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"How I think, Who I am"—Role of social media influencers (SMIs) as change agents

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Abstract

Social media influencers (SMIs) have gained critical standing due to their capability to generate trust and alter behaviors. Trust in the influencer has further encouraged the followers to value the relationship equally and sometimes more than family and friends. In a mixed-method approach, the study investigates the role played by SMIs as change agents by generating trust. Partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to assess the measurement and structural models. Findings reveal that influencer characteristics—interactivity and informativeness—significantly impact the followers' social, physical, and emotional self-concept. Trust fully mediated the relationship between interactivity and emotional self-concept, and partially mediated the relationship between interactivity and social & physical self-concept. However, informativeness was not significant in building trust leading to self-concept. The findings imply that SMIs must engage in more consistent, meaningful, and real conversations with their followers to create an effective communication strategy. The current study based on the findings develops a conceptual model to demonstrate the impact of SMI characteristics on self-concept, by generating trust.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have observed an ever-increasing adaptation of social media sites and trends. Influencer marketing has gained a significant market share and consumer mind space within social media. While most influencers discuss their everyday life by sharing their experiences in style, sports, health, and fitness, some SMIs also share their thoughts about social issues, such as body positivity, gender equality, and mental health. Their posts, conversations, and interactions regarding social issues provide SMIs with a unique identity, develop high trust, and in the process increase followers' loyalty.

SMIs are known to express their opinion by sharing their brand experience and personal life with their followers. A significant share of prior research on SMIs is focused on the impact of sponsorship disclosure on brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). In this regard, Stubb and Colliander (2019) found that nonsponsored posts generate higher source and message credibility. Evans et al. (2019) have shown that disclosure of advertisements at the time of content sharing negatively affects influencer credibility. Research has focused on source credibility attributes that positively affect attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness (Gong & Li, 2019). Lou and Yuan (2019) studied the effects of the credibility of messages on attitude and buying intention. Lee and Eastin (2020) discuss influencers' personality perception as constructed through their posts and images.

Prior research has also evaluated SMIs from other perspectives of para-social relationships (Reinikainen et al., 2020), and sponsorship disclosure (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2020). Studies have also evaluated characteristics of SMI, such as attractiveness, credibility, expertise, prestige, information, and instructiveness, originality, uniqueness, quality, and quantity authenticity and trust (Casalo et al., 2020; Jun & Yi, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Esteban-Millat, et al., 2020; Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Giordano, & Lopez-Lopez, 2020). SMI content factors, such as visually pleasing content, entertainment value of content, and informativeness (Ki & Kim, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Stubb & Colliander, 2019) have been discussed in earlier work. Researchers have focused on identifying if the number of followers and the number of times a post is shared has an impact on the advertising effectiveness of the SMIs'

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branded content (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) and if sponsorship disclosure and its impact on ad recognition and intention to buy (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

SMI content factors, such as visually engaging content (Ki & Kim, 2019), entertainment value of content (Lou & Yuan, 2019), and informativeness (Stubb & Colliander, 2019) have been discussed in earlier work. Researchers have focused on identifying if the number of followers and the number of times a post is shared has an impact on the advertising effectiveness of the SMIs' branded content (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) and if sponsorship disclosure and its impact on ad recognition and intention to buy (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

Research however needs to consider the followers' perspective regarding the impact of an influencer's content on the followers as a person rather than just as a consumer. At present, there is a paucity of research on the role of SMIs as change agents focusing on their followers' self-concept. Further, the impact on self-concept will increase influencer valuation. Therefore, given the critical value of influencer characteristics, we study SMIs' role in their followers' lives.

The authors opine that influencers bring social change by initiating a thought-provoking dialogue through their content and making a difference in the lives of their followers. The research objective therefore is to study the role of SMIs as social change agents. The authors aim to study SMI characteristics that create trust and impact the followers' self-concept. The study aims to answer the following research questions (Refer Figure 1):

RQ1: What are the SMI characteristics that create trust and impact followers' self-concept?
RQ2: What is the relationship between influencer characteristics and self-concept?
RQ3: What is the role of trust in influencing follower's social, physical, and emotional self-concept?

This article has been divided into several sections. Section 1 gives an introduction and background to the rationale for the study. Section 2 deals with a systematic literature review (SPAR-4-SLR) on social media influencers (SIMs) and the proposed hypothesis. Section 3 dealt with qualitative study and results. The quantitative analysis and findings of the proposed hypotheses are given in Section 4, followed by the conclusion and limitations of the study in Section 5.

2 | REVIEW OF LITERATURE

SIMs become experts in fashion, lifestyle, gaming, and fitness by sharing their personal lives, lifestyle, and methods on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok (Jin et al., 2019). As a result, SMIs are perceived to be relatable, accessible, and approachable, who are genuine, have an unbiased opinion, and are, therefore, more credible, and trustworthy than traditional celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Influencers cultivate a dedicated and loyal fan following by creating fascinating stories about their interests and lifestyle (Ki et al., 2020) through videos, photos, stories, and activities (Childers et al., 2019) on social media. Lou and Yuan (2019) define SIMs as content creators who are experts in their field and have many followers.

The definition describes influencers as content generators who also carry the status of an expert with a huge network of followers (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). They are perceived to be a credible source of information for their followers (Schouten et al., 2019). According to Lee and Junqué de Fortuny (2022), SMIs strengthen and change consumer attitudes toward brands.

SMIs are usually normal grassroots individuals who create a likeability through their content, unlike traditional celebrities who are public figures (Lou & Yuan, 2019). SMI such as Falguni Vasavada (#falgunivasavada) started as social media users and became micro-influencer to macro-influencers by sharing their life and lifestyle on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Turner (2010) has termed this phenomenon as a "demotic turn,"—which refers to the appearance of regular social media users and their experience on social media.

SMIs build a relationship with their followers by creating content in a conversational form (Tolson, 2010). Additionally, through the self-disclosure of advertisements, they create authenticity (Ferchaud et al., 2018) and earn trust (Huang, 2015). In turn, it invites interaction and engagement with followers. While influencers monetize their fame (Liljander et al., 2015), they also engage in community building, advocate for social change, and help their followers with their lives by providing motivation, solutions, and advice to their issues (Archer & Harrigan, 2016). According to Reinikainen et al. (2020), followers also develop a parasocial relationship with their favorite influencers, who not only give recommendations about brands but also provide advice and guidance regarding forming a particular lifestyle.

