis; Indirect test with 10,000 bootstrapping and a 99% confidence level for confidence intervals

6.1. Theoretical implications

Our research contributes to understanding the dark side of influencer endorsements and how relationships between social media influencers, brands and individuals can also break. Although several earlier studies have examined the influence of negative celebrity information on brands (e.g., Carrillat et al., 2014; Kelly et al. 2016; Till and Shimp 1998; Zhou and Whitla 2013), little research has been carried out on how influencer betrayals affect endorsed brands and, conversely, how brand betrayals affect endorsing influencers. While earlier literature recognises influencer transgressions (Cocker et al., 2021), their dynamics are still understudied. Our findings complement the study of Colliander and Erlandsson (2015), who found no significant negative impact on the part of blogger transgression on brand attitude. In the current study, such a connection was found, not directly but through the construct of influencer coolness.

Another theoretical contribution lies in extending the construct of brand coolness (Warren et al., 2019) to the context of social media influencers. Influencer coolness was found to be positively associated with parasocial relationships and brand attitude. Because brand coolness has been seen as a desirable and profitable feature for brands (Warren and Campbell, 2014), our results suggest that it is a desirable feature for influencers as well. We also demonstrated both the vulnerability of influencer coolness after influencer and brand betrayals and the importance of coolness in brand endorsements through the connection that coolness has with brand attitude and brand trust.

The current study also extends the literature on brand betrayal (Tan et al., 2021) to the context of influencer betrayal. Moral violations on the part of brands can affect the relationships that individuals have with brands (Reimann et al., 2018), and the feelings of betrayal caused by influencers can affect their relationships with their followers. A further finding is that these emotions can spill over, even to seemingly innocent parties: although, in our research design, the condition of the influencer transgression scenario was unrelated to the associating brands and the brand transgression scenario was unrelated to the endorsing influencers, the effect can still be traced to brands and influencers, respectively. This indicates that partners can be found 'guilty by association' (Carrillat et al., 2014), even though they are innocent of the transgression made by the other party and may not even be aware of it. However, the results may also indicate 'double betrayal', in which an individual first feels betrayed by a favoured brand and is then hit by another wave of betrayal after realising that a favoured influencer has endorsed such a deceitful and unethical brand. The individual has been led on by not just one but two trusted friends.

In terms of methodology, our research contributes to instrument development (i.e., measurement items for influencer betrayal), emphasizing how to tackle a sequential negative response from consumers or followers after an influencer transgression.

6.2. Practical implications

Collaborations between social media influencers and brands are becoming more common, and long-term relationships are becoming the ideal, instead of short campaigns (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). However, as the relationships between influencers, followers and brands become intertwined, both positive and negative emotions can become entangled. Therefore, it is important to understand the psychology behind these relationships.

If negative associations spill over from the influencer to the brand and from the brand to the influencer, both parties should weigh the potential benefits and consider the potential losses caused by a collaboration. Strategic cautiousness and the probing of partnerships may prove valuable. In fact, the mere awareness and acknowledgement of a potential spill over may be beneficial because such events may occur even when the parties are unaware of these links (Bowden et al., 2017).

Brands have been understood as increasingly responsible for their actions' effects of society at large, and our findings call for a new type of responsibility: *collaboration responsibility*. Collaboration responsibility is expected from both brands and influencers in that existing associations or past transgressions should be openly discussed before collaborations begin. This responsibility implies a shift from the typical self-care approach, in which the parties are mostly worried about their own reputation, toward an understanding that influencers and brands have responsibilities regarding one another's reputation. This extended responsibility should reach the influencers' followers, brand customers and other stakeholders and include considering how these other parties may be affected and the potential long-term implications of collaboration. For brands, collaboration responsibility also includes ensuring that the cooperation allows the influencer to maintain or even deepen the relationship the influencer has with his/her followers. Moreover, because many influencers and their followers are still very young and adolescents are known to both become elated by brands but also regret their commitments (Dhir et al., 2016: 427), brands should be held to a greater standard in terms of ensuring the safety and well-being of young people.

7. Limitations and future research

The present research has certain limitations, but it also opens avenues for additional studies. First, a real brand and real influencer were used in this research, and the original attitude towards the influencer and brand may have affected the proposed effect. In fact, all experiments carry their own risks, and in the spirit of collaboration responsibility, we are aware of the risk that our conditioning could have formed unwanted associations in the minds of the respondents. To advance our understanding of the field, however, we feel that the use of self-reported influencers and brands was necessary. In the future, a fictitious influencer and hypothetical brand could be used to test the effect. The use of online experiments with MTurk also raises the issue of validity. Replication in a field setting with a larger sample size might be helpful in future studies; in addition, more culturally and geographically diverse responses would help as well.

The research design contained two conditions with two transgression scenarios. A control group with no transgression scenarios would have helped to verify the results. The results were also limited to the presented scenarios. The precise scenarios were chosen to test the model, but other potential transgressions should be tested in future studies. Moreover, future studies should measure the severity of various kinds of transgressions and the margin for operations on both sides regarding different transgressions. We also acknowledge that the spill-over effect may be offset by other potential moderating effects, such as self-brand connection or self-congruency (Tan et al., 2019) with the social media influencer. Thus, future studies should test the model with additional moderators.

8. Conclusion

The current study explores the intertwined relationships between social media influencers, brands and individuals on social media. Although positive emotions have been found to spill over from influencers to brands (Reinikainen et al., 2020), the effects of negative emotions have mostly been overlooked, such as the negative feelings that are caused by trust violations. The present study specifically examined the effects of influencer and brand betrayals on endorsed brands and endorsing influencers, respectively.

The results show a risky two-way effect: a transgression on the part of either party can reflect on the other party by shattering trusting relationships. This is something that both influencers (Lövheim, 2011) and brands (Winchel, 2018) contemplate, and the current study shows that the risk is real. Specifically, we demonstrate that an influencer transgression has resulted in negative impacts on the endorsed brand's attitude, trust and purchase intention, whereas a brand transgression would negatively affect the endorsing influencer coolness and parasocial relationships with their supporters.

Based on the findings, one might ask whether breaks in trust in the relationships between influencers, followers and brands could hold a deeper significance for society at large. Individuals' experiences with other individuals, institutions and organisations have been linked to the level of generalised trust in society (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005). It has also been suggested that increased levels of distrust lead to more distrust, thus creating a 'vicious circle of distrust' (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019). Whether this same logic applies to influencers and brands remains unclear, but it should be considered a possibility that these feelings of betrayal could spill over to other areas of individuals' lives, thus diminishing the likelihood of trusting others and even contributing to diminished generalised trust in society.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.techfore.2021.120990.

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