2.1 | Study one—SPAR-4-SLR approach

2.1.1 | Methods

We used the scientific procedure and rationale for systematic literature review (SPAR-4-SLR) proposed by Paul et al. (2021) to conduct a review of the literature. The three stages of the SPAR-4-SLR protocol, namely assembling, acquisition, and arranging, were followed. The extensive search aided us with the final 111 articles identified for inclusion in Study 1. Table 1 gives an overview of the outcomes and consequences of influencer marketing. The antecedent-decision-outcomes (ADO) framework (Paul et al., 2021) helped us in identify antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcome variables for the current study on influencer marketing.

2.1.2 | Discussion

The review of the literature identified 45 factors affecting consumer behavior on SMIs and influencer marketing appearing under seven categories: influencer characteristics, behavioral orientation,

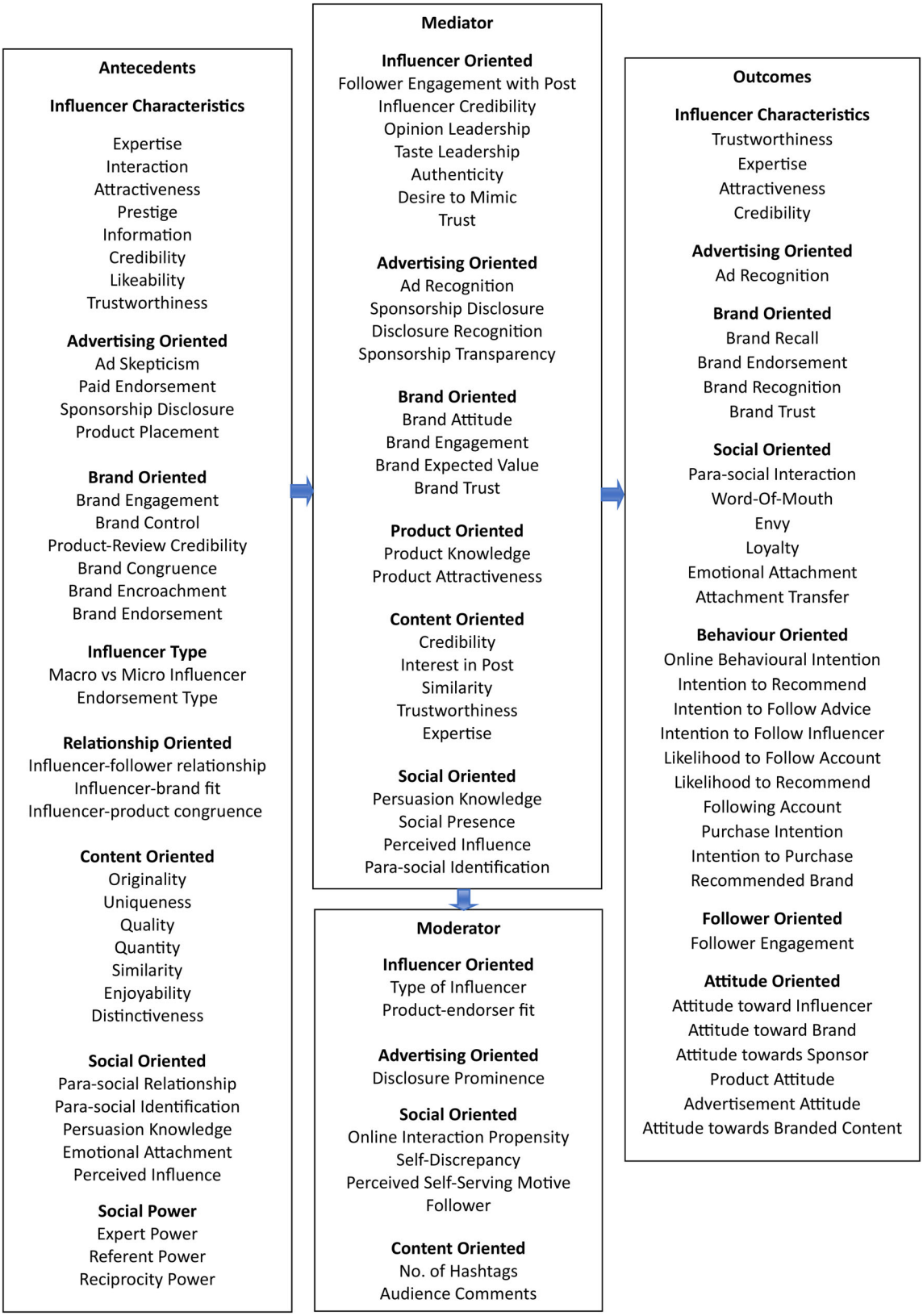


FIGURE 1 SPAR-4-SLR.

influencer relationship & social orientation, product & brand orientation, advertising oriented, social media content, and attitude oriented. The findings from SPAR-4-SLR helped in identifying a key gap in the literature. While prior literature has extensively discussed constructs, it does not discuss the role of SMIs in the lives of their followers in terms of self-concept.

TABLE 1 Factors affecting consumer behaviour toward social media influencers.

Sr. no.	Antecedents/mediator/moderator/outcome	Decisions/findings	References
Influencer characteristics			
1	Trustworthiness	Followers found influencers trustworthy when exposed to their content	Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Esteban-Millat, et al. (2020), Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Giordano, and Lopez-Lopez (2020)
2	Expertise	Influencer expertise affects consumers' attitudes positively which forms favorable behavioral outcome	Schouten et al. (2019)
3	Attractiveness	Attractiveness in influencers was found to increase influencer credibility	Ki and Kim (2019)
4	Information	Information when provided creates an image of an influencer who is competent, ideal, and related to them	Sanchez-Fernandez and Jimenez-Castillo (2021)
5	Inspiration	SMIs' persona of inspiration affected followers' perception resulting in emotional attachment	Ki et al. (2020)
6	Prestige	Prestige affects consumers' attitudes toward social media influencers	Ki and Kim (2019)
7	Credibility	Influencer credibility positively affects brand trust, purchase intention, and attitude toward influencer	Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Esteban-Millat, et al. (2020), Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Giordano, and Lopez-Lopez (2020), Mettenheim and Wiedmann (2021)
8	Interactivity	Interactivity was found to have a positive relationship with the perceived authenticity	Jun and Yi (2020)
9	Authenticity	Authenticity was found to have mediated influencer interactivity and impacted trust in the sponsored brand	Steils et al. (2022)
10	Desire to mimic	Five aspects—attractiveness, prestige, expertise, information, and interaction impact follower's attitude toward influencers	Ki and Kim (2019)
Behavioral orientation			
11	Behavioral intention	Factors such as sponsorship disclosure, ad recognition, and WOM forms positive behavioral intentions	Sands et al. (2022)
12	Purchase intention	Influencer characteristics, sponsorship disclosure, trust, and brand attitude positively impact purchase intention	Reinikainen et al. (2020)
13	Perceptual outcomes	Sponsored advertisement has a positive impact on sponsorship transparency	Evans et al. (2019)
14	Recommendation intent	Explicit advertising disclosure by influencers caused consumers' inferences regarding influencers' sincere recommendation intent in terms of posting content	Han et al. (2021), Jegham and Bouzaabia (2022)
Influencer relationship & social orientation			
15	Parasocial interaction	Brand recall and engagement intentions do not affect Parasocial interaction with the influencer.	Hess et al. (2022)
16	Type of influencer	Influencer type does not moderate the effect of disclosure	Sands et al. (2022)
17	Word-of-mouth (WOM)	Sponsorship disclosure impacts purchase intentions and Word-of-Mouth (WOM) intentions	Jin and Phua (2014)
18	Influencer-follower relationship	The influencer-follower relationship is not affected by ad recognition	Dhanesh and Duthler (2019)
19	Envy	Consumers exposed to SMI posts experience envy greater than those exposed to posts by traditional celebrities	Jin et al. (2019)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Sr. no.	Antecedents/mediator/moderator/outcome	Decisions/findings	References
20	Social presence	Social presence impacts trust in influencers along with attitude toward a brand	Jin et al. (2019)
21	Self-discrepancy	Findings reveal the impact of self-discrepancy on followers' attitude	Jin et al. (2019)
22	Emotional attachment	Followers form an emotional attachment with influencers through continuous interaction	Jun and Yi (2020)
23	Loyalty	Followers who experience emotional attachment to influencers show higher brand loyalty	Jun and Yi (2020)
24	Social anxiety	Social anxiety plays a critical role in forming a narcissistic social attitude	Jiang et al. (2021)
25	Persuasion knowledge	When a follower is exposed to the ad by an influencer, it forms positive attitudes through persuasion knowledge	Kim et al. (2021)
26	Social power	Social power derived from influencers determine follower economic and social satisfaction	Wang et al. (2021)
Product & brand oriented			
27	Brand recall	Disclosure affects brand recall and intentions to engage with the post	Boerman (2020)
28	Brand engagement	Brand engagement by SMI determines the effectiveness of the advertising message delivered	Chen et al. (2021), Foroughi et al. (2023)
29	Brand endorsement	Follower knowledge of brand endorsement relates to advertisement recognition and purchase intention	Dhanesh and Duthler (2019), Dumas and Stough (2022)
30	Brand trust	The follower's emotional attachment forms brand trust	Chen et al. (2021), Mettenheim and Wiedmann (2021)
31	Brand recognition	Brand recognition is found higher when promoted by the social media influencer	Jin and Ryu (2020)
32	Brand encroachment	A decrease in brand encroachment results in an increase in interactivity	Hamdan and Hwan (2022)
Advertising oriented			
33	Ad recognition	Ad recognition impacts follower's purchase intention based on an influencer's recommendation	Boerman (2020)
34	Sponsorship transparency	A prominent disclosure enhances users' perceived sponsorship transparency	Evans et al. (2019)
35	Sponsorship disclosure	Sponsorship disclosure impacts behavioral intention to engage with the influencer posts through advertisement recognition	Steils et al. (2022)
36	Advertisement skepticism	The number of followers predicts the effectiveness of advertising messages, reducing ad skepticism	Jang et al. (2020)
37	Product placement	Consumers exposed to influencer content indicate positive attitude when exposed to product placement	Jin and Muqaddam (2019)
Social media content			
38	Similarity	SMI persona of similarity affects followers' perception of relatedness	Schouten et al. (2019)
39	Enjoyability	Enjoyability positively influences followers to acquire the products/brands recommended	Ki et al. (2020)
40	Originality	The originality of content is a critical factor for an influencer to be perceived as an opinion leader	Casalo et al. (2020)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Sr. no.	Antecedents/mediator/moderator/outcome	Decisions/findings	References
41	Uniqueness	The uniqueness of content positively affects influencer perception and follower's adoption of the recommendation	Sands et al. (2022)
42	Perceived influence	Perceived influence from higher engagement and behavioral intention regarding recommended brands	Sanchez-Fernandez and Jimenez-Castillo (2021)
Attitude oriented			
43	Attitude toward the influencer	Influencer-product fit has a positive impact on the attitude toward the influencer	Cicco et al. (2020)
44	Attitude toward brand	Consumers exposed to SMI experience higher trust and positive attitudes toward the endorsed brand	Stubb and Colliander (2019)
45	Product attitude	Influencer-product congruence enhance product attitude	Kim and Kim (2021), Foroughi et al. (2023)

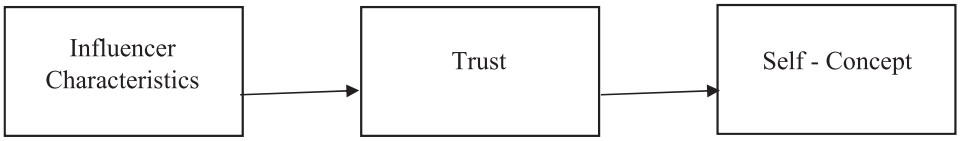


FIGURE 2 Proposed conceptual model for the study.

2.1.3 | Hypothesis development

The proposed conceptual model, illustrated in Figure 2, is based on the influence framework (Scheer & Stern, 1992). The objective is to study SMI characteristics that create trust in influencers, which impacts the followers' self-concept.

2.1.4 | Theoretical underpinning

Influence framework

The study adopted the influence framework (Scheer & Stern, 1992), which demonstrates the influence of an influencer to affect the follower's attitude and persuade them to engage in a specific manner. According to Scheer and Stern (1992), a consumer's attitude toward an influencer is affected by the type of influence used to achieve compliance and the outcomes from the behavior adopted by followers. The power dynamic of influence is established in four stages: (a) influence attempt, (b) attitudinal response by follower, (c) follower's willingness to comply, and (d) behavioral outcome of followers (Scheer & Stern, 1992).

Social comparison theory

Festinger (1954) in their seminal work theorized that people self-evaluate to assess their own abilities and opinions as compared with others. The theory further elaborates on three factors of comparison, first, who is the point of comparison; second, what is the motive of comparison; and third, what is the consequence of comparison (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Gerber et al. (2018) discusses a two directional comparison, namely, upward comparison and downward comparison. Upward comparison is when people compare themselves to those that they perceive to be superior to them. Downward comparison is when people compare themselves to those that are inferior or worse-off than themselves (Gerber et al., 2018). Upward comparison contains the risk of diminished sense of well-being, and has the potential to harm an individual's overall self-concept. Downward comparison is theorized to increase the sense of well-being and boost one's self-concept (Luo et al., 2018; Thornton & Moore, 1993).

With regards to the motives of comparison, upward comparison is associated with desire to self-evaluate, self-improve, and self-enhancement. Consumer's motive of self-improvement could lead them to learn and be inspired through upward comparison (Park & Park, 2017). With regards to consumer's reaction to social comparison, prior literature found that with change in significant life events consumers' experience change in self-perspective (Gibbons, 1999). Beyond upward and downward comparison, prior literature suggested the dispositional tendency to compare, irrespective of upward or downward comparison, also plays a role in emotional and relational development (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2014).

In the current study, we drew from the influencer framework and social comparison theory to explain a holistic perspective on the influence of SMI in affecting followers' self-concept. We argue that the first three stages of the influence framework mimic the influence of SMI. The first stage is the content posted by SMIs where they discuss social issues, such as body positivity, gender equality, and mental health operating as an influence attempt. In the second stage, the followers respond through comments on the SMI posts and direct messages to SMI. It provides feedback and forms interaction with the SMI, which operates as an attitudinal response. In the third stage, the follower shows willingness to comply with the reviews and

suggestions of the influencer. Through the social comparison theory, we stipulate that follower's comparison with SMI will operate as a self-improvement and self-enhancement stimuli resulting in change in followers' self-concept. We argue that the final stage of behavioral outcome will occur in terms of adoption of new products and services because of change in self-concept of the followers.

2.1.5 | Influencer account characteristics

Research on SMIs focused on influencer characteristics affecting behavior change has largely focused on attractiveness, prestige, informativeness, interactivity, likeability, and credibility. However, in the context of SMIs as social change agents, the interpretive research in study 2 found two critical characteristics, namely interaction and information that significantly impact followers' self-concept.

Interaction

According to Chung and Cho (2017), interaction is a critical quality affecting followers' trust. Ki and Kim (2019) discussed that consumers are likely to perceive influencers as greater opinion leaders when content is interactive. Influencer interactivity has been defined as a two-way communication between a SMIs and their followers. This interactivity occurs through comments and feedback (Jun & Yi, 2020).

Continuous communication with followers is manifested when even the smallest and most unimportant comment is responded to and answered by the influencer. This interaction helps followers in feeling safe and stable with the influencer. Further, interactivity helps in enhancing the perception of authenticity (Jun & Yi, 2020) and the feeling of relatedness (Ilicic et al., 2016). Interactivity, therefore, directly and positively impacts trust in influencers, as a consumer's experience increases with regular interactivity (Jun & Yi, 2020). While prior literature includes multiple factors and perspectives of interaction between influencers and followers, little has been discussed on the aspect of direct messaging or chat function provided by social media sites in which a follower has direct access to their favorite influencer and can message them in real-time, which further enhances trust in the influencer. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis (H1):

> **H1.** The interactivity of an influencer positively influences trust.

Information

Information provided by the influencers is one of the most crucial measures of an influencer's content quality. The quality of an influencer's post is critical to the influencer's effectiveness (Leung et al., 2022). According to Hwang and Shim (2010), an influencer's role as an opinion leader is to provide their followers with information that would attract further public attention. Consumers view influencer-provided information as trustworthy as they provide information by sharing their own experiences postusage (Alhidari et al., 2015). Ki and Kim (2019) have conceptualized information as the extent to which social media content is informative and interactive. We propose hypothesis (H2) as follows:

> **H2.** The informativeness of an influencer positively influences trust.

3 | STUDY TWO—QUALITATIVE STUDY

For the current study, we used a mixed-method design. According to Creswell and Clark (2007), a mixed method approach entails gathering, analyzing, and combining qualitative and quantitative data in a study to understand a research problem better. The study's typology was exploratory sequential design, used to look for variables in the study and create measurement items (Creswell & Clark, 2007). The objective of a two-phase exploratory design is to use the results of the first phase to develop hypotheses and questionnaire items for the second phase (Greene et al., 1989).

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with SMIs and their followers. In study 2, we conducted five in-depth interviews with SMIs to understand influencer characteristics that generate trust and impact the followers' self-concept in the influencers' opinion. After the analysis of SMI interviews, the authors extracted key influencer characteristics important for creating trust and self-concept. Using those characteristics, a semi-structured interview guideline was designed and 10 followers of the above-mentioned five influencers were interviewed. The objective of conducting qualitative research was to generate items for the quantitative phase of the study. We interviewed the influencers that discuss social issues, such as body positivity, gender equality, and mental health. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During our research, major themes emerged. The themes are as follows: informativeness, interaction, trust, and self-concept. We acknowledge that the themes and underlying dimensions overlap with existing literature (Ki & Kim, 2019). However, thematic analysis assisted us in identifying elements shared by all participants and reporting their experiences following the existing literature in the context of SMI as social change agents. The qualitative research helped identify the relationship between influencer characteristics, trust, and self-concept.

To ascertain the validity of the transcribed data, we invited four experts (two from industry and two from academia) who were avid researchers and familiar with the research topic to conduct a face validity check. Based on the experts' feedback, we made further modifications.

3.1 | Self-concept

Self-concept is linked with positive relation of happiness, achievement, and emotional & mental health (Marsh & O'Mara, 2008). It also addresses negative social relations issues, such as violence, victimization, bullying, and rejection (Lopez & DuBois, 2005). Self-concept is

an individual's perception of oneself developed through interpretation and interaction with the external environment. Self-concept is divided into three categories, namely, physical, social, and emotional self-concept (Shavelson et al., 1976). Self-concept is multifaceted and is divided into social, physical, and emotional self-concepts.

3.2 | Physical self-concept

Physical self-concept comprises physical ability self-concept and physical appearance self-concept (Marsh, 1992). Self-regard/presentation of self is composed of confidence and physical self-concept. Physical self-concept is viewed as a multidimensional model of self-concept. It measures appearance (attractiveness), strength (strong, powerful body), endurance, health, coordinating physical movements, physical activity, body fat, sports skills, flexibility, and feeling positive about one's physical self.

3.3 | Emotional self-concept

Emotional self-concept comprises self-concept for emotional states and emotional stability (Marsh, 1992). Leung et al. (2015) measure emotional stability as consumers' perception of being calm, relaxed, and emotionally stable.

3.4 | Social self-concept

Social self-concept comprises peer and significant others' self-concept (Marsh, 1992). According to Cobb (1976), social self-concept is when an individual believes they are loved and cared for as an esteemed member of a network.

3.5 | Interactivity to self-concept

The exploratory study found that influencer interactivity with followers caused a behavioral effect on the followers' self-concept. With continuous and long-term interaction with the influencers, followers experienced a change in all three types of self-concept: physical, social, and emotional. Through continuous exchange through comments and direct messages, followers discussed their reluctance to dress in a particular fashion due to the social stigma around it demotivating them. However, in the course of a continuous conversation with the influencer followers experienced an increase in confidence to try new styles and wear them with poise everywhere they went.

We propose the following hypotheses,

H3a. The interactivity of an influencer positively influences physical self-concept.

H3b. The interactivity of an influencer positively influences emotional self-concept.

H3c. The interactivity of an influencer positively influences social self-concept.

3.6 | Information to self-concept

Interviews with followers also found a direct relationship between the information provided by influencers and the followers' physical, emotional, and social self-concept information provided by influencers in their field of expertise encourages followers to try and experiment with the influencers' suggestions, such as trying a color they would usually not. This information also gives followers confidence and self-assurance to accept themselves as they are and go out into the world with heads held high.

H4a. The informativeness of an influencer positively influences physical self-concept.

H4b. The informativeness of an influencer positively influences emotional self-concept.

H4c. The informativeness of an influencer positively influences social self-concept.

3.7 | Trust in SIMs

Online influencer marketing is critical in leveraging brand marketing strategies and has proven effective in generating follower trust (Leung et al., 2022). Chetioui et al. (2020), defined trust, "as the degree to which followers trust influencers, both in what they say and in what they do." Trust is the degree to which the followers trust an influencer's judgment. Wang and Scheinbaum (2017) describe trust as the ability of influencers to create the perception of credibility, honesty, and integrity in the minds of their followers.

The prior literature has not studied the relationship between trust and self-concept. However, the exploratory study found a direct relationship between trust and physical, social, and emotional self-concept. The followers' trust in the influencer encouraged them to experiment with new things, further increasing their confidence. They found the courage to share and open up that side of their personality even to the larger society.

We propose the following hypotheses:

H5a. Trust in the influencer positively influences physical self-concept.

H5b. Trust in the influencer positively influences social self-concept.

H5c. Trust in the influencer positively influences emotional self-concept.

H6a H6b H6c. Trust mediates the relationship between interactivity and physical, social, and emotional self-concept.

H7a H7b H7c. Trust mediates the relationship between informativeness and physical, social, and emotional self-concept.

4 | STUDY THREE—QUANTITATIVE STUDY

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Sample profile

The sampling unit for the study was followers of SMIs who followed at least one influencer, who shares content related to body positivity, gender equality, and mental health, along with their content on other areas, such as fashion and lifestyle.

4.1.2 | Procedure

A sampling frame comprising undergraduate and postgraduate students from the universities where the authors were employed was procured. Simple random sampling was used to reach the respondents (Kelley et al., 2003). Screening questions that included followers who followed SMIs that promote social issues like body positivity, gender equality, and mental health, were included to reach the suitable sample. The respondents were informed of voluntary participation and assured of anonymity. The questionnaire introduction informed the respondents about the study's purpose. They were asked to fill out the survey based on their interaction with the SMIs on the three most popular social networks (YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram) (Statista, 2021) based on their experience of interacting with the SMIs in any of the networks. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: qualifying (whether the participant follows a social media influencer), the main study (closed-ended questions about the study's constructs as described above), and demographic information (age and gender).

4.1.3 | Measures

The study used preestablished scales from the literature with minimal modification in the wordings of the items used to remove ambiguity and similarly worded phrases. Along with it, the three items were extracted from qualitative research in study two and added to the survey. The item pool comprised 30 items.

4.1.4 | Pilot study

A pilot survey with Generation Y and Z was conducted with followers who followed at least one influencer. The study aimed to evaluate trust in SMIs' content and examine its role in influencing the social, physical, and emotional self-concept. We recruited 204 undergraduate and postgraduate students from the university where the authors were employed of whom 56.3% were males and the rest females. The average age of the sampling unit was 21.6 years. Exploratory factor analysis used principal axis factoring (PAF) and Promax rotation. PAF has no distributional assumptions (Fabrigar et al., 1999) and produces fewer Heywood cases (De Winter & Dodou, 2012). The minimum sample main study's minimum sample size (n_{min}) using the inverse square root method (Kock & Hadaya, 2018). Assuming a significance level of 5%, the minimum sample size was calculated using the following equation:

$$n_{min} > (2.486/|P_{min}|)^2$$

P_{min} is the value of the smallest path coefficient in the PLS path model. The minimum sample size required for our study with a P_{min} equal to 0.24, was 155 (Hair et al., 2019).

The descriptive statistics of the study are given below in Table 2.

4.2 | Main study

For the main study, we received 566 responses, out of which 78 were discarded as they were incomplete and failed to respond to attention-check questions appropriately. The constructs in the proposed model were subject to factor analysis using the SPSS Statistics software (Ver 24). We employed partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the data and test the proposed model.

4.2.1 | Statistical control (common method bias)

Common method bias was checked using procedural and statistical remedies (Podskoff et al., 2003). All the values for VIF were found to be less than 3.3 (Kock, 2015), thereby indicating no common method bias.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of the study.

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Excess kurtosis	Skewness
Interactivity	3.987	0.753	0.327	−0.516
Informativeness	3.099	1.055	−0.573	−0.134
Trust	4.085	0.773	0.759	−0.781
PSC	3.719	0.951	−0.199	−0.493
ESC	3.461	1.009	−0.41	−0.388
SSC	3.985	0.888	0.88	−0.935

Abbreviations: ESC, emotional self-concept; PSC, physical self-concept; SSC, social self-concept.

4.2.2 | PLS measurement model assessment

After the preliminary considerations, the measurement model assessment is the first step in PLS-SEM. The reflective-reflective model assessment comprises examining the loadings (to ascertain factor structure), Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (for internal consistency), convergent validity using average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity (to ascertain the distinctiveness of the constructs) (Hair et al., 2019). Refer to Table 3.

Factor loadings for constructs ranged between 0.554 and 0.874. The values for AVE were above 0.5 indicating a good convergent validity (Table 3). The constructs were also assessed for discriminant validity, where the square root of the AVE for all the constructs was higher than the interconstruct correlations between them (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Further, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio was found to be less than 0.85 confirming the discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015) (Refer to Table 4).

4.2.3 | PLS structural model assessment

Next in line, we investigated the structural model using the predictive accuracy (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and effect sizes (f^2). Table 5 refers to the results of the structural model assessment. The R^2 of the constructs ranged between 0.32 and 0.67 indicating a good fit. Q^2 values of 0.164, 0.319, 0.175, and 0.239 were obtained for emotional

TABLE 3 Measurement model results.

Constructs	Codes	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE
Emotional self-concept	ESC1	0.554	0.841	0.855	0.837	0.568
	ESC2	0.762				
	ESC3	0.801				
	ESC4	0.863				
Physical self-concept	PSC1	0.674	0.866	0.869	0.865	0.518
	PSC2	0.668				
	PSC3	0.664				
	PSC4	0.806				
	PSC5	0.791				
	PSC6	0.7				
Social self-concept	SSC1	0.757	0.886	0.888	0.887	0.61
	SSC2	0.765				
	SSC3	0.824				
	SSC4	0.803				
	SSC5	0.755				
Trust	TRUST1	0.698	0.845	0.849	0.846	0.525
	TRUST2	0.653				
	TRUST3	0.729				
	TRUST4	0.748				
	TRUST5	0.787				
Informativeness	INF1	0.698	0.878	0.882	0.875	0.586
	INF2	0.696				
	INF3	0.874				
	INF4	0.721				
	INF5	0.821				
Interactivity	INT1	0.691	0.893	0.894	0.893	0.512
	INT2	0.727				
	INT3	0.672				
	INT4	0.736				
	INT5	0.723				
	INT6	0.77				
	INT7	0.738				
	INT8	0.659				

Abbreviations: AVE, average variance extracted; CR, composite reliability.

TABLE 4 Discriminant validity.

	Fornell–Larcker criterion						HTMT ratio					
Construct	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**
Emotional SC	0.754											
Informativeness	0.424	0.765					0.42					
Interactivity	0.472	0.585	0.715				0.465	0.584				
Physical SC	0.448	0.551	0.801	0.72			0.437	0.552	0.798			
Social SC	0.433	0.242	0.529	0.614	0.781		0.423	0.238	0.529	0.611		
Trust	0.529	0.465	0.711	0.668	0.5	0.724	0.524	0.464	0.712	0.666	0.5	

TABLE 5 Structural model results.

Construct	R2	Q2	SRMR	NFI
Emotional SC	0.324	0.164	0.042	0.868
Physical SC	0.67	0.319		
Social SC	0.321	0.175		
Trust	0.509	0.239		

SC, physical SC, social SC, and trust indicating an excellent predictive relevance as all the values were more than 0 (Hair et al., 2019).

4.2.4 | Hypotheses testing

The path coefficients were then monitored to assess the structural model. The findings of the study have been collated in Table 6. The structural paths from interactivity to the self-concept (emotional, physical, and social) were significant. The path coefficient from interactivity to physical self-concept (PSC) was significant and H3a was supported ($p < .05$, $t = 1.021$, $\beta = 0.604$); interactivity to the emotional self-concept (ESC) was insignificant and H3b was not supported ($p > .05$, $t = 7.810$, $\beta = 0.092$); interactivity to social self-concept (SSC) was significant and H3c was supported ($p < .05$, $t = 4.852$, $\beta = 0.372$) (Refer Figure 3). H4a was supported as the path coefficient from informativeness to PSC was significant ($p < .05$, $t = 2.709$, $\beta = 0.111$); H4b was supported as the path coefficient from informativeness to ESC was significant ($p < .05$, $t = 2.046$, $\beta = 0.197$); and H4c was supported as the path coefficient from informativeness to SSC was significant ($p < .05$, $t = 1.967$, $\beta = -0.122$).

The direct relationships between interactivity and trust were found significant and therefore H1 was supported ($p < .001$; $t = 11.231$, $\beta = 0.667$) and H2 was not supported as the path coefficient from informativeness to trust was found insignificant ($p > .05$; $t = 1.157$, $\beta = 0.075$). The direct relationship between trust and PSC was found significant supporting H5a ($p < .001$; $t = 2.608$, $\beta = 0.187$); trust and ESC were found significant supporting H5b ($p < .001$; $t = 4.443$, $\beta = 0.372$); and trust and SSC was found significant supporting H5c ($p < .001$; $t = 3.317$, $\beta = 0.262$). Table 6 summarizes the results of the proposed direct relationships in the study.

TABLE 6 Summary of results.

Description	Hypothesis	Status
Interactivity → trust	H1	Supported
Informativeness → trust	H2	Not supported
Interactivity → physical SC	H3a	Supported
Interactivity → emotional SC	H3b	Not supported
Interactivity → social SC	H3c	Supported
Informativeness → physical SC	H4a	Supported
Informativeness → emotional SC	H4b	Supported
Informativeness → social SC	H4c	Supported
Trust → physical SC	H5a	Supported
Trust → emotional SC	H5b	Supported
Trust → social SC	H5c	Supported

4.2.5 | Mediation results

The mediation analysis results revealed trust mediated the relationship between interactivity and self-concept. Trust partially mediated the relationship between interactivity and PSC as both the direct ($p < .001$; $t = 2.608$) and indirect relationship ($p < .05$; $t = 7.810$) were found significant. There was full mediation between interactivity and ESC in the presence of trust ($p < .001$, $t = 4.079$). Trust partially mediated the relationship between interactivity and SSC as both the direct ($p < .05$; $t = 4.852$) and indirect relationship ($p < .05$; $t = 4.079$) were found significant. Thus, H6a, H6b, and H6c were supported (Refer Figure 4).

Trust did not mediate the relationship between informativeness and self-concept. Table 7 summarizes the mediation results. Hence, H7a, H7b, and H7c were not supported.

5 | DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the role of SMIs as social change agents, specifically focusing on their impact on the self-concept of their followers. Drawing motivation from the influencer framework (Scheer & Stern, 1992) and social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), our study delved into the characteristics of

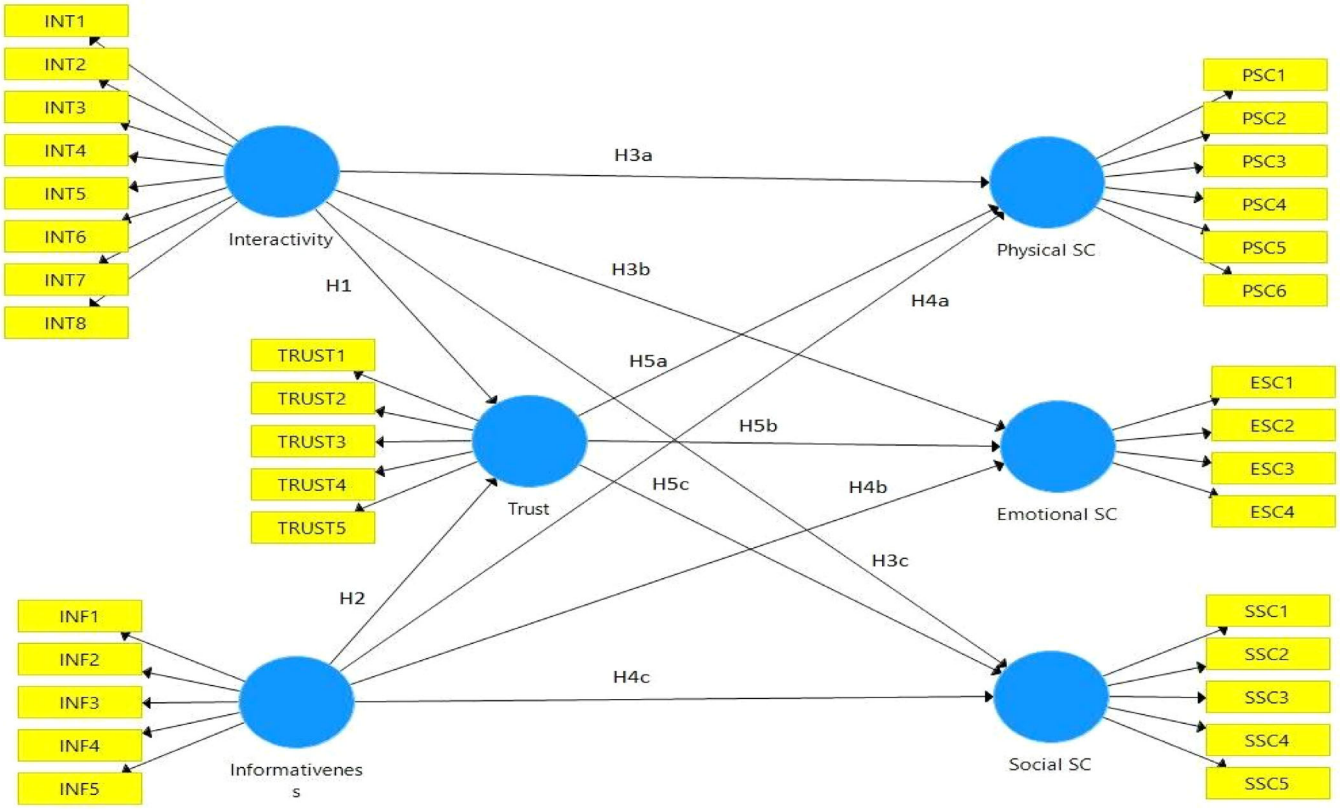


FIGURE 3 Research model and hypotheses.

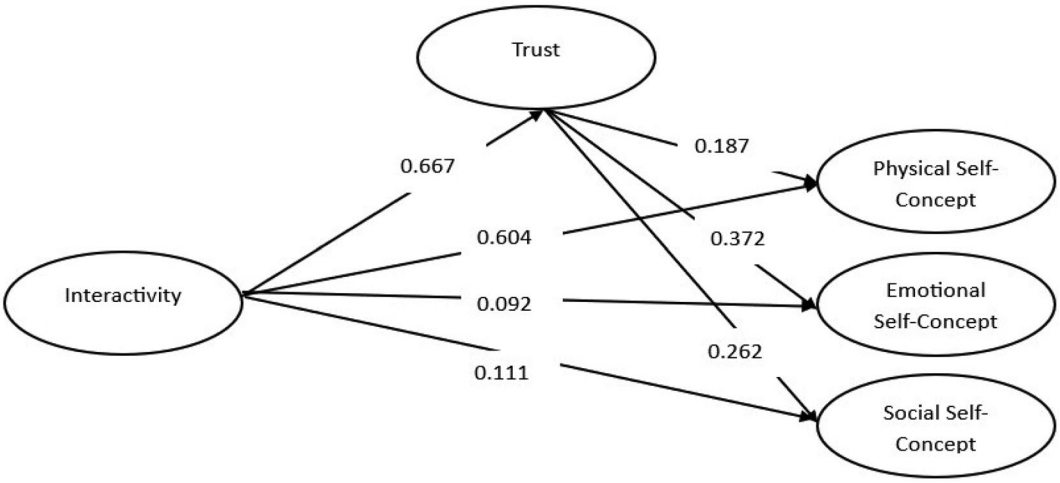


FIGURE 4 Descriptive model of relationships between variables (β values at $p < .05$).

TABLE 7 Mediation results.

Description	*t* statistics (|O/STDEV|)	*p* values	Status
Interactivity → trust → physical SC	2.555	.011	Supported
Interactivity → trust → emotional SC	4.079	.000	Supported
Interactivity → trust → social SC	3.452	.001	Supported
Informativeness → trust → physical SC	0.947	.344	Not supported
Informativeness → trust → emotional SC	1.085	.278	Not supported
Informativeness → trust → social SC	0.978	.328	Not supported

influencers, namely informativeness and interactivity, as key independent variables. The study was conducted in two stages—the qualitative stage and the quantitative stage. We conducted in-depth interviews with influencers and their followers to identify the key influencer characteristics that have impacted the lives of the followers in various ways. The qualitative study was also done with the intent of examining the key outcomes of influencer characteristics.

In-depth interviews with prominent SMIs, including Falguni Oza, Sumitra Selvaraj, Hiten Noonwal, Sanket Savant, and Adam Pasha, revealed that these influencers, experts in lifestyle and entertainment, also addressed social issues, such as body positivity, gender equality, and mental health. They initiated thought-provoking dialogues, contributing to social change through their content on social media. According to existing literature, trust in SMIs is influenced by various characteristics, including the credibility of information shared, expertise, and attractiveness of content (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Munnukka et al., 2016). Our study supported these findings and extended them to propose that influencer characteristics leading to trust also influence the follower's self-concept.

The proposed model tested the relationships between influencer characteristics—interactivity and informativeness on self-concept via trust acting as a mediator. The findings revealed a significant direct relationship between interactivity and self-concept (social and physical). The results were consistent with the follower loyalty model of influencer interactivity and its role in building influencer brand equity (Jun & Yi, 2020) and contradicted that the influencer-follower relationship is not dependent on interactivity (Kim & Kim, 2021). However, the direct relationship between interactivity and emotional self-concept was found insignificant. In addition, trust fully mediated the relationship between interactivity and emotional self-concept, indicating that the emotional well-being of an individual is an outcome of the trust developed over time. Trust mediated the relationship between interactivity and social, physical, and emotional self-concept indicating that regular communication, consistent efforts to follow up with the reader, and personalization by the SMI contribute to a better-developed self-concept of the follower. Further, the trust did not mediate the relationship between the informativeness of the SMI and social, physical, and emotional self-concept, indicating that simply informing the audience about social issues may not lead to trust and thus be insufficient in changing the way a follower thinks about oneself. In conclusion, this study sheds light on the intricate dynamics between influencer characteristics, trust, and the self-concept of followers, contributing to the understanding of SMIs as catalysts for social change.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

This area of research is unique for two reasons. First, the study claims to be the first to identify SMI as a social change agent who is an expert in their domain and responsible for contributing to the benefit of society at large. The study derives its motivation from social comparison theory and influencer framework, where we argue that the characteristics of SMIs can have a strong and positive impact on the followers' lives. The success of SIMs is based on the premise that they are authentic individuals. The influencers engage with the followers through their entertaining and informative content and a multitude of interactions. This in turn impacts the follower's trust in the influencer. People have the inherent nature to engage in upward or downward comparison, which can significantly impact their well-being and self-concept. These tendencies to compare with others affect emotional and relational development (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2014). Our study argues that an SMI who engages in entertaining content and discusses social and personal issues further increases trustworthiness, enhancing the follower's self-concept.

So far, extant literature has examined the role of SMIs in influencing the purchase decisions of followers in fashion, lifestyle, and daily routine product purchases. Self-concept as a construct has yet to be studied in the context of influencer marketing, and the current study claims to be a pioneer in examining the role of self-concept as an outcome. The present research focuses on self-concept operationalized as social, physical, and emotional self-concept and examines the impact of the influencer characteristics interactivity and informativeness on each separately. The current study was motivated by a lack of empirical research that examines testing the role that an SMI plays not only as an influencer for fashion and lifestyle products but also as a role model or change agent who positively affects the self-concept of their followers.

Second, our study focuses on the pivotal role of trust as a mediator in the relationships between interactivity, informativeness, and self-concept within the context of SMIs and their role as social change agents. Our study found that as trust is cultivated through meaningful, consistent, and true interactions, it elevates followers' self-concept. Followers who trust their chosen SMIs are more likely to internalize these influencers' positive messages and values, positively impacting their self-concept. The study establishes a link between the quality of SMI-follower interactions, the level of trust established, and the subsequent influence on followers' self-concept. This insight underscores the importance of authentic and meaningful engagement in the digital sphere, emphasizing that beyond content creation, the nature of interactions significantly contributes to the transformative role of SMIs as social change agents. Our study's findings align with the extant literature examining the role of trust as a mediator in influencer marketing (Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Esteban-Millat, et al., 2020; Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Giordano, & Lopez-Lopez, 2020; Schouten et al., 2019; Weismueller et al., 2020), especially in consumer decision-making.

5.2 | Social implications

Social media has changed the way people consume information. It has proved to be the most dominant form of media consumption. The rise in influencers and the ever-rising trend of pop culture on social media, like thinspiration and fitspiration (Cohen et al., 2019) have triggered users to manifest healthy eating habits. It has also led them to feel pressured into following ego-defensive behavior. While there are

positive implications related to mental and physical health awareness generated on social media, studies confirm both positive and negative influences of digital content on how readers see themselves when subjected to the post by an influencer (Cohen et al., 2019).

The findings of the current study emphasize the importance of the digital content created and advocated by the SMIs that may generate interventional outcomes for the positive use of social media. The active engagement of the followers ensures the impact even more. The current study suggests that larger engagement with the followers by the SMIs in terms of interactivity may result in positive implications on how they think, feel, and act themselves. The interactivity factor plays a critical role in a dialogue amongst the followers, the enormous social media user base, and society. When the followers are exposed to the thoughts, opinions, and views of influencers on body positivity, gender identity, and women's rights, they get exposed to a new line of thinking, which helps them ask critical questions about how they see themselves and how they think others see them. The thought-provoking posts of influencers give their followers a platform to share their thoughts, express their concerns, tell their stories, and seek information and solutions to their ongoing problems. These in turn help the followers in creating a positive self-concept. As a result, follower loyalty for the influencer is generated creating more positive ramifications in the future.

The research has specific implications for SMIs who would like to create their own unique identities by delving into predominant covert societal issues that need immediate attention from society. The digital marketing platforms that have displayed crests and troughs in the way they generate impact, must follow this socially inclined sustainable marketing strategy as a part of imbibing the societal marketing concept.

5.3 | Limitations and future directions

The current study, like any other research, has limitations. The study was cross-sectional and time-limited, limiting the scope of the findings. It is suggested that a longitudinal approach be used to study follower loyalty and the intention to associate with the influencer for a long time. The study design suggests that exploring other mediators, such as influencer image and reputation directly influencing the influencer's communication strategy, could be beneficial in understanding the dynamics further.

Our study identified trust as a crucial mediator in the relationship between influencer characteristics and self-concept. Subsequent research endeavors may examine the presence of additional mediators, expanding the investigation to factors like influencer image and reputation that might directly impact the influencer's communication strategy. The positive impact of a follower's elevated self-concept may manifest in prolonged association and loyalty to the influencer. Future research could explore outcomes beyond self-concept, including investigating follower loyalty and testing whether loyalty is attitudinal by examining follower intentions to recommend following influencers and engaging in positive word-of-mouth.

Further studies could also explore the role SMIs play in motivating followers to transition into influencers themselves. Investigating other influencer characteristics like expertise, attractiveness, and influencer prestige and their influence on various outcome variables could be a stimulating avenue for research. All these considerations are framed within the context of the influencer-follower relationship.

Expanding on the dynamics of influencer-follower relationships, future research might focus on understanding how trust in influencers may impact the brands they endorse. Trust in influencers can significantly shape brand trust. Additionally, researchers are encouraged to conduct a comparative analysis across different categories of influencers, such as nano, micro, macro, and mega-influencers, to comprehend their impact on various marketing outcomes like product attitude, follower loyalty, and behavioral intentions.

The success of SMIs hinges on their authenticity, as they experience the products and services before recommending them. This belief contrasts celebrity endorsements, where followers may question the authenticity of brand endorsers' product usage. However, followers are likely to reflect and make purchases based on the recommendations of influencers they perceive as authentic. It can be further argued that the enhanced self-concept of followers would heighten their inclination to purchase brands influencers recommend.

6 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study empirically investigates the significant relationship between informativeness and self-concept (social, physical, and emotional). This is consistent with existing studies that show that the informative value of the content posted by SMIs has an impact on trust in branded posts (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In addition, influencer interactivity also played a critical role in impacting the followers' self-concept for the influencers to establish a long-term relationship; both interactivity and informativeness play a crucial role. When an influencer takes a genuine interest in the followers' lives by contributing significantly to their well-being improves their likelihood of accepting SMI content and recommendations. Further, it was also found that trust plays a critical role in influencing the follower's self-concept. Trust in the SMI content leads consumers to accept the opinions posted positively. The results opined that trust in the SMI content led the followers to think positively about their social, physical, and emotional state.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